

SPINOZA'S VIRTUOUS PASSIONS

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A CENTRAL MESSAGE OF SPINOZA'S *ETHICS* is that we achieve freedom by mastering the emotions.¹ Harkening back to the ancient Stoics, Spinoza describes human bondage as "man's lack of power to control and check the emotions. For a man at the mercy of his emotions is not his own master but is subject to fortune" (4pref).² In order to help us become our own masters, Spinoza offers "remedies for the emotions," techniques for checking and controlling them. Of course, Spinoza did not believe, any more than the Stoics, that all emotions are harmful.³ Spinoza judges what is bad in the emotions with respect to our virtue, which he equates with our power (4def8). The importance of our power, in turn, stems from our nature: we are ultimately modes of the one substance, whose essence as power is expressed as our individual striving to persist in our being and to increase our power to act. Emotions are bad, then, to the extent that they frustrate our striving, decreasing our activity and power. Eliminating these contributes to our freedom because it prevents us from being directed by external forces.

On this basis, one would imagine that achieving virtue would require us to eliminate the passions, pursuing the Stoic ideal of *apatheia*. Since the passions arise from being passive to external forces,

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²Unless otherwise noted, translations are taken from: Baruch Spinoza, *Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002). Where quoted passages are different, translations are my own. Passages are cited by part and proposition, for instance, 2p37. I will use the standard conventions for abbreviating further references to the *Ethics*: "a" = "axiom"; "c" = "corollary"; "d" = "demonstration"; "doe" = "definition of the emotions"; "sch" = "scholium" and so forth.

³I mean the *eupathia* or good emotions, though there is no appropriate Greek equivalent for 'emotion'.

the passions would seem to represent the sort of bondage which concerns Spinoza. Partly on this basis, it is often assumed that Spinoza understood a life of virtue as one of pure activity, with as few passions as possible.⁴ This paper aims to show that Spinoza reserves an important role for the passions in a life of virtue.⁵ Seen in a certain light, this claim might appear trivial: the passions, like sensations, are knowledge of the first kind, which provides us with the particular knowledge about external things necessary for comporting ourselves in the world. Since virtue amounts to increasing one's power, it follows that the passions, like sensation, must be virtuous in the gen-

⁴It is very common to draw this conclusion in passing, for instance, see Ronald Sandler, "Intuitus and Ratio in Spinoza's Ethical Thought", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13 (2005): 73. The position is more forcefully defended by those who read Spinoza as a Stoic, such as Susan James, who writes that "the claim that all passion is inimical to virtue, so that in so far as we become virtuous we become free of passion, was regularly derided by seventeenth-century philosophers and moralists as a Stoic aberration. In cleaving to this view, Spinoza aligns himself with a controversial tenet of Stoicism, and would have been seen to do so," in "Spinoza the Stoic" ["Stoic"], in *The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, ed. Tom Sorell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 289–316. Nussbaum also criticizes Spinoza for an intolerance of passivity and weakness, which she attributes to Stoic influence. See Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 502. The most notable exceptions are Ursula Goldenbaum, "The Affects as a Condition of Human Freedom in Spinoza's Ethics," in *Spinoza on Reason and the Free Man*, eds. Yirmiyahu Yovel and Gideon Segal (New York: Little Room Press, 2004), 149–66, and Pierre-François Moreau, who argues that Spinoza leaves an important role to experience as a necessary supplement to reason, since experience involves interacting with and thus being passive to external objects. Moreau indirectly acknowledges the importance of passivity in *Spinoza: l'expérience et l'éternité [l'expérience]*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994). A final group of scholars argue that Spinoza rejects the model of the free man as a model to which we should hold ourselves. Since the free man is completely active, these scholars uphold the line I am pushing in a very roundabout way. See Don Garrett, "A Free Man Always Acts Honestly, Not Deceptively: Freedom and the Good in Spinoza's Ethics," in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, ed. Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 221–38, and Daniel Garber, "Dr. Fischelson's Dilemma: Spinoza on Freedom and Sociability" ["Dr. Fischelson"], in Yovel and Segal, 183–207.

⁵A nice example of Spinoza's sympathy for the passions is when he criticizes those who demonize the passions in the *Political Treatise*: "Philosophers look upon the passions by which we are assailed as vices, into which men fall through their own fault. So it is their custom to deride, bewail, berate them, or, if their purpose is to appear more zealous than others, to execrate them." Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 680.

eral sense that they are necessary for us to navigate the world successfully.

While I agree with these claims, my thesis argues that the passions are virtuous in a more specific, moral sense. The passions, unlike other knowledge of the first kind, corresponds to our degree of perfection. As such, the passions play an important role in moral reasoning by indicating what activities are good and bad for us. Indeed, it follows that the passions are indispensable to moral reasoning: a truly virtuous person would require the passions in order to engage consistently in the sorts of activities that increase her power, namely, following reason. Consequently, the passions are virtuous, not just in the general sense that they increase our power, but in the deeper sense that they are integral to a virtuous character. This particular sense of virtue is captured by Spinoza's notion of true virtue as living in accordance with reason.

This important role of the passions in a life of virtue has been neglected, in part, because it is difficult to make sense of Spinoza's claim that the passions track our perfection. Spinoza holds that passions are either pleasures, which indicate an increase in our perfection and power, or pains, which indicate a decrease in our power.⁶ It is not clear, however, how a passion can be pleasurable, in other words, contribute to one's power consistently with Spinoza's philosophy: when we are passive, we are directed by external forces, which would not seem to constitute an increase in our power of activity. The problem has led some commentators to conclude that Spinoza was mistaken to allow for passive pleasure and that perhaps he didn't really think such a thing is possible.⁷ In order to account for the importance of the passions, then, we must explain how they can increase our power. In brief, this paper will argue that, for Spinoza, even when we are passive, we are somewhat active to varying degrees. The passions represent activity because they exercise our understanding by providing us with intelligence about bodies, in particular, the degree of our

⁶ Spinoza even defines pleasure as passive: "the passive transition of the mind to a state of greater perfection," (see also 3d0e2).

⁷ See Paul Hoffman, "Three Dualist Theories of the Passions," *Philosophical Topics* 19 (1991): 153–200; Michael LeBuffe, "The Anatomy of the Passions" (forthcoming in the *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*); and Marx Wartofsky "Action and Passion: Spinoza's Construction of a Scientific Psychology" ["Action and Passion"], *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marjorie Grene, (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1973), 329–53.

own bodies' perfection. It follows that a passion can be sufficiently active to bring about an increase in one's power.

Section I briefly sets forth Spinoza's explanation of the passions as inadequate ideas corresponding to changes in our perfection. Section II aims to resolve the above difficulty in making sense of Spinoza's claim that the passions track our perfection. The rest of the paper argues that the passions are virtuous in a moral sense of the term. Section III considers three senses of 'virtue' in Spinoza and whether they are moral. The final section defends the claim that the passions contribute to our true virtue because of their importance to a character that is disposed to act in accordance with reason.

I

The Passions. In order to make a case for the passions, we should first consider how Spinoza understands them generally. For Spinoza, affects are expressed at both the bodily level, as bodily states or changes, and at the mental level, as ideas. In the case of a passion, the affect involves passivity at both levels. We are passive at the bodily level when we are an inadequate cause, either when we are acted on by external bodies or when our actions rely on the causal power of external bodies. At the mental level, passivity involves having inadequate ideas.

To understand mental passivity, we have to say something more about inadequate ideas. Spinoza defines an adequate idea as one that has all the intrinsic characteristics of a true idea in God's mind (2d4, see also 1ax6, 2p32). 'Intrinsic characteristics' refers to properties which ideas have in themselves, rather than their relationship to and agreement with objects. This suggests that adequate ideas are clear and distinct, while inadequate ideas are mutilated and confused (2p29n).⁸ Furthermore, since all ideas in God's mind are adequate, inadequate ideas arise only from particular minds to the extent that they fail to capture fully the true ideas in God's mind (2p36).⁹ In other

⁸ See also Spinoza's equation of adequacy and truth in letter 60.

⁹ Consequently, adequacy is a relation not a property. On this point see Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics [Study]* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1984), 178.

words, our idea of *p* is inadequate in the sense that it is missing something contained in God's idea of *p*.¹⁰

In order to understand more precisely how such ideas are inadequate, then, we need to understand what they are missing. Spinoza's main examples are our ideas of our bodies and of external bodies. In describing their inadequacy he tends to use a phrase of the following form: there is knowledge in God in so far as he is affected by very many things, not in so far as he has only the idea of *q* (either our bodies or external bodies) (2p24–5, 2p28). His reasoning is that the true idea of *q* in God's mind is affected by other ideas in God's mind, just as *q* is affected by other bodies. Furthermore, the true idea of *q* represents the causal relationship between *q* and the bodies acting on it. However, the partial idea of *q* in our mind is not affected in the same way by other ideas in our mind; nor does it represent the same causal relationships between *q* and the bodies acting on it. To put the point more plainly, inadequate ideas fail to capture their causal antecedents—because they fail to represent the causal antecedents acting on their bodily counterparts or they fail to stand in the appropriate causal relationship with other ideas in our mind.¹¹

In light of this discussion we can see how having inadequate ideas involves precisely the same passivity we experience at the bodily level: when we have an inadequate idea, our minds are acted on by

¹⁰ This point helps explain Spinoza's somewhat obscure first claim about inadequate ideas at 2p11c: "When we say that God has this or that idea not only in so far as he constitutes the essence of the human mind but also in so far as he has the idea of another thing simultaneously with the human mind, then we are saying that the human mind perceives a thing partially or inadequately." In other words, our idea *p* is inadequate when one cannot fully conceive the true idea corresponding to *p* through *p* alone. Rather one must conceive both *p* and "another thing," whatever is missing from *p*.

¹¹ The importance of causal antecedents to adequate knowledge can be traced back (through 2p9, 2p8 and 2p7) to 1a4: "the knowledge of an affect depends on and involves knowledge of the cause." According to this axiom, knowing a thing involves understanding its causes (see also letter 32). The claim that we do not know antecedent causes requires some qualification. The most important antecedent causes are external bodies acting on and determining our bodies. Spinoza claims that we represent external bodies through their effects on our bodies (2p16, 2p16c1), though in a confused way: "the ideas that we have of external bodies indicate the constitution of our own body more than the nature of external bodies" (2p16c2). Consequently, we do have ideas of proximate antecedent causes, just not adequate ideas of them.

external ideas, just as our bodies are acted on by external bodies.¹² According to the above, for some body (*b*), its idea (*ib*) is adequate if it fully represents the body's causes, external objects (*e*). Thus our *ib* is inadequate, among other reasons, because the human mind lacks a full, true idea of the external objects (*ie*). Furthermore, according to Spinoza's parallelism, *ie* causes *ib*, just as *e* causes *b*. Since *ie* is not contained by the human mind and our *ib* is, this is an instance of something external acting on our mind. We can put the point slightly differently, by focusing on the explanatory sense of 'cause': We cannot conceive of *ib* entirely through our own mind, since a full account of *ib* would have to appeal to its cause *ie*, which is external to our mind; in other words, *ib* is "caused" by something external in the sense that its explanation requires appeal to something external.¹³ Thus describing an idea as inadequate literally means, as the name suggests, being an inadequate cause of an idea. Consequently, the adequacy of an idea is a measure of both its epistemic adequacy and our causal activity in having the idea.¹⁴

With the relevant Spinozistic machinery in place, we can now show how Spinoza explains passive affects: Suppose that while

¹² The claim defended in this paragraph is that all inadequate ideas are caused by external things, not that all ideas caused by external things are inadequate. As we will see, we can develop adequate ideas from external things in the case of common notions (see 2p39).

¹³ This discussion might give the false impression that we can never have adequate ideas. After all, if adequate ideas represent causal antecedents and we can never have all the ideas of the causal antecedents of a thing, it would seem that we can never have truly adequate knowledge. However, Spinoza allows two cases where we can attain adequate knowledge: First, we can attain adequate knowledge of properties which are common to all things in such a way that the properties are as much in the part as in the whole; the obvious candidates here are thought and extension (2p38). The reasoning seems to be that everything we need to know about such properties is contained in each mode which exhibits those properties such that knowing the causal history of the mode does not further contribute to our knowledge. Second, we can have adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God (2p47). The reasoning here is that such knowledge of God is contained within each mode as the condition for its existence (2p45). Consequently, it seems that we can attain adequate knowledge of only general things, universal properties, the infinite nature of substance and its connection to modes. We will always have inadequate knowledge of empirical, particular things.

¹⁴ Henceforth I will assume that the adequacy of an idea refers both to its epistemic adequacy and its causal adequacy.

camping on vacation I am bitten by a highly venomous snake. The bite will be fatal unless treated with antivenom and I am too isolated to reach assistance before the venom takes effect—for simplicity's sake, suppose that I know all of this. The result of the bite is that I experience the affect of sadness. Following Spinoza's parallelism the affect is an inadequate idea which is identical to a corresponding bodily event.¹⁵ Consequently, the explanation for the sadness must occur at both the mental and bodily level. On the bodily level, the bite gives rise to sadness because it decreases my bodily power of activity; we would explain the affect as passive because an external thing, the snake, causes the decrease in my bodily power of activity. On the mental level, the affect is sadness because it is an idea which represents the decrease in my bodily power of activity; it is an inadequate idea, first, because it represents the snake only partially through the snake's effects on my body (the pain of the bite) and, second, because my mind does not contain the cause of my idea of my bodily changes, the true idea of the snake in God's mind, corresponding to the body of the snake. Consequently, my mind is being acted on by an external cause.¹⁶

II

Understanding Passive Pleasures. Before explaining how the passions can be virtuous in a moral sense, we must first explain how Spinoza can consistently claim that the passions are virtuous in the more basic sense that they can contribute to our power. Let's begin by considering the evidence that passivity generally can be advantageous.¹⁷ Spinoza recognizes the possible advantages of passivity

¹⁵ Following Spinoza I will use 'affect' to refer to either the bodily or mental aspect of an affect. I hope that context will make the referent clear.

¹⁶ While I know that the snake bit me, this knowledge is only possible because my ideas of my body indirectly represent the snake through its affect on me; I do not contain the true idea of the snake, in God's mind.

¹⁷ Bennett argues that Spinoza in an earlier draft of the *Ethics* conceived of all pleasures as passive and imperfectly rewrote the text to allow for active pleasure (*Study*, 257–8). If Bennett is right it may account for a few remarks that Spinoza makes which seem not to allow for active pleasures (such as 3p11sch and 3p57d). At any rate, Spinoza's decided view is that there are both passive and active pleasures.

when considering our dependency on the basic necessities of life. “The human body needs for its preservation a great many other bodies, by which, as it were, it is continually regenerated” (2p13post4).¹⁸ To the extent that these bodies are necessary for our survival, it is advantageous to be passively affected by them (4p39).¹⁹ Furthermore, Spinoza recognizes that securing our well-being requires social organization and a state (4p40; see also 4p35c1). Any minimal distribution of labor in a society requires us to depend upon the labor and contribution of others for our well-being. In this way, being passive to others is also to our advantage.

A possible motivation for Spinoza’s view on the value of passivity is that, for Spinoza, it is necessary that we are always passive to some degree, so that, if we are going to increase our power at all, it must be possible to do so passively. Our necessary passivity follows from Spinoza’s definition of passivity as being an inadequate or partial cause: “we are passive when something takes place in us, or follows from our nature, of which we are only the partial cause” (3def2). It follows from this definition, first, that we are passive anytime that we bring about something through the cooperation of other things. For instance, one would be passive when building a sandcastle with the assistance of friends or, even, tools. In fact, since the sandcastle comes about partly through the power of the sand to maintain its shape and so forth, one would be passive to some degree even when building the sandcastle entirely with one’s own hands. It follows, second, that we are passive anytime something acts on us: for something to act on us, it must bring about some change in us; otherwise, we would not say that the thing has exerted any causal power over us. Since such a change is partly brought about through the power of the thing, we are at best an inadequate cause of such change and, thus, passive.²⁰ It follows that a fully active person would not really

¹⁸ As an example, he claims that we require many different kinds of food in order to nourish all the parts of our body (4app27).

¹⁹ “We can never bring it about that we should need nothing outside ourselves to preserve our own being and that we should need nothing outside ourselves to preserve our own being and that we should live a life quite unrelated to things outside ourselves” (4p18sch).

²⁰ The same point is expressed in a different way by Wartofsky: our power depends upon our ability to act, which requires us to be capable of interaction which requires us to be acted on as well. Thus “the dependency on other bodies, in a strange and dialectical sense, is the very condition of a body’s activity, since its power to act is its power to affect other bodies; as, in turn, the power to act of these other bodies is their power to act on this (my) body.” “Action and Passion,” 338.

interact with the world—they would only act on the world.²¹ Spinoza confirms the impossibility of such a thing when he claims that our power will inevitably be surpassed by the power of external forces (4p3) and, consequently, we will necessarily undergo changes which are not brought about by our own power (4p4).²²

It follows from this discussion that the passions, as a kind of passivity, must also be able to increase our power. In order to understand the difficulty with making sense of this claim, consider an instance where a passion might be said to represent an increase in one's power: suppose that after I collapse comatose in the wilderness from a snake-bite, I am found by a park ranger who, recognizing the bite, injects me with antivenom. Spinoza would explain the effect of the antivenom as passive pleasure: at the bodily level, the antivenom causes pleasure because it increases my bodily power of activity, for instance, by improving my bodily function; the pleasure is passive because it is brought about by an external thing, the ranger. At the mental level, the passion of pleasure is an inadequate idea because it conceives of the change in my bodily power of activity, though my mind does not contain ideas of the bodily causes (the ranger and the antivenom). The problem is that, since the pleasure arises from being passively affected, how can such a thing increase my causal activity? Spinoza's view seems almost paradoxical: a change caused by something else is an increase in my own causal activity!

²¹ I should note one way that we can be affected and still be active. Spinoza explains when he writes that God can be affected: "the idea of an individual thing existing in actuality has God for its cause not in so far as he is infinite but in so far as he is considered as affected by another idea of a thing" (2p9). God is affected to the extent that he is identified with one of his modes, which is affected by another mode. God is affected *actively* because he is not affected from the outside; all the modes are in God. A human being could similarly be affected actively, for example, when some of her ideas are affected by other of her ideas. However, because humans are finite and do not contain all the modes, increasing the degree to which we are affected will inevitably lead us to be affected from the outside and thus to greater passivity.

²² Spinoza also confirms our inevitable passivity when he criticizes both the Stoics and Descartes for supposing that we can gain complete control over our passive emotions (5pref). On this point, see also "Action and Passion," 334.

One might try to sidestep the problem by conceiving of power as a capacity to act. Following this line of reasoning, one might think that the antivenom increases my power in the sense that it causes changes in my body which provide me with the capacity to act from my *conatus*, my essential causal powers, at a future time. This response is unsuccessful because it conceives of power in a way that is inconsistent with Spinoza, as something potential, contained but untapped, like the power in a battery. According to the *conatus* doctrine, at every moment, every thing expresses its power as much as possible. If one's power fails to bring about a particular effect, this is not because the power is stored and unused, but rather because one's power is countered in some way by the power of another thing. The only way that we could fail to express our power is if we were able to check our own power, which, according to 3p6, is impossible. Since Spinoza cannot admit the possibility of unexpressed power, he also cannot admit that the antivenom increases my power in the sense that it supplies me with a capacity to act at a future time.²³

In explaining a more successful solution, we will first concentrate on passivity at the mental level, though we will presently generalize our claims to the case of bodies. The solution is based on the claim that even inadequate ideas involve some causal activity. I do not mean by this that inadequate ideas are causally efficacious, that they bring about change; rather, inadequate ideas represent some causal activity on the part of the mind that conceives them. This might seem counterintuitive: since adequacy is a measure of causal activity, it would follow that inadequate ideas have some degree of adequacy.²⁴ However, Spinoza writes as though inadequate ideas can have some adequacy when he suggests that some inadequate ideas can be more or less adequate than others, for instance, claiming that some ideas are very inadequate (2p30). This way of thinking makes sense given Spinoza's view about the particular knowledge offered by inadequate ideas. In order to have truly adequate knowledge of something particular, say *q*, one must have all the ideas of all of *q*'s

²³ Of course, Spinoza might agree that the antivenom gives me the capacity to act better in the future; he just cannot regard this as an increase in one's power, given his understanding of power.

²⁴ I mean here that they represent causal activity, not causal efficacy. In other words, I mean that inadequate ideas represent the activity of the idea and the person having the idea, not that inadequate ideas have the power to cause changes in other things.

causes and their causes and so forth. While human minds—unlike God's (2p9d)—cannot meet this requirement, some of our ideas come closer than others. If I had ideas of all of *q*'s immediate causes, my knowledge would be more complete, adequate and involve greater causal activity than the knowledge of one who doesn't have any idea of *q*'s causes. Since affects are ideas, it follows that passive affects can be more or less active as well; thus the more adequate one's ideas, the more one's joy changes in character from passive to active, from, say, *amor* to *amor dei*. 5p15 acknowledges this scalar sense of activity in *amor dei* when it tells us that one loves God "the more so the more he understands himself and his emotions."²⁵

One might question how one's having inadequate ideas, in other words, being passive to external ideas, could involve being causally active at all.²⁶ The answer is that even passive affects express our *conatus* simply in virtue of the fact that they represent our body

²⁵ See also 4p59d: "In so far as pleasure is good, it is in agreement with reason (for it consists in this, that a man's power of activity is increased or assisted), and it is a passive emotion only in so far as a man's power of activity is not increased to such a degree that he adequately conceives himself and his actions. Therefore if a man affected with pleasure were brought to such a degree of perfection that he were adequately to conceive himself and his actions, he would be capable, indeed, more capable, of those same actions to which he is now determined by passive emotions." This reading of *amor dei* is also argued in Jerome Neu, *Emotion, Thought and Therapy: A Study of Hume and Spinoza and the Relationship of Philosophical Theories of the Emotions to Psychological Theories of Therapy* (New York: Routledge Press, 1977), 81.

²⁶ Spinoza's thinking about action also supports the claim that we are causally active when we have inadequate ideas. As is often recognized, Spinoza uses 'action' in two ways: In the first strong sense, occurrence *p* is my action if I am the adequate cause of *p*. Spinoza also uses the term in a weaker sense to refer to instances where we are passively determined. The weak sense is evident, for instance, in 4p59 when Spinoza describes being passively determined as an "action". He uses the term the same way in 2p48d when he says that the mind "cannot be the free cause of its actions" (see also 4p23). The weak sense of 'action' seems to be: occurrence *p* is my action if I am a partial cause of *p*. It follows that inadequate ideas, to the admittedly limited extent that they are caused by us, express our power and *conatus*. Spinoza confirms this when he writes that "the mind, both in so far as it has clear and distinct ideas and in so far as it has confused ideas, endeavors to persist in its own being" (3p9). The strong and weak sense of 'action' is noted in Michael Della Rocca, "The Power of an Idea: Spinoza's Critique of Pure Will" ["Power"], *Nous* 37:2 (2003): 200–31, at 205–6. I should also note that Michael LeBuffe offers a different explanation for 3p9 in "Why Spinoza Tells People to Try to Preserve their Being," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 86 (2004): 119–45.

(3p11s).²⁷ This is because the power of the mind depends upon representing the body.²⁸ Spinoza employs this claim when arguing that, if the mind stops representing the body, the cause must be some outside force; this is because nothing can follow from the mind itself which is contrary “to the idea that constitutes the essence of our mind.”²⁹ Furthermore, Spinoza claims that an idea increases one’s mental power to the extent that it represents increases in the body’s power of activity (3p11). For instance, our pleasure at receiving the antivenom is active to the extent that it represents the increase in the body’s power from the antivenom.³⁰

Thinking of our inadequate ideas as involving some causal activity resolves the problem of passive pleasure in the following way: an inadequate idea, to the extent that it involves our causal activity, could represent an increase in one’s power of mental activity sufficient to offset whatever decrease in power arises from its passivity.³¹ Return to the example of the antivenom. While having the affect de-

²⁷ Della Rocca has another explanation for why an inadequate idea must express our *conatus*: it follows analytically from the fact that an action is ours and we only act from our *conatus* that our having an even inadequate ideas represents some action of our *conatus* (Della Rocca, “Power,” 208). I agree, but in this context the explanation is unhelpful because the question at stake is *how* an inadequate idea represents the *conatus*.

²⁸ Spinoza thinks this follows from the parallelism asserted by 2p7 (he specifically appeals to 2p8cor and 2p8s), though the derivation is unclear.

²⁹ Another reason to think that having an idea involves causal activity is that all ideas involve the affirmation of the idea as true (2p49). This is explained comprehensively in Della Rocca, “Power.”

³⁰ Furthermore, the pleasure at receiving the antivenom involves anticipating the life that the antivenom allows me to experience. In doing so, the mind regards its own power, which also increases its power of activity (3p53). Della Rocca argues that Spinoza rejects future directed strivings because they violate his naturalism. Consequently, Spinoza conceives of them as anticipation, which is a present pleasure which comes from the idea of some future benefit. He bases this account, for instance, on 3p7. See “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Psychology,” in *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 192–266.

³¹ My solution should also be distinguished from another of LeBuffe’s claims that passive pleasures might represent only localized increases in power (Cf. LeBuffe, “Anatomy of the Passions,” 39–43). LeBuffe claims that this addresses the problem (partially) because it prevents any instance of passive pleasure which represents a net increase in one’s power of activity; in this sense, passive pleasure is not ever a net increase in pleasure. Again, my reading disagrees.

creases my causal activity—simply affirming an inadequate idea involves a decrease in my activity—it can also increase my causal activity, in that it represents an increase in the power of the body (3p11). The solution suggests that in such cases one gains more activity from the affect than one loses. In this way, the affect is both passive, because it is brought about partly by external causes, and pleasure, because it involves a net increase in causal activity.³² Seen in this light, the solution arises from properly understanding the categories of adequate and inadequate ideas: Passive pleasure appears problematic if one supposes that inadequate ideas are purely passive. However, Spinoza understands inadequate ideas as those involving any degree of passivity whatsoever.

This should be distinguished from Wartofsky's admittedly "unsuccessful" explanation of passive pleasure: he argues that we may have a passive pleasure only when a pleasure counters and diminishes a pain, so that one's pain is less than it would be otherwise. For instance, taking aspirin may give me pleasure in the sense that it reduces the pain of the snakebite. On Wartofsky's solution, a pleasure could only become great enough to completely overcome a pain if it were active; therefore, *passive* pleasure can only consist in partial reductions in pain. In contrast, on my solution, being passive can increase one's net pleasure and power, not just reduce pain and decreases in power.³³ Wartofsky's claim is similar to LeBuffe's claim that passions can only be pleasurable to the extent that they restrain other passions.³⁴ As with Wartofsky's claim, I disagree on the grounds that being passive can actually increase our power, not just mitigate more harmful forces.

³² This solution implies that passivity can be cancelled out or checked by one's activity. Spinoza implies this conclusion when he claims that the mind strives to oppose and check ideas which diminish our power of activity with those which increase our power of activity (3p13). Of course, Spinoza's remarks in 3p13 concern the interaction between two opposing ideas, whereas the case of passive pleasure, as I have framed it, concerns a single idea with opposing tendencies. Nevertheless, the case of one idea should work similarly: the affect of passive pleasure simultaneously acts to increase and decrease one's power of activity and pleasure. The decrease would be cancelled out by the increase just as it is when two opposing ideas duke it out.

³³ "Actions and Passions," 348.

³⁴ LeBuffe, "Anatomy of the Passions," 39–43.

This solution can be generalized to the case of bodies as well. As in the mental case, being affected by bodies can involve our own activity as well. Even when we are passively affected by external bodies the changes in our bodies are brought about partially through the power of our own bodies. Remember the example of the sandcastle: one cannot mold the sandcastle without assistance from the power of the sand to maintain its shape. The same is true for the case of the antivenom: the antivenom is only effective because of my bodily mechanisms by which I process and circulate the antivenom to all of my tissues. If the ranger had come too late, I would not have the power to assist him in this way. Indeed, if I were purely passive and relied entirely on the power of the antivenom, the ranger's efforts would be no more effective than pumping antivenom into a corpse. Furthermore, to the extent that the effect is brought about through my power, the effect better expresses my *conatus* and is to my benefit. It is not hard to imagine that my contribution to the effect involves sufficient activity that I actually become more active by being passively affected by the antivenom.

One might object that this solution has not really shown that the passions can be advantageous after all: according to the solution, passive pleasure only increases our power to the extent that the affect is active; the general idea is that the adequacy and activity of the idea overpowers its passivity and inadequacy. Consequently, the objection goes, we cannot really conclude that one's *passivity* increases one's power; rather, the increase comes from one's *activity*.³⁵ The objection is correct in one sense: at the mental level, an inadequate idea is passive to the extent that it does not represent some aspect of a true idea. Clearly it does not make sense to say that our activity and power is increased by *not* representing something. However, there is a sense in which passivity itself increases one's power: being passive

³⁵This is Hoffman's reason for thinking that passive pleasure ultimately cannot be explained in Spinoza's system. "While it [Hoffman's best proposed solution] may succeed in explaining how increasing the ways in which we can be affected by external objects increases our power of acting, and so succeeds in explaining how being affected by something external can be pleasurable, it does not succeed in making room for passive joy. Insofar as we are affected by something external that increases our power of acting, we are active, not passive." "Three Dualist Theories of the Passions," 179.

supplies us with ideas that we can only obtain by being passive. Since these ideas increase our power, it makes sense to say that passivity itself increases our power. For example, even though my idea of the antivenom is inadequate and based on how my body is affected, this idea still provides me with understanding, informing me, for instance, that there is an antivenom, how quickly it takes effect, its effectiveness and so forth. If my knowledge were limited to what I can understand through pure activity, in other words, adequate ideas, I would only know general properties of things and metaphysical facts, for instance, the relationships between substance and modes, their natures and so forth. Knowledge of particular things, like the antivenom can only be achieved by representing particular external objects in terms of how they act on our bodies, which requires us to be affected by them and thus passive.³⁶ Since my understanding and power can only be increased in this way by being passive, it makes sense to say that passivity itself increases one's power.

Spinoza acknowledges this reasoning when he explains how being affected by objects, and thus being passive, increases our understanding (4p38). Spinoza's reasoning is that the mind represents everything that happens in the body (2p14). So, the more our body is affected by things, the more things our mind will represent, increasing our understanding; "as the body is rendered more capable in these

³⁶ My claim here about the importance of the passions for giving us the particular knowledge required for action echoes Moreau's claim that experience is necessary for understanding the relationship between the general claims revealed by reason and particular finite modes, which we cannot derive from reason (*l'expérience*, Book I, chapter 1). My claim here is different from Moreau's, firstly, in that it is uniquely concerned with the passions, without claiming that Spinoza reserves any particular role for experience generally. Furthermore, my view argues that the passions contribute to a virtuous life in a different way than Moreau argues that experience can be beneficial. Moreau argues that experience, understood properly as distinct from vague experience and scientific experiment, is beneficial for a variety of reasons: it reveals the limits of what can be understood through reason and helps us when reason falls short, telling us of the existence of particular things and how to orient ourselves to them. He argues that the passions, in particular, give us the practical experience to confirm the claims of reason and that they make us particular individuals, accounting for the various ways that we understand, interpret and react to the world (Book II, chapter 3). Moreau does not consider the importance that the passions play in a moral life by revealing the degree of our perfection.

respects, so is the mind rendered more capable of apprehension” (4p38d).³⁷ Since understanding increases one’s power (4p26–7), Spinoza also claims that increasing our understanding by being passively affected also increases our power. “That which so disposes the human body that it can be affected in more ways, or which renders it capable of affecting external bodies in more ways, is advantageous to man” (4p38).³⁸ As Spinoza summarizes the point in 4app27 “the advantage we get from things external to us” is the “experience and knowledge we gain from observing them and changing them from one form to another.” Our understanding of the particular properties revealed through passive encounters with external things is particularly important for us to act in ways which are to our advantage. For instance, my particular knowledge of the antivenom will incline me to carry antivenom on future hikes or to avoid hiking in areas with snakes and so forth.³⁹ This sort of knowledge allows us to navigate the world, telling us which foods make us sick, which bus goes up-town, which politician can be trusted and so forth.

III

Three Kinds of Virtue. While the foregoing explains how passions can be virtuous in the sense that they contribute to our power, do they qualify as virtuous in a moral sense of the term? While

³⁷ This conclusion is spelled out in 4p18sch: “If we consider the mind, surely our intellect would be less perfect if the mind were in solitude and understood nothing beyond itself. Therefore there are many things outside ourselves which are advantageous to us and ought therefore to be sought.”

³⁸ Spinoza offers a helpful example illustrating this reasoning when discussing *titillatio* (imbalanced bodily pleasure). Spinoza claims that *titillatio* can be excessive and bad because it can “hinder the body’s ability to be affected in numerous other ways” (4p43d). Presumably this is because excessive bodily pleasure disposes one to continue interacting with the world in the same way (say, through sex or drinking), without engaging in new activities which would increase one’s understanding (see also 4p60). In this way, our understanding may actually be hindered by not being sufficiently passive to external objects.

³⁹ Of course, not all passivity will be to one’s advantage, as in the case of being bitten by a snake or run over by a bus. Nevertheless, I could only understand the antivenom by being passive, since any analysis of the antivenom from my own nature would only reveal general properties of extended things or metaphysical truths about modes.

Spinoza explicitly defines virtue as power (4def8; 3p55cor2), he offers other more restrictive notions of virtue. The second is what Spinoza sometimes calls the highest virtue (4p36d; 5p27) or highest good.⁴⁰ This is attained through perfecting the intellect or reason (4app4), which amounts to having knowledge of God or, equivalently, an adequate conception of oneself and everything that falls within the scope of human knowledge. Spinoza explains that the highest virtue arises only from contemplating clear and distinct perceptions (4p52).⁴¹ The distinction between this highest virtue and the more general virtue mentioned above is, foremost, one of degree: the highest good is a good for the same reason as any other, because it increases one's power. However, since the highest good is so effective at increasing one's power, it also plays a more fundamental role in structuring the relations among other goods. Thus, Spinoza, following eudaimonistic ethics,⁴² argues, first, that the highest good is the only complete good—sought for its own sake, not for the sake of any other thing—and, second that other goods are only valuable to the extent that they lead to the highest good.⁴³

⁴⁰ 5p27 might appear to suggest that the highest good consists only in an intuitive knowledge of God, knowledge of the third kind (2p40sch2). However, other passages where Spinoza mentions the highest good (4p36d) show that any adequate conception of God constitutes our highest good.

⁴¹ 4p52d claims that our highest contentment comes from clear and distinct perceptions, while 4p52sch identifies our highest contentment with our highest good. 4p52 might seem to disagree with my reading because it identifies our greatest contentment as arising from contemplation of our own power, not God. However, we must remember that our own power is an expression of God's power, in particular, that aspect of God's power to which we have the greatest epistemic access.

⁴² Of course, there is a great deal of variety among these accounts. For instance, for Aristotle there are other practical goods which do not themselves constitute the highest good but which make it possible for us to achieve the highest good, such as a life with sufficient resources for rational reflection and participation in civic life, whereas Stoics deny that nonmoral things such as resources are goods, though they nevertheless describe such things as preferred indifferents: indifferent with respect to the good, but nonetheless choiceworthy.

⁴³ Cf. Spinoza, *The Emendation of the Intellect* [TEI] 1 and 5 in the *Complete Works*. These claims are not as explicit in the *Ethics*, though they are suggested, for instance, by 4p52. I generally agree with those who argue that the TEI should be read as clarifying the project of the *Ethics*; see *l'expérience* Book I, particularly chapter 1 and Herman De Dijn, *Spinoza: The Way to Wisdom* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996).

Thirdly, Spinoza writes that our “true virtue is nothing other than to live by the guidance of reason” (4p37sch1; see also 4p52d). Since Spinoza defines reason as having adequate ideas (2p40sch2), true virtue can only be attained from living in accordance with adequate ideas. This is a more restricted use of ‘virtue’ than the first because ‘true virtue’ would not include all increases in our power: winning the lottery might increase my power, but it is not necessarily an action in accordance with reason. True virtue is not the same as the highest virtue either, since true virtue is concerned with “living” according to reason. The highest virtue, since it consists in having clear and distinct perceptions of God’s nature and our connection to it, involves having highly intellectual knowledge, for instance, the metaphysics of mode and attribute, the nature of extension, the laws of physics and so forth. While it is true that, following parallelism, such knowledge would have bodily counterparts, it is unlikely that all of this knowledge has practical consequences in terms of guiding one’s action. Thus our highest virtue consists in simply having adequate ideas, while our true virtue is attained through acting in accordance with them.⁴⁴

Do any of these uses of ‘virtue’ refer to virtue in a moral sense? The first does not seem to be moral, since it holds that anything which is good for us, even obviously amoral activities such as eating and drinking, is virtuous. It is interesting that, although Spinoza often follows the Stoics, he clearly departs from them here. The Stoics argue, against Aristotle, that only virtue is good, thereby ruling out other sorts of goods, for instance, the sort of things which lead to a commodious life, such as a nice house. While Spinoza also equates virtue with the good, he does so by expanding the category of the virtuous to encompass all things which are good for a person, rather than by restricting the scope of the good narrowly to the virtuous.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ While this distinction is subtle, it is important because it allows that one can exhibit true virtue, even though she may lack the sort of metaphysical training required for many of our adequate ideas, such as our idea of substance.

⁴⁵ Moreover, it follows that Spinoza equates virtue with acting according to one’s nature (4p18sch), unlike the Stoics, for whom virtue is only one way of acting in accordance with one’s nature. Thus Spinoza says that raising one’s arm to strike a blow, to the extent that it is consistent with my nature, is virtuous (4p59sch).

Are the other notions of virtue restricted to moral goods and actions, thereby corresponding to a more Stoic view on the nature of virtue? The notion of highest virtue is clearly indebted to a eudaimonistic ethical framework. The highest virtue is a moral concept in the loose sense that it offers prescriptions for actions; calling something our highest virtue implies that we should engage in actions to help us attain it. The notion of true virtue also implies prescriptions for actions, though true virtue is a slightly different moral concept because it is achieved by *living* in accordance with reason, which implies regularly and consistently acting in accordance with reason. Consequently, true virtue is related to a more common notion of virtue as character, habit, dispositions. Spinoza's interest in this aspect of virtue is clear from his description of *fortitudo* (3p59sch) or strength of character.

It is important to note that 'highest virtue' and 'true virtue' are not moral in the stricter sense of pertaining to what is permissible and obligatory. Spinoza is clear that permissibility is determined by advantage (4app8), so that the category of the permissible is coextensive with virtue generally. Thus Spinoza regards as impermissible any action that decreases our power, even those which we regard as obviously amoral, such as skipping a meal. Spinoza has very little to say about duty and obligation, aside from general claims about how we ought to act, where 'ought' signifies what will best increase our power, again including obviously amoral actions. Consequently, it is not clear that Spinoza employs any sense of 'virtue' which maps on to this common way of thinking about the moral.

IV

True Virtue and the Intelligence of the Passions. Are the passions virtuous in either of the moral senses of the term? First, consider the notion of highest virtue. Spinoza does say that passivity improves our understanding from "the experience and knowledge we gain from observing things and changing them from one form to another" (4app27; see also 4p38–9). However, since Spinoza holds that the highest good consists in clear and distinct perception, which is only possible in the case of adequate ideas, increasing our power pas-

sively, because it provides us with only inadequate ideas, cannot contribute to the highest good.⁴⁶

Would the passions count as virtuous in the sense of true virtue? It is tempting to answer no, since true virtue involves acting from adequate ideas and the passions are inadequate ideas. However, we must remember that true virtue implies living in accordance with reason, in other words, consistently acting in ways which increase our power of activity. Since the passions serve as a barometer of our power, they would help us to increase our power by indicating whether an activity increases our power. For instance, my formative experiences with the painful consequences of breaking rules taught me that a life of crime will not assist my perfection, whereas the pleasure accompanying learning taught me that a life of education would. Indeed, there is a good case for thinking of the passions as necessary for true virtue. While one may occasionally get lucky and hit on the right action, it is unlikely that one would consistently act appropriately without the feedback offered by the passions. Since it can be difficult to tell whether one is acting in accordance with reason, one needs to know when she succeeds and fails. This sort of feedback cannot come from adequate ideas, since they are too general. For instance, while we can determine through adequate ideas that we should surround ourselves with rational people and love God, the actual pursuit of these activities requires us to know more specific, particular things than can be revealed through adequate ideas. For instance, I need to know which people are rational or whether my love for a particular person is leading me towards love of God or mere lust. Making these determinations requires experience, in particular, the experience of increasing or decreasing one's power, which is revealed only by the passions.

The foregoing argument presupposes that the passions provide a kind of intelligence, that one can tell from pleasure or pain the status of one's power. A possible problem with this claim is that Spinoza admits that some pleasures can be bad and some pains good. If a pleasure is bad, it decreases my perfection. But pleasure is supposed to indicate an increase in my perfection; "pleasure is not in itself bad, but

⁴⁶ As a side note, this point provides a possible explanation for those passages where Spinoza seems to contrast virtue to passions, saying, for instance, that humility "is not a virtue, but a passion" (4p53d): by 'virtue' here, the suggestion goes, Spinoza means something like "contributes to the highest good."

good" (4p41). A bad pleasure, it would seem to follow, must be an unreliable indicator of perfection; similarly if a pain is good, then it increases my perfection and, thus, the pain too must be unreliable. All of this suggests that pleasures and pains are generally poor barometers of one's perfection. In this case, the passions of pleasure and pain cannot provide us with the appropriate feedback for them to contribute to our true virtue.

In responding to the objection, we may focus our attention on bad pleasures, since Spinoza claims that pain is only good in so far as it checks bad pleasure. Spinoza explains that *titillatio* can be bad because it "is related to man when part of him is affected more than others" (3p11s). Spinoza argues that this can create an imbalance which actually decreases the body's power of activity: "The power of this emotion can be so great as to surpass the other activities of the body" (4p43d). In this respect, *titillatio* can be "excessive" and "bad." At first, it is difficult to reconcile these claims with the definition of pleasure as a transition to a state of greater perfection. Consider an example of excessive *titillatio*: my pleasure from eating can become excessive if I eat to the point that it is detrimental to my health, decreasing my ability to act. The difficulty is this: if excessive eating decreases my power, how can it be categorized as a kind of pleasure, since pleasure is supposed to be correlated with transitions to greater perfection?

The key to a Spinozistic resolution is his claim above that excess pleasure is related to a particular part of the body: one receives pleasure from even excessive eating because it accompanies an increased power of activity in some part of the body, namely the part occupied with digestion. Excessive eating makes one a more powerful eater, able to digest more food and store more energy. The problem is that this localized increase in power disrupts the proportion of motion-and-rest for the entire body, thereby decreasing the net power of the entire bodily system. Consequently, even bad pleasures can still be regarded as accurate barometers of perfection: *titillatio* reliably tracks a *localized* increase in one's power of activity, for instance, the power of a particular region or system of the body.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ This point is recognized by Hoffman, "Three Dualist Theories of the Passions," 175.

This explanation for how bad *titillatio* accurately tracks perfection can be generalized to all bad pleasures. Almost all of the bad pleasures are kinds of love, which Spinoza defines as pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause (3p13s). We can explain the varieties of bad love as pleasure in the sense of *titillatio*, accompanied by the idea of an external cause. This is supported by 4p44d: “Therefore *titillatio* accompanied by the idea of an external cause is love, and thus love can be excessive.” Thus love is bad in that it corresponds to local increases in power which disrupt the entire body’s power of activity. The immoderate loves (*ebrietas*, *libido* and *avaritia*) offer obvious examples, since one’s sensual powers are heightened, at the expense of one’s other powers, namely reason (3p56s). The only bad pleasures which are not strictly love are pleasures accompanied by the idea of an *internal* cause: pride (*superbia*) (3p26s) and passive self-esteem (*acquiescentia in se ipso*) (3p30s). Although these pleasures involve ideas of the self, they can just as easily be explained as kinds of *titillatio*. 4app30 indicates that Spinoza intends to explain all bad pleasures (and desires) in this way: “since pleasure is usually related to one part of the body in particular, the emotions of pleasure (unless one exercises reason and care), and consequently the desires that are generated from them, can be excessive” (see also 4p60).

On the basis of this discussion, we can say that Spinoza’s inclusion of bad pleasures is, not only consistent with, but a consequence of the claim that pleasure tracks perfection. Following a strong naturalistic line, Spinoza intends many of his claims about human beings to apply univocally to all things, including each of the various parts and systems of our body: just as we have a *conatus*, each part of our body, in so far as it tends to persist in its existence, has a *conatus* as well. Just as our *conatus* undergoes changes in its power of activity, so too will the *conatus* of the parts of our body. Each of these changes will have a corresponding idea of pleasure or pain in the human mind. Furthermore, since some global decreases of power for the entire human body will inevitably be accompanied (or caused) by localized increases of power from its parts, it follows that some localized pleasures will also accompany (or even contribute to) global pains. The important point is that Spinoza is committed to this conclusion in part because he is committed to the view that pleasure accurately tracks changes in perfection (for each system of the body).

The foregoing provides us with a picture of how the passions can function in practical reasoning. At any time the mind contains any number of pains and pleasures corresponding to changes in the power of various parts of the body. Although we may be conscious of many of these ideas, the only ideas which track our *conatus* correspond to the power of activity for our entire being, its proportion of motion-and-rest. This requires us to discriminate the pleasures which are consistent with the flourishing of the entire body from those which are not. Such discrimination would be facilitated by the fact that, according to Spinoza's theory, any harmful localized pleasure should be accompanied by pain, corresponding to the overall decrease in one's power of activity. For example, although one may feel pleasure from excessive sensual pleasures, there will also be pain from the resulting neglect of his rational nature. Practical reasoning then involves sorting through and discriminating among the passions in this way.

V

Conclusions. This paper has shown, firstly, that Spinoza's admission of the passion of pleasure is, not anomalous, but rather of a piece with his philosophical system: Spinoza's division of our ideas as adequate or inadequate makes two lopsided categories. Adequate ideas are a narrow category pertaining mostly to general properties of things and metaphysical truths. In contrast, the category of inadequate ideas includes all other ideas and, consequently, ideas of widely varying epistemic quality. Spinoza recognizes this variety by allowing varying degrees of adequacy and activity in having inadequate ideas. This recognition is necessary, since the adequacy of our ideas comes, in part, from representing our power, as do many of our inadequate ideas to varying degrees. Furthermore, to the extent that some of our inadequate ideas represent increases in our power, given his definition of pleasure, it follows that they must give us pleasure, though perhaps not as much pleasure as do fully adequate ideas.

Secondly, given this proper understanding of the passions, we can see the important role they play in the life of the virtuous. For Spinoza the passions are necessary for us to act in the world: they provide us with the knowledge of particular things, which makes it possible for us to navigate external objects. More importantly, the passions

alone provide us with knowledge about our perfection and thus the feedback which makes it possible for us to act in accordance with reason. Since Spinoza's notion of true virtue involves a disposition to act consistently in accordance with reason, it follows that the passions play an integral and positive role in the virtuous life.⁴⁸

This point helps us to see how Spinoza's moral philosophy breaks starkly with the Stoics. For the Stoics, the passions are mistakes of reason, failures to follow *logos*. Consequently, they see the sage, one who is completely free from the passions, as obviously desirable. Moreover, for them there is nothing incoherent about the possibility of such a person, though Stoics admit that there have been few if any sages. In contrast, Spinoza's understanding of reason is much narrower than the Stoics', limited only to having a few, general adequate ideas. While Spinoza agrees with the Stoics that the passions are epistemically inferior, he cannot make sense of the notion that someone can function entirely through reason and, consequently, it would be incoherent for him to uphold *apatheia* as a realistic ethical goal. The result is a philosophy which is far more attentive to the irrational and affective aspects of human life, a philosophy which is more understanding of human passivity, vulnerability, and dependence.

While it is widely recognized that Spinoza criticizes the Stoics for imagining that it is possible for humans to completely master the passions, it is nevertheless common to see Spinoza as Stoic in the sense that he desires to eliminate the passions as much as possible. On this view, passions are, at best, necessarily evils. While it is true that Spinoza wants to reduce the causal power that external things exert over us and, consequently, reduce the causal power of the passions, this paper has shown that is not the case that Spinoza sees the passions as necessarily bad or that he wants us to eliminate the passions. On this reading, Spinoza's assertions of our passivity are not necessarily the "darkest" and most "pessimistic" part of the *Ethics*.⁴⁹ Rather,

⁴⁸ It may be tempting to conclude that the passions are necessary for a virtuous life only in the weak sense that they are necessary for any life at all. This would put them on the same level as food and shelter: necessary for a moral life, though without any moral significance. Although the passions are necessary for a virtuous life in this weak sense, unlike food and shelter, the passions are uniquely constituted to contribute positively to a virtuous life, providing us with the sort of information that is necessary in order to act in accordance with reason, thereby contributing to a proper character.

⁴⁹ "Action and Passion," 345.

they are optimistic, since passivity is a necessary part of the path to a virtuous life.⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ We should remember that Spinoza is careful to allow that recognizing our passivity can itself be active (4p53d). Although observing one's own weakness, when passive, is painful and bad, Spinoza allows that one who "conceives his own weakness from understanding something more powerful than himself, by the knowledge of which he measures his own power of activity, we are conceiving only that the man understands himself distinctly; that is that his power of activity is assisted."