

THE AFFIRMATIVE MIND: SPINOZA ON STRIVING UNDER THE ATTRIBUTE OF THOUGHT

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In the *Ethics*, Spinoza advances two apparently irreconcilable construals of will [*voluntas*]. Initially, he presents will as a shorthand way of referring to the volitions that all ideas involve, namely affirmations and negations. But just a few propositions later, he defines it as striving when it is “related only to the mind” (3p9s). It is difficult to see how these two construals can be reconciled, since to affirm or assent to some content is to adopt an attitude with a cognitive (mind-to-world) direction of fit, while to strive to persevere in one’s being would seem to be to adopt an attitude with a conative (world-to-mind) direction of fit. Attempting to achieve consistency by taking striving under the attribute of thought to consist in affirming only pushes the equivocation problem onto the concept of affirmation (Lin 2019). It would seem, then, that Spinoza equivocates on the concepts of will, affirmation, or perhaps both. I defend the univocity of Spinoza’s accounts of will and affirmation, showing that it comports with established accounts of affirmation in early modern philosophy and yields a clear, uniform account of what it means to strive under the attribute of thought, preserving the systematicity of Spinoza’s account of mind in ways that other interpretations do not.

Keywords: Spinoza; will; desire; affirmation; direction of fit; emotion; affect

SPINOZA is notoriously hostile towards the idea of the will [*voluntas*] as a free power, or faculty, of mind. He rejects the standard theological view that God possesses a will distinct from his intellect (1p33s2; 1p17s) and he criticizes Descartes and the Stoics for supposing that humans can gain absolute dominion

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over the passions through the exercise of a will (5 Preface).¹ Nevertheless, he does not call for us to purge *voluntas* from our philosophical lexicon. In characteristic fashion, he offers a revisionist account of the term.

The problem with his revisionist account is that it does not seem to be a single account at all, as he puts forth two apparently distinct construals of will. On the one hand, in 2p48–49, in the midst of his analysis of belief formation, he presents will as a shorthand way of referring to the volitions [*volitiones*] that all ideas involve, namely affirmations and negations. Here, he ascribes to the will—or, more precisely, to particular volitions—a purely doxastic, or belief-fixing, role. On the other hand, just a handful of propositions later, near the beginning of *Ethics* 3, he defines will as striving when it is “related only to the mind” (3p9s), placing will in a more familiar conative context. It is difficult to see how these two construals can be reconciled, since to affirm or assent to some content is to adopt an attitude with a cognitive (mind-to-world) direction of fit, while to strive to persevere in one’s being would seem to be to adopt an attitude with a conative (world-to-mind) direction of fit.

One way to try to achieve consistency is to take striving under the attribute of thought to consist in affirming (see D. Steinberg 2005). However, this only pushes the equivocation problem onto the notion of affirmation, taking it to mean *both* assenting to something *and* preserving the existence of something (see Lin 2019). It is difficult to see how to avoid the conclusion that Spinoza has an equivocal account of will, affirmation, or perhaps both.

In this paper, I seek to show that Spinoza in fact had univocal accounts of will and affirmation, establishing that all volitions are affirmations² and that what it means to strive under the attribute of thought is just to affirm in the doxastic sense. This interpretation casts Spinoza’s understanding of the relationship between cognitive and conative activity in a new light, revealing a position that breaks with the standard belief-desire model of action and avoids some of the attendant problems.³ While it is not uncommon for commentators to note that Spinoza did not sharply distinguish between the cognitive and the conative, or between theoretical and practical beliefs, surprisingly little work has been done that details precisely how Spinoza understands the relationship between belief and desire or what exactly it

1. Unless otherwise noted, references are to the *Ethics*. I adopt the following abbreviations for the *Ethics*: Numerals refer to parts; ‘p’ denotes proposition; ‘c’ denotes corollary; ‘d’ denotes demonstration; ‘D’ denotes definition; DA denotes Definition of the Affects; ‘s’ denotes scholium (e.g., 3p59s refers to *Ethics*, part 3, proposition 59, scholium). All references to the Latin are to *Spinoza Opera*, edited by Carl Gebhardt. Translations are Curley’s (Spinoza 1985–2015).

2. I omit ‘negation’ here for reasons that will become apparent later in the paper.

3. See, for instance, the problem of epiphenomenalism (see Kim 1989; 1993; 2000) and the puzzle of how beliefs and desires mesh together to regulate action (Railton 2012).

means to strive under the attribute of thought.⁴ I aim to fill this gap in this paper, showing how, under the attribute of thought, conative states (e.g., desires) can be seen as doxastic in that they consist in affirming (or assenting to) the existence of some object, and how doxastic states (e.g., beliefs) can be seen as conative in that the affirmations that they necessarily involve are expressions of one's striving. This reading has the virtues of: explaining away several apparent equivocations in Spinoza's thought, revealing that he is not plagued by direction of fit problems; comporting with the established meaning of affirmation in early modern philosophy; and yielding a clear and consistent account of what it means to strive under the attribute of thought that fully respects the causal barrier between thought and extension and thereby preserves the systematicity of Spinoza's philosophy.

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I motivate the problem of equivocation, indicate how I intend to resolve it, and situate my reading within some of the best current scholarship on Spinoza's account of affirmation and striving. In the second part, I build the case for my reading by way of a careful textual exegesis of the many expressions or guises of affirmation in Spinoza's theory of cognition, showing how this interpretation coheres with the text, while avoiding the problems associated with other interpretations. In the third and final part, I respond to potential concerns and clarify crucial features of this reading.

1. Two Accounts of Will

1.1. Will as Affirmation

Ethics 2p48–49 constitutes a pointed critique of the Cartesian model of belief formation, as expressed, for instance, in the Fourth Meditation.⁵ Here, in his attempt to explain why God is not culpable for human errors, Descartes argues that judgment arises from the concurrence of two faculties: the intellect, or the “faculty of understanding,” and the will. The faculty of understanding supplies the content for judgment, while the will adopts a stance in relation to that content: affirming it, denying it, or withholding assent. And while the human understanding is “extremely slight and very finite,” the will is “in the essential and strict sense” as unlimited as God's (CSM 2, 40; Cf. *Principles* 1.35).⁶ Consequently, we can affirm

4. Among the more thorough attempts to address these issues are: Della Rocca (2003), D. Steinberg (2005), Schmid (2014), Lin (2019). I discuss them below.

5. See also the *Principles of Philosophy* 1.32–1.35. For more on the contrast with Descartes, see Curley (1975) and Lin (2019).

6. References to Descartes are to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* I–II. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge University Press, 1985. [CSM].

or deny things that we do not sufficiently understand, which is precisely what we do when we form erroneous judgments.

Spinoza rejects nearly all of this. Not only does he deny that we have an “absolute, or free, will” (2p48), he dispenses with faculty psychology altogether, claiming:

[T]here is in the mind no absolute faculty of understanding, desiring, loving, and the like. From this it follows that these and similar faculties are either complete fictions or nothing but metaphysical beings, *or* universals, which we are used to forming from particulars. So intellect and will are to this or that idea, or to this or that volition as ‘stone-ness’ is to this or that stone, or man to Peter or Paul. (2p48s)

Faculties like “the will” are, at best, universals, which do not have any independent reality but are rather abstractions or shorthand ways of referring to a set of particulars (2p40s1).⁷ After repudiating the independent reality of faculties, Spinoza clarifies what he means by will:

[B]y will I understand a faculty of affirming and denying, and not desire. I say that I understand the faculty by which the mind affirms or denies something true or something false, and not the desire by which the mind wants a thing or avoids it. (2p48s)

Following Descartes’s lead in the Fourth Meditations, Spinoza conceives of the will here as playing an expressly doxastic, and not conative, role⁸; that is, he presents will here as involved in forming beliefs rather than directing action.

Lest one think that here Spinoza is insulating a desire-based or conative conception of will from his critique of faculty psychology, we should note that he includes the faculty of “desiring” within this critique. In distinguishing the

7. Cf. 1p32d; *Korte Verhandeling* (KV), Ch. 16. Throughout his writings, Spinoza makes a number of critical remarks about universals. Still, it is not obvious that he intends to repudiate universals wholesale. For analyses of how universals might find a reputable place in Spinoza’s philosophy, see Hübner (2016) and Viljanen (2018).

8. It should be noted that for Descartes the will is a general faculty that can be exercised in a range of ways, doxastic and conative alike, including “desire, aversion, assertion, denial and doubt” (*Principles* 1.32, 204). He was keen, though, to distinguish between ideas that are truth-apt and those that are not, opening the Third Meditation by considering which among his ideas could be bearers of truth and falsity, asserting that “[a]s for the will and the emotions, here too one need not worry about falsity; for even if the things which I may desire are wicked or even non-existent, that does not make it any less true that I desire them. Thus the only remaining thoughts where I must be on my guard against making a mistake are judgments” (CSM 2, 26).

“will” from desire, his point is rather that the particular volitions out of which we form the idea of an abstract or imaginative faculty of will are themselves affirmations and negations (assents or denials) and not particular desires.

This reading is supported by his claim in the subsequent proposition that: “In the mind there is no volition, or [*sive*] affirmation and negation, except that which the idea involves insofar as it is an idea” (2p49). Here, he is unquestionably advancing his own view, while still insisting that volitions should be understood as affirmations or negations: “there is no absolute faculty of willing and not willing, but only singular volitions, namely, this and that affirmation, and this and that negation” (2p49d).

Spinoza proceeds to claim that there is no volition without an idea and no idea without a volition, and that consequently (from 2D2) volitions pertain to the essence of ideas. In the subsequent corollary and its demonstration, he again invokes “the will” [*voluntas*], only to clarify that “the will and the intellect are nothing apart from the singular volitions [*volitiones*] and ideas themselves” and that singular volitions and ideas are “one and the same [thing]” (2p49c).

From 2p48–2p49, we learn two crucial things about Spinoza’s conception of will. First, “the will” is just a convenient way of referring to what is common to ideas: particular volitions. Second, the particular volitions that ideas involve are affirmations or negations (assents or denials) and not desires. They are fundamentally doxastic.

1.2. Will as Mental Striving

After concluding *Ethics* 2 with this account of will and volition, Spinoza complicates things near the beginning *Ethics* 3, where he advances what appears to be a very different account of will. This conception builds off of the so-called conatus doctrine, according to which “each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives [*conatur*] to persevere in its being” (3p6). After asserting that striving is the “actual essence of the thing” (3p7), Spinoza proceeds to characterize several manifestations of striving. Here we find his second construal of will:

When this striving is related only to the mind, it is called will [*voluntas*]; but when it is related to the mind and body together, it is called appetite [*appetitus*]. This appetite, therefore, is nothing but the very essence of man, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation. And so man is determined to do those things. Between appetite and desire there is no difference, except that desire [*cupiditas*] is generally related to men insofar as they are conscious of their

appetite. So desire can be defined as Appetite together with consciousness of the appetite. (3p9s)

In this passage, Spinoza distinguishes between three manifestations of striving: will, appetite, and desire. Will and appetite are evidently very closely connected, the only difference being that will is striving under the attribute of thought, while appetite is striving under the attributes of *both* thought and extension. Now, since “the mind and the body, are one and the same individual, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension” (2p21s; cf. 2p7s), it follows that whenever one strives under the attribute of extension, one strives under the attribute of thought, and vice versa.⁹ Consequently, the difference between will and appetite is merely aspectual or notional.¹⁰ Will is thus how we conceive of striving insofar as we attend only to its expression under the attribute of thought.

Desire is evidently also closely related to these other concepts. In fact, in some passages he seems to identify appetite and desire (3p57d; 3 DA I expl.) In 3p9s, though, Spinoza claims that desire involves consciousness. Leaving aside for now the vexed question of how Spinoza understands consciousness,¹¹ we may simply observe that, as a conscious state, desire, like will, appears to be a distinctly mental manifestation of striving. And, indeed, Spinoza explicitly connects desire to volition in the appendix to Part 3 (3 DA I).

What I want to highlight at this point is just how different the explication of *voluntas* in *Ethics* 3 looks from the conception advanced in *Ethics* 2. *Voluntas* in *Ethics* 2 plays a doxastic, or belief-fixing, role, affirming or denying some putative *factum*, resulting in an idea that is truth-apt, while *voluntas* in *Ethics* 3 is conative, tending towards some *faciendum*, or some condition to be brought about (i.e., self-preserving effects), where the content of this volition or striving is not obviously truth-apt or subject to correctness conditions.¹² This leaves the reader to wonder how these two construals of will might be reconciled.

9. The analysis here is confined to physical beings, like us. Spinoza’s metaphysics admits that there might be beings whose reality is expressed in other attributes of which we are not aware (see Ep. 64).

10. As readers of the *Ethics* know well, Spinoza frequently invites us to conceive one and the same thing in different ways (including minds and bodies themselves), littering the pages of the *Ethics* with the *quatenus* (“insofar as”) qualifier that enables him to make aspectual distinctions. This is not to trivialize the role that such distinctions play in Spinoza’s system (for a reading that emphasizes the metaphysical significance of conceptual or aspectual distinctions, see Newlands 2018).

11. For a range of views, see Garrett (2008), Nadler (2008), LeBuffe (2010), Marshall (2013), Marrama (2017), Renz (2018).

12. I take the language of *factum/faciendum* from David Velleman’s analysis of cognitive and conative attitudes in “The Guise of the Good” (1992).

1.3. *Proposed Reconciliation: Affirming as Mental Striving*

There are several possible responses that one could make here. One would be to contend that only one of these senses of *voluntas* is legitimate. The obvious candidate for illegitimacy would be the “doxastic” account, since Spinoza introduces this concept in the midst of a criticism of the faculty of will (2p48). However, as noted above, Spinoza proceeds to make use of this conception of will as a shorthand for the affirmation (or negation) that ideas as ideas involve (2p49). He seems to be as committed to the doxastic conception of will as he is to the conative conception. Another possibility is that he simply uses *voluntas* in two fundamentally distinct ways. However, it is implausible that a thinker as systematic and careful as Spinoza would use the same technical term in two fundamentally distinct and irreconcilable ways just a few propositions apart, especially when the second construal is a stipulative definition (so he is not under special pressure to deploy the term in this way). This leaves us with a third possibility, which is that the two definitions are, despite appearances, compatible. This is the view that I wish to defend.

My proposal for reconciling the two accounts is straightforward. The first account presents the will as a shorthand way of referring to the affirmations that ideas involve as ideas. The second account states that the will is one’s striving under the attribute of thought. My proposal is that what it means to strive under the attribute of thought is just to affirm the objects of one’s ideas. However, it is one thing to assert this, it is quite another to marshal positive evidence in support of the reading and flesh out its meaning and implications. That will be the task of the second part of this paper. First, though, I want to situate my interpretation in relation to some most prominent accounts of the relationship between affirming and striving.

1.4. *Existing Scholarship on Affirmation and Striving*

Perhaps the most influential treatment of Spinoza’s account of will and affirmation in recent years is Michael Della Rocca’s article “The Power of an Idea: Spinoza’s Critique of Pure Will.” In this work, Della Rocca attempts to reconstruct the demonstration of 2p49, homing in specifically on the puzzling claim that “an affirmation is simply a matter of having a certain idea” (2003: 203). Della Rocca attempts to show that this is rooted in Spinoza’s commitment to the view that ideas are not like “mute pictures on a panel” (2p49s, ii.132), but rather express their own volitional power, which takes the form of affirmation. Della Rocca’s analysis is surely right on two fundamental points: (1) just as there is a power that is intrinsic to bodies, there is a power that is intrinsic to ideas; (2) the power of ideas is to be understood in terms of affirmation.

Nevertheless, I think that Della Rocca's analysis of how affirming relates to striving is wanting in a few respects. When directly considering the relationship between ideas and striving, he claims that "each idea must somehow be bound up with the agent's striving for preservation and enhancement" (2003: 208), and he proceeds to illustrate how ideas might be "bound up with" one's striving in the following way: "Let's say that in addition to the idea that there is water in the cup, I have the idea that drinking water would increase my power of acting or be beneficial to me. . . . If I have these ideas, I will strive or have some tendency, e.g., to put the cup to my lips" (2003: 209).

I have several reservations about this sketch.¹³ First of all, it is predicated on something like a conventional belief-desire model of action, which, as I see it, Spinoza sought to supplant. This leads Della Rocca to conceive of the relationship between the affirmation of the water in the cup (i.e., the belief that there is water) as impacting one's striving only through the mediation of *another* idea that supplies the particular end or aim (e.g., the representation of the water as beneficial). But, as indicated above, I think that Spinoza took the relationship between striving and affirmation to be far more direct: affirmation just *is* striving under the attribute of thought. No further ingredients need to be added to belief-like ideas in order for them to be "bound up with" our striving.

Moreover, by analyzing the striving that results from one's ideas in terms of overt physical behavior, this account fosters a somewhat misleading impression of how striving under the attribute of thought gets expressed. Della Rocca is, of course, keenly aware that Spinoza denies psycho-physical causation (3p2; cf. 2p6),¹⁴ so he would undoubtedly point out that the effect of the idea of water and its utility is not, strictly speaking, the raising of the glass to one's lips, but the corresponding mental idea. Still, the fact that in a discussion of striving under the attribute of thought Della Rocca is wont to present the effects in terms of physical activity reveals how strong the propensity is even among the best scholars to conceive of the effects of striving exclusively in physical terms, leaving the purely mental manifestation of striving woefully under-theorized.

Writing soon after Della Rocca, Diane Steinberg offers an interpretation that is in certain respects similar to Della Rocca's and shares many of its virtues (2005).¹⁵

13. To be fair, Della Rocca admits that this is only "one way in which causation by an idea is linked with an agent's conatus" and that he does not purport to offer "a comprehensive treatment of Spinoza's account of conatus and its relation to ideas" (2003: 208). But my concern is not that this model does not exhaust possible ways in which the affirmation of an idea is connected to striving, but that it misconstrues the relationship between affirmation and striving.

14. And in the very same article, Della Rocca maintains that Spinoza's position is starkly anti-Cartesian in that "thought is conceptually self-sufficient" such that "ideas cannot interact with radically dissimilar things" (2003: 200).

15. Like Della Rocca, she notes that the demonstration of 2p49 is, on its own, rather inadequate (2005: 148–49, 152). Also, like Della Rocca, she thinks that what is missing from Spinoza's account is an appeal to the power or intensity of ideas (2003: 149–52).

However, she advances a more direct account of how the power of ideas relates to one's striving. Rather than construing the affirmation that is involved in an idea as something that must be integrated into one's striving (e.g., by way of desires or representations of goodness), Steinberg claims that the affirmation is *itself* an expression of one's striving. She asserts that "the first and principle tendency of an idea's striving to persevere is to affirm the existence of its object. . . . the affirmation thesis is what results when [the conatus] doctrine is applied to ideas: as a finite mode of thinking, an idea strives to affirm the existence of its object" (2005: 154). I think that Steinberg is exactly right about this, and the second part of this paper is in certain respects an attempt to unpack and defend this assertion. The reason that this is necessary is that Steinberg herself offers only a rather tenuous justification of the view and does not explore its peculiar implications or confront its potential problems.

One such problem has been forcefully articulated recently by Martin Lin. Lin is skeptical of any attempt to ground the account of affirmation in 2p49 in one's striving: "As far as I can see, there is no way to analyse affirmation as the manifestation of the conatus that retains the connection between affirming an idea and the truth of that idea that Spinoza obviously intends it to have" (2019: 35). According to Lin, affirmations cannot be understood in terms of striving because to affirm something is to take it to be true, while striving is not aimed at truth but self-preservation.¹⁶ He proceeds to argue that interpretations like Steinberg's equivocate on the meaning of affirmation:

To see this as an account of judgment requires an equivocation on 'affirms' because I can affirm the existence of some object (that is, have a mind-to-world directed attitude toward the proposition that it exists) without affirming its existence (that is, striving to preserve its existence) and vice versa. For example, that I affirm (in the sense that has a mind-to-world direction of fit) the existence of my coffee cup does not entail that I will try to protect it from harm. And I can, for example, perform actions that will protect an as of yet unborn child from harm without affirming that the child presently exists. The conatus doctrine only tells us that each idea affirms its object in the sense of protecting-from-harm and not in the sense of taking-to-exist. (2019: 35–36)

Lin points to the distinction between the doxastic conception of will and desire in 2p48s as evidence that Spinoza appreciates this difference in direction of fit that is overlooked by commentators like Della Rocca and Steinberg: "Spinoza

16. In an essay from two years earlier, Lin maintains that affirmation can be understood in terms of striving: "Spinoza's account of the *conatus* or striving for self-preservation that he says animates all of nature accounts for both affirmation in judgment and desire" (2017: 93). I take it that Lin (2019) is rethinking the claim of Lin (2017).

thinks affirmation is related to truth in such a way as distinguishes it from ‘the desire by which the mind wants something’. Efforts to understand affirmation in terms of conatus, however, fail to preserve any connection to truth that distinguishes it in this way” (2019: 35).

Lin’s concern about direction of fit looks like a genuine sticking point: affirming as true seems fundamentally different from striving to persevere in one’s being.¹⁷ As we will see, though, if there is an equivocation on the notion of affirmation, it is Spinoza’s, not Steinberg’s.¹⁸ And since the apparent equivocation about affirmation perfectly mirrors the apparent equivocation on *voluntas*, as seen through the direction of fit problem cited above, this should give us serious pause, since either Spinoza is systematically equivocal, deploying multiple concepts (affirmation, will, volition) in *precisely the same equivocal ways* or we have failed to understand something fundamental about how Spinoza understands these concepts.

At this point, my cards are clearly on the table: I think we have not yet fully appreciated Spinoza’s conception of striving under the attribute of mind. While scholars like Della Rocca and Steinberg are right to think that affirmation is closely related to striving, Lin exposes the limitations of the existing scholarship, which has not sufficiently spelled out how Spinoza conceived of the relationship between the cognitive and the conative. The aim of part 2 of this paper is to begin to flesh out the details of a satisfactory account. I will argue that Spinoza thinks that mental striving consists in an idea’s affirming the existence of its object, and that desires are just particular instances of this affirmative activity. Perhaps because of the strangeness of this view, it remains hidden in plain sight in the *Ethics*.

2. Mental Striving as Affirming: The Many Guises of Affirmation

2.1. Ideas, Objects, and Affirmation: Some Preliminary Observations

In order to build the case for the view that that affirming is just striving under the attribute of thought—which enables us to reconcile Spinoza’s two accounts of *voluntas*—I will examine the many guises of affirmation, which correspond

17. Stephan Schmid motivates the problem well too when he writes: “there seems to be a big difference between wanting something and believing something,” framing this as a problem of direction of fit (2014: 255). While I am sympathetic to the thrust of Schmid’s subsequent analysis, I have reservations about how he understands the relationship between “affirmation” and “motivational force” (see esp. 2014: 264–65).

18. For an account according to which Spinoza embraces a different kind of equivocal conception of affirmation, see Youpa (2020: 25–27).

to the many guises of idea. Before proceeding, though, I want to make a few preliminary observations about Spinoza's conception of mind. First, it is worth noting that the only particular things or modes (1p25c) that exist under the attribute of thought are ideas (cf. LeBuffe 2010: 557). Minds are not distinct types of mental entities in which ideas inhere; rather, they are themselves ideas, or collections of ideas, that vary in their complexity according to the complexity of the objects that they represent (2p15).

This brings me to my second observation, which is that ideas are fundamentally intentional: they take some object [*objectum*]. The demand that an idea take an object underlies Spinoza's analysis of the human mind in 2p11–13, where he argues that the idea that constitutes the human mind is an idea of the body, on the grounds that (1) the mind is an idea, (2) ideas must take an object, and (3) the only thing could serve as the object of the mind is the body. Claim (2) expresses Spinoza's commitment to the intentionality of ideas. Since other scholars have examined the intentional structure of ideas in impressive detail, I will not belabor the point here (see Koistinen 2017; Lin 2017; Renz 2018; Hübner 2019a). I will simply emphasize that *all* ideas, even affects, have this intentional structure (see 2A3).

The third point that I wish to make here concerns the character of the volitions that are intrinsic to ideas: they are directly and in the first instance *affirmations*, rather than affirmations *or* negations (see Hübner 2015). While in 2p49 and 2p49d, Spinoza construes volition as affirmation or negation, references to negation drop out in the ensuing scholium and subsequent analyses. The reason for this, I believe, is that, for Spinoza, negation arises only when the content affirmed by one idea entails the negation of content affirmed by another. To affirm some thing, *p*, implies the denial of what contradicts *p*, though the mental act itself is purely affirmative. For instance, in affirming that it is presently wholly sunny outside, I have an idea that entails the denial that it is presently overcast, though the idea is itself directly affirmative.

The primacy of affirmation is indicated in 2p49s, where affirmation is presented as the default position, and denial or doubt arise only when one has some *further* idea, or affirms some other content:

[W]hat is perceiving a winged horse other than affirming wings of the horse? For if the mind perceived nothing else except the winged horse, it would regard it as present to itself, and would not have any cause of doubting its existence, or any faculty of dissenting, unless either the imagination of the winged horse were joined to an idea which excluded the existence of the same horse, or the mind perceived that its idea of a winged horse was inadequate. And then either it will necessarily deny the horse's existence, or it will necessarily doubt it. (2p49s)

On this view, affirming is the default stance; doubt and disbelief are derivative.¹⁹ The primacy of affirmation is suggested elsewhere the *Ethics*, as for instance when Spinoza claims that ideas of affections of the body “posit” [*ponit*] rather than “exclude” [*secludit*] the “existence or presence” of their object (2p17d), and when he reasons that in order to “negate” the idea of something destructive we must “affirm” things that “exclude their existence” (3p13). Negation itself is not an activity of ideas; rather, ideas negate in virtue of what is excluded by the content that is affirmed. This view was already in place in Spinoza’s *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (composed c. 1660), in which he claims: “[the mind] forms positive ideas before negative ones” (TdIE, §108).²⁰ In the same work, he explains why affirmative ideas are sometimes cast in negative terms: “I speak of intellectual affirmation, giving little thought to verbal affirmations which, owing to the poverty of language, must sometimes, perhaps, be expressed negatively, though the idea contained is affirmative” (TdIE, §96; cf. §89).

Taking this point about primacy of affirmation together with the observation about intentionality, we may say that an idea not only takes an object (i.e., is intentional), it *affirms* the object. This leaves one to wonder what it means for an idea to affirm its object. For instance, we might wonder whether it consists in affirming properties of a subject or affirming the existence of some thing. In fact, I think that Spinoza thinks of affirmation in both ways. We see this in the winged horse example above (2p49s), where Spinoza treats affirmation at once as a kind of predication (one affirms wings of a horse) *and* as implying an existential judgment (the winged horse *exists*).²¹ When we affirm the existence of some thing, we always affirm it under some aspect or as existing *in such-and-such a way*.²² To use his example, when we affirm the sun affecting our body, we affirm it as existing about two hundred feet from us (2p35s). Put simply, affirming some object is always affirming that it exists *thusly*.

The final observation that I wish to make here concerns how other seventeenth century philosophers understood affirmation. Affirmation [Latin: *affirmatio*] in this era was understood in one of two general ways. It was sometimes

19. For contemporary defenses of such a belief-default view, rightly traced back to Spinoza, see Gilbert (1991), Gilbert et al. (1993), Mandelbaum (2014).

20. Over a century later, we find Kant advancing a version of the primacy of affirmation: “Now no one can think a negation determinately without grounding it on the opposed affirmation. . . . All concepts of negations are thus derivative, and the realities contain the data, the material, so to speak, or the transcendental content, for the possibility and the thoroughgoing determination of all things” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A575/B603).

21. As we will see, Spinoza’s conception of the object that is affirmed as existing may be capacious enough to include not only *things* but also (nominalizable) propositions. Spinoza’s account of belief resembles Hume’s on this point. See Lewis Powell (2018).

22. For proposals of how we might fill out the “such-and-such” here, see Garrett (2008) and J. Steinberg (2013).

taken as the act of joining together or copulating ideas or words to form a proposition. We affirm one thing of another in the sense of predicating something of a subject.²³ The other notion of affirmation was the Cartesian one considered above, according to which to affirm is to assent. The former consists in forming a proposition, while the latter consists in forming a judgment.

Some philosophers of this era seem to have run together these two senses of affirmation. Jill Vance Buroker has argued that in the *Port Royal Logic* Arnauld²⁴ “equates forming the proposition with judging it. In the act of connecting the subject and the predicate, one necessarily commits oneself to a truth-value” (Buroker 1996: 8). On her interpretation, Arnauld takes the Cartesian view of affirmation as assent and claims that the very act of forming a proposition involves assent. David Owen and Michael Ayers attribute a similar view to Locke.²⁵ While there is some dispute as to whether or not Arnauld or Locke viewed the affirmation involved in forming a proposition as also involving assent—that is, whether or not assertoric force is expressed through the affirmation²⁶—there is no question that affirmation in this era fell within the purview of logic, language, and judgment, and thus related to mental or linguistic acts that are truth-apt, or have a mind-to-world direction of fit, and not to motivation and action. Hobbes, for instance, claims that humans, unlike brutes, can err or make true or false judgments only because we have the capacity to affirm things or copulate names.²⁷ And the Port Royalists expressly distinguish the “*main* function of the verb,” which is to “signify affirmation,” our “principal way of thinking,” from verbs that “signify other actions of soul, such as desiring, requesting, commanding, and so on” (Arnauld and Nicole 1996: 79). The crucial point here is that affirmation in the early modern period was associated exclusively with forming propositions and judgments that could be assessed for truth or falsity.

2.2. *Striving Under the Attribute of Thought: Affirming the Existence of Body*

With these observations in place, we may now turn to the evidence for the view that affirming is striving under the attribute of thought. As noted above, for Spinoza, all mental states or entities—including the human mind (2p11d; 2p13;

23. For a helpful general overview, see Nuchelmans (1983).

24. Buroker attributes this view simply to Arnauld, rather than to Arnauld and Nicole, presumably because it has its roots in the *Port Royal Grammar*, to which Nicole did not contribute.

25. David Owen claims that for Locke “there is only one act of the mind” involved in predication and affirmation (Owen 2003: 18). Cf. Ayers (1993: 1:104–5).

26. See Ott (2002) for a reading of Arnauld and Locke that denies that affirmation implies assertoric force.

27. *Leviathan* 4.11, 18; Hobbes, “Third Set of Objections” to Descartes’s *Meditations* (CSM 2, 128).

2p15)—are ideas, and all ideas take and affirm an object. Since the object of the idea that constitutes the human mind is the body (2p13), this idea must involve an affirmation of the body. Indeed, since the affirmation pertains to the *essence* of the idea (2p49d), we should expect him to say that the essential activity, the striving, of the mind qua idea is to affirm the body. And, sure enough, this is precisely what he asserts in 3p10d: “the first and principal [tendency] of the striving of our mind [*nostrae mentis conatus*] (by P7) is to affirm the existence of our body.” This claim occurs in the demonstration to the proposition that immediately follows his construal of will as striving insofar as it is “related only to the mind” (3p9s). This looks like clear evidence that Spinoza thinks that the will, or the striving of the mind, consists in affirming the objects of one’s ideas. We find an equally direct statement to this effect at the end of Part 3, where Spinoza writes that “the essence of the mind consists in this (by IIP11 and P13), that it affirms the actual existence of its body” (3 GDA exp., ii.204).

Moreover, because Spinoza defines the essence of a thing as that which, when posited, posits the thing, and that which when taken away, takes away the thing (2D2), if the mind’s essence consists in affirming its object (i.e., the body), it follows that if the mind ceased to affirm the body it would literally cease to exist. And this is the exact conclusion that Spinoza draws in 3p11s: “the present existence of the mind and its power of imagining are taken away as soon as the mind ceases to affirm the present existence of the body.” All of this is fairly decisive evidence that the striving of the mind consists in affirming the existence of its object, the body; and it supports the more general theses that ideas by their very nature affirm the existence of their objects and that this is how striving is expressed under the attribute of thought.

At this point, though, we must confront Lin’s worry that this sense of affirmation simply *cannot* mean the same thing that it does in 2p48–2p49. Perhaps Spinoza is using the term here to mean something more like *seeking to preserve*, or, to use Lin’s phrase “protecting-from-harm.” While, for a contemporary reader—who will have encountered non-doxastic conceptions of affirmation (think: “life-affirming”) from sources as disparate as Nietzsche and positive psychology—this might seem like a natural reading, I think it should be resisted for several reasons. First, and most obviously, it saddles Spinoza with an equivocal account of affirmation, the equivocity of which is not motivated, explained, or defended in the text.²⁸ Second, as noted in the preceding section, the act of affirmation in the

28. The same could be said in response to Andrew Youpa’s rather different account of Spinoza’s equivocation on affirmation, according to which Spinoza sometimes uses affirmation to imply assenting to propositional content while at other times using it to refer to a mere (non-propositional) signaling (Youpa 2020: 25–27). Youpa appeals to equivocation to defend his view that emotions are not truth-apt states. As will be apparent in §2.5, I think that for Spinoza emotions *are* truth-apt states and that the affirmation that they involve is the very same affirmation discussed in 2p48–49.

seventeenth century belonged squarely within the domain of proposition formation and judgment, that is, in relation to mind-to-world, truth-apt mental states. So, for someone in this context to use the verb *affirmare* to mean “protecting-from-harm,” would have been highly unorthodox, probably to the point of being unintelligible. Third, while affirmation in the sense of assenting to something is quite evidently a mental activity, the same cannot be said of protecting from harm.²⁹ While we may tend to conceive of striving in terms of its physical manifestations, as noted above Spinoza insists that the mental act of affirming cannot give rise to protective behavior in any ordinary, physical sense; it can only give rise to further ideas. Fourth, and finally, it is precisely because the essential activity of the mind is to affirm the body in the sense of assenting to its existence, and not in the sense of seeking to preserve, that we are able to make further existential judgments about the things that affect the body. I turn to this point now.

2.3. *Affirming External Objects: Bare (Non-Affective) Ideas*

We have seen above that the essence of the mind is to affirm the body.³⁰ This is, in a sense, Spinoza’s version of the Cartesian cogito: I am, I exist; or, my body is, it exists.³¹ For convenience, I will refer to this essential doxastic commitment (the mind’s affirmation of the existence of the body) as one’s essential self-affirmation, bearing in mind that “self” here is not a term that Spinoza uses and that it should not be confused with the Cartesian “I”. (A brief clarifying point is in order here. While *X*’s mind is the idea of *X*’s body, it would not be correct to say that in virtue of this *X* has an idea of *X*’s body; rather, it is the idea that *constitutes X*’s mind, the idea that *is X*. In fact, Spinoza claims that one only comes to have an idea of one’s body—and in turn come to be acquainted with one’s mind—through its affections [2p19]. Still, *X*’s mind affirms *X*’s body, even if *X* is not directly aware of this). But if the body is the object of the mind, one might reasonably ask how it is that one comes to represent anything *other* than the body.

29. One might think that for Spinoza there must be a mental expression of “protecting from harm,” since all things strive to persevere in their being, even ideas (see D. Steinberg 2005; Schmid 2014; Lenz 2019). While I do think that ideas tend to persevere in their being, I don’t think that we should understand this as modelled on the physical account. Rather, what it means for an idea to persevere in its being is just, once again, for it to tend to affirm its object.

30. Because for every idea of *x* there is an idea of that idea of *x* (2p20; 2p7), the account that I offer concerning striving under the attribute of mind could be told at meta-level: the striving of the idea of the mind (which is the idea of the body) consists in the idea affirming the *mind*’s existence. But rather than complicate the analysis, I will confine my distinction to the first-order striving of the mind, i.e., the affirming of the *body*’s existence.

31. I put it this way to underscore the fact that affirming is a form of assenting to some thing’s existence. However, it is worth noting that even if the idea that *this body exists* is one’s essential doxastic commitment, it is not first in the order of philosophizing (see 2p10s).

Part of Spinoza's response is that insofar as we have an idea of any body, we will have ideas of what is common to all bodies (2p38), including extension itself, an eternal attribute of God (see 2p45–2p47). In response to a query about the basis and extent of human knowledge from Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus (mediated by G. H. Schuller), Spinoza asserts both of these points, namely that we have knowledge of God *qua* extension, and that this knowledge, like the knowledge of all other things apart from the body, arises out of, or is inferred from, one's idea of the body:

[T]he human Mind can achieve knowledge only of the things which the idea of an actually existing body involves, or what can be inferred from this idea itself. For the power of each thing is defined solely by its essence (by EIIP7). Furthermore, (by IIP13) the essence of the Mind consists only in this, that it is the idea of an actually existing Body. Therefore, the Mind's power of understanding extends only to those things which this idea of the Body contains in itself, or which follow from it. But this idea of the Body neither involves nor expresses any other attributes of God than Extension and Thought. For (by IIP6) its object, that is, the Body, has God for a cause insofar as he is considered under the attribute of Extension, and not insofar as he is considered under any other attribute. So (by IA6) this idea of the Body involves knowledge of God only insofar as he is considered under the attribute of Extension. (Ep. 64, emphasis added)

Spinoza is thus committed to the view that all of our knowledge springs from our idea of the body.³²

One forms ideas of other finite particulars when other bodies impinge upon one's own. When this happens, one is affected in a way that "involves" or implicates³³ both the affecting and the affected body, and one forms a corresponding idea of this affection that in some sense represents both one's own body and the affecting body (2p16–2p17).³⁴ Put simply, one forms ideas of finite external things because their natures are implicated in the affections of one's body, and

32. Here, I agree with Carriero: "That my mind affirms, as the *primum* and *praecipuum* tendency of its conatus, the existence of its object, my body, gives it its perspective on the world" (2020: 88).

33. See Gabbey (2008), Garrett (2010).

34. An anonymous referee suggested that such ideas only strictly represent the external thing. I take it that, on the referee's reading, the relationship between the idea and its bodily object is direct or unmediated, and thereby not strictly a representational relationship. I am intrigued by this suggestion and would like to see the case for it. But rather than take a stand on this, I will simply note that Spinoza's language of ideas "perceiving" affections of the body (2p12) or "indicating" the condition of the body (2p16c) suggests a representational relationship in some loose sense of *carrying information about* their object.

one necessarily also perceives the affections of the body since “whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the mind must be perceived by the human mind” (2p12).³⁵ Ideas of the body’s affections thus take a complex intentional object: they are at once ideas of one’s own body and ideas of the affecting body, and they represent both of these things in a limited, fragmentary way, reflecting how one’s body is affected.³⁶

Given that, on my reading, it pertains to the essence of an idea to affirm the existence of its object, the idea of one’s bodily affections—with its complex intentional object—will include at once an affirmation of the existence of one’s own body and an affirmation of the affecting object; and these affirmations themselves depend on the mind’s essential affirmation of the body. Spinoza expresses this in 3p11s when he claims that mind’s power of imagining (or perceiving) particular things depends on the antecedent affirmation of the existence of the body: “the power of the mind by which it imagines things and recollects them also depends on this (see IIP17, P18, P18S), that it involves the actual existence of the body.” The reference to 2p17 is quite revealing, since this passage is underwritten by this same reasoning. This proposition and its demonstration read:

If the human body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, *the human mind will regard [contemplabitur] the same external body as actually existing, or as present to it*, until the body is affected by an affect that excludes the existence or presence of that body

This is evident. For so long as the human body is so affected, the human mind (by P12) will regard this affection of the body, that is (by P16), it will have the idea of a mode that actually exists, an idea which involves the nature of the external body, *that is, an idea which does not exclude, but posits, the existence or presence of the nature of the external body [ideam, quae existentiam, vel praesentiam naturae corporis externi non secludit, sed ponit]*. And so the mind (by P16C1) will regard the external body *as actually existing, or as present*, until it is affected, and so on, q.e.d. (2p17/d, emphasis added)

It is notable that 2p16 and 2p16c1 (cited here) only establish that one will perceive the external bodies by which one is affected. Nothing in these passages licenses the further claim that an idea *posits the existence* of the external thing, or that *one regards it as present*.³⁷ Spinoza simply seems to assume that to have an idea about

35. For an account of Spinoza and the representation of external things, see Lin (2006) and J. Steinberg (2013: §2.1).

36. For a detailed discussion of confusedness in Spinoza, see Della Rocca (1996).

37. Spinoza equates affirming with positing in 3p4d: “the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny the thing’s essence, or [sive] it posits the thing’s essence, and does not take it away.” See also 3p54s.

some thing, T, is to posit T's existence. However, the inference is unproblematic if one allows that the essential activity of ideas is to affirm the existence of their objects. I take it that this core commitment underwrites the reasoning of 2p17d. Since at this point in the *Ethics* Spinoza has not yet claimed that affirmations are intrinsic to ideas, one might raise questions about the order of exposition here. But given how central this thesis is to Spinoza's view of mind, he can be forgiven for deploying this fundamental tenet before he has explicitly introduced it.

This analysis reinforces the claim that the essential affirmation of the body is doxastic, since it is because the mind essentially affirms, in the sense of assenting to, the existence of the body that one assents to the existence of the other things that affect the body. And, consequently, it provides further support for the view that Spinoza had a univocal, doxastic, conception of "affirming." So much for what we might call the basic ideas of external things, which is to say the ideas of things without regard to affects.

2.4. Affirming Changes in One's Body's Power of Acting: Emotions

In order to directly confront the alleged direction of fit problem, we must turn to consider the role that affirmation plays in relation to affects. For the sake of this analysis, it will be helpful to distinguish forms of joy (*laetitia*) and sadness (*tristitia*)—which I will refer to as emotions—from the third primary affect, desire (*cupiditas*) (3p11s). As has been duly noted in the scholarly literature, desire seems to be different in character from joy and sadness, since, contrary to the definition of affects in 3D3, desire is not itself a change in one's power of acting, but rather a response to a change in one's power of acting (see LeBuffe 2009 and J. Steinberg 2016). Because, for Spinoza, desire has a distinct character that is best explicated in light of his account of emotions, I will begin with an analysis of the role of affirmation in emotions.

The two primary classes of emotion are joy and sadness. Joy is defined as that affect, or genus of affect, whereby the mind passes to a greater perfection or power, while sadness is that affect, or genus of affect, whereby the mind passes to a lesser perfection or power (3p11s). Emotions, as ideas, have rich intentional content, and do what all ideas do: affirm their objects. Here is Spinoza's "General Definition of the Affects" (GDA):

An affect which is called a passion of the mind is a confused idea, by which the mind affirms [*affirmat*] of its body, or of some part of it, a greater or lesser force of existing than before, which, when it is given, determines the mind to think of this rather than that. (3 GDA, ii.203)

There is a lot to unpack in this brief definition. First, it is worth noting that it is restricted to the passions, or passive affects, and their confusedness reflected the confusedness of their underlying ideas or perceptions (§2.3). The claim that affects are built upon basic ideas is indicated in various passages, including 2A3, which states: “there are no modes of thinking, such as love, desire, or whatever is designated by the word affects of the mind, unless there is in the same individual the idea of the thing loved, desired, and the like.”³⁸ Passions represent and affirm external things because they are partially constituted by the ideas of these things.

What distinguishes emotions from *mere* affections (non-affective ideas)³⁹ is that the former also involve the affirmation of a change in one’s body’s power of acting. This is what Spinoza designates the *form* of the affect:

[A]ll the ideas we have of bodies indicate the actual constitution of our own body (by IIP16C2) more than the nature of the external body. But this [idea], which constitutes the form of the affect, must indicate or express a constitution of the body (or of some part of it), which the body (or some part of it) has because its power of acting, *or* force of existing, is increased or diminished, aided or restrained. (3 GDA exp., ii.204)

Put simply, emotions affirm both external objects *and* changes in one’s body’s power of acting. Here is how Spinoza puts the point later in the same explication:

[B]ecause the essence of the mind consists in this (by IIP11 and P13), that it affirms the actual existence of its body, and we understand by perfection the very essence of the thing, it follows that the mind passes to a greater or lesser perfection when it happens that *it affirms of its body (or of some part of the body) something which involves more or less reality than before.* (3 GDA exp., ii.204, emphasis added)

Two important points are expressed in this passage: when the body undergoes a change in power, the mind affirms of it a greater or lesser reality; and this follows from the mind’s essential affirmation of the body.

Emotions, then, are belief-like states that affirm of the body a greater or lesser reality.⁴⁰ Elsewhere Spinoza expresses “affirming greater reality” in terms of “positing existence,” writing: “joy posits the existence of the joyous thing, and

38. See also GDA explication (ii.204) and 3p56/d, Spinoza claims affects are individuated by their affecting objects.

39. For evidence that Spinoza allows for nonaffective ideas, see 3 post 1 and 3p15d, both of which indicate that one can be affected without a change in one’s power of acting.

40. To be clear, I am not claiming that one experiences emotions as belief-like or that one is aware of one’s affirmation. More on this in §3.1.

posits more existence, the greater the affect of joy is” (3p21d; cf. 3p23d). The notion of “posit[ing] more existence” is likely to give readers pause, since existence is not typically thought of as something that comes in degrees.⁴¹ While others have tried to make this claim more palatable by construing it as a variation of the claim that *reality* comes in degrees, which was a perfectly reputable idea in the seventeenth century, famously expressed in Descartes’s Third Meditation,⁴² I think that there is a better way of translating the passage that avoids this matter altogether, since the Latin does not indicate anything about degrees of existence. Rather, it states that “joy posits the existence of the joyous thing [*laetitia existentiam rei laetae ponit*]” and that it *does this the more (eo magis quo)* “the greater the affect of joy is [*laetitiae affectus major est*]”. In other words, the claim seems to be that the greater the joy is, the more fully it *posits* the joyous thing. It is the degree of *positing* that covaries with the intensity of the joy, not the degree of existence. If this is correct, then to be affected with joy is to affirm one’s (body’s) existence more intensely, more assuredly. So, when one is in a state of joy, one more confidently affirms one’s body’s existence; and when one is in a state of sadness, one affirms it less confidently. Forms of joy support one’s essential activity of affirming one’s existence, resulting in a more vigorous self-affirmation (*‘I am! I exist!’*), whereas forms of sadness result in an attenuated self-affirmation.

We see, then, that emotions involve both an affirmation of the actual existence of some affecting object—they posit the existence of the thing loved, hated, feared, etc.—and an affirmation of a change in one’s own (body’s) power of acting. Moreover, emotions, at least typically, involve the joining together of these two ideas, such that one *attributes* the change in one’s body to the object, directing one’s emotion at the affecting object.⁴³ So, for instance, if I take a bite of a chocolate bar and this increases (a part of) my body’s power of acting, I not only affirm the existence of the chocolate bar while more strongly affirming my body, I also affirm *of* the chocolate bar that it has my increased power, directing my joy at the chocolate.

Putting this all together, we get the following picture of the affirmation involved in a (passionate) emotion:

Emotion: affirming of some object that it supports or undermines one’s affirmation of one’s body.

41. See Della Rocca (2008) for a reading of Spinoza according to which existence does, in fact, come in degrees.

42. This is how Melamed (2013: 88n92) recasts Della Rocca’s (2008) claims about grades of existence.

43. While this joining together seems to be the default response, these affirmations—of the external object and of the change in one’s power—can be disjoined through the effortful cognitive therapy laid out in the beginning of Part 5 (see esp. 5p2).

While this account is certainly unusual, on its own it does not raise direction of fit problems, since emotions have a mind-to-world direction of fit, representing—or tending to track, however imperfectly—what exists and how things affect one’s body.⁴⁴ This brings us, finally, to the crucial class of ideas for defending the univocity of affirmation and will in Spinoza: desires.

2.5. *Striving Modified by Emotion: Desire*

Making sense of Spinoza’s conception of desire is no easy task. He glosses desire in three different ways in *Ethics* 3:

1. “*Desire can be defined as Appetite [i.e., ‘striving related to the mind and body together’] together with the consciousness of the appetite*” (3p9s).
2. “*Desire is the very essence, or nature, of each [man] insofar as it is conceived to be determined, by whatever constitution [constitutione] he has, to do something*” (3p56d).
3. “*Desire is man’s very essence, insofar as it is conceived to be determined, from any given affection of it, to do something*” (3 DA I, ii.190).

Spinoza intends these formulations at least to be coextensive, if not semantically equivalent. He attempts to reconcile them in the explication of the definition of desire at the end of *Ethics* 3 (3 DA I, ii.190). The reconciliation of (2) and (3) is quite straightforward. He writes: “by an affection of the human essence we understand any constitution of that essence” (3 DA I, ii.190). Consequently, the phrase “from any given affection of it” in (3) means the same thing as “by whatever constitution he has” in (2), making (3) a straightforward restatement of (2).

What this has to do with the reference to consciousness in (1) is less obvious. The strategy of 3 DA I explication is to establish that one is conscious of one’s striving if and only if one is affected, thereby establishing that (1) and (3) are coextensive. To see how this works, we must turn to 2p23, to which Spinoza refers both in this explication and in the demonstration that precedes (1), where he writes: “the mind (by IIP23) is necessarily conscious of itself through ideas of the body’s affections” (3p9d). On the face of it, 2p23 appears to establish only the converse (“The mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body”). However, the actual demonstration aims to establish the biconditional: the mind knows itself only insofar as the body is affected

44. Unlike other cognitivists about emotions, on my reading, Spinoza does not think that emotions represent axiological properties. Rather, they constitute evaluative attitudes. See J. Steinberg (2016) and (2018).

(first half of 2p23d), and insofar as the body is affected, the mind perceives the ideas of these affections and thereby knows itself (second half of 2p23d). From the fact that one is conscious of oneself *if and only if* one's body is affected, it is supposed to follow that one is conscious of one's appetite insofar as one's appetite is affected. This renders (1) coextensive with (3), and in turn (2).

Uniting these formulations, we may say that, for Spinoza, desire is one's essence or striving insofar as it is constituted or affected (thereby rendering one conscious) such that one is determined to do something. Here we should clarify that Spinoza thinks that it is not just any affection that gives rise to desire; rather desires are determined by, or arise out of, emotions (3p37; 4p15; 4p15d; 4p60; see J. Steinberg 2016). I have argued elsewhere that the determination relationship between emotions and desire should be understood constitutively, rather than causally: Emotions modify one's striving, and the concrete orientation of striving just is desire (J. Steinberg 2016). To desire something, then, is to strive in a particular way based on how one is emotionally affected. Put somewhat differently, desire is just an emotion considered strivingly.

To directly confront the question of how exactly desire relates to affirmation, we must consider what Spinoza means when he claims that desire is one's essence insofar as it is affected in a particular way *such that one is determined to do something* (3 DA I; 3p56d). What, exactly, do desires determine us to do? As noted above (§1.4), scholars have tended to focus on physical actions: reaching for a glass of water to drink, etc. But, again, this assuredly is *not* Spinoza's view, since desire is a mode of thinking, and modes of thinking cannot give rise to motion (2p6; 3p2; 5 Preface). Fortunately, Spinoza's own articulation of what desires determine us to do respects the causal barrier between the attributes. In the "General Definition of the Affects" he states that an affect "determines the mind to think of this rather than that [*mens ad hoc potius quam ad illud cogitandum determinator*]" claiming this particular phrase captures "the nature of desire" (3 GDA, ii.204). *Desire is the mind's determination to think this or that.*

At this point, the pieces of Spinoza's idiosyncratic conception of affirmation, desire, and striving under the attribute of thought are beginning to fall into place. Since desire is one's striving insofar as one is emotionally affected, we may import from above the accounts of striving of the mind (self-affirmation) and emotion (affirming of some object that it posits or takes away one's body's reality) to arrive at the following account:

Desire: being determined from one's essential self-affirmation to (continue to) affirm the existing of things that support one's self-affirmation.

From here it is a short step to the construal of desire as the determination "to think [*cogitandum*] this or that," since to *think* of some thing, T, is to affirm its existence,

and vice versa.⁴⁵ This also jibes with his account of imagining as having an idea of bodily affections that “present external bodies as present to us [*corpora externa velut nobis praesentia repraesentant*]” (2p17s). To desire some particular object is to be determined to affirm and to continue to affirm it as present—that is, to imagine it or think of it—because affirming the existence of this thing is supportive of one’s essential affirmation of one’s own (body’s) existence.⁴⁶

This rendering helps to make sense of Spinoza’s claim that: “The mind as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body’s power of acting” (3p12). While the demonstration of this proposition is rather tortured, the basic line of reasoning is that to the extent that one joyfully affirms some thing, T (e.g., chocolate bar), one imagines it as existing and as positing one’s body’s power of acting or reality (and in turn one’s power of thinking); and, since, under the attribute of thought, one essentially affirms the existence of her body, she also will continue to affirm those things that she represents as fostering her self-affirmation. Consequently, one strives to continue to affirm as presently existing—that is, to imagine or to think of—those things that one represents joyfully. 3p12 is, in short, an account of desire. And in the subsequent proposition, we get a corresponding account of aversion: “when the mind imagines those things that diminish or restrain the body’s power of acting, it strives, as far as it can, to recollect things which exclude their existence” (3p13).⁴⁷

45. See Spinoza, *Metaphysical Thoughts (Cogitata Metaphysica)*, CM, I.277–78.

46. Since the preceding discussion has focused on inadequate ideas of finite particulars and on passionate desires, one might wonder whether the account that I am advancing could possibly apply to adequate ideas and the striving for understanding that Spinoza describes in *Ethics* 4 and 5 (4p26; 5p10d; 5p25; 5p28). Without trying to give a comprehensive treatment, let me just indicate why I don’t see any problem extending this account to adequate ideas. Adequate and inadequate ideas alike affirm the existence of their objects; but while the latter affirm things as *presently* existing, the former affirm their objects (e.g., common notions, essences, etc.) as actually existing *sub specie aeternitatis* (5p29/s). Moreover, as we already saw in the response to Tschirnhaus above (Ep. 64), Spinoza is committed to the view that adequate ideas of eternal things depends upon the idea and affirmation of the body no less than inadequate ideas (cf. 5p29). Active desires and the striving to understand can also be understood within the preceding framework. The key difference with respect to adequate ideas is, once again, that they affirm things as eternal, rather than as presently existing. When one has adequate ideas, one acts and one necessarily rejoices in this power of acting or understanding (3p58–3p59; cf. 5p15). This joy, like all joy, encourages the affirmation of one’s own existence, leading one to continue to affirm the object of this adequate idea and what follows from it (see Hübner 2019b). The joy that accompanies adequate ideas determines the mind to deduce and affirm further properties, and form more (affirmative) adequate ideas, all of which can be conceived through the nature of the mind (3p1, 3p3; 3D1–2; 5p31). Active desires, like passive desires, can thus also be seen as predicated on, and expressive of, the affirmation of one’s existence: one strives to affirm more adequate ideas, which support one’s essential self-affirmation.

47. From here, the account radiates outward, as Spinoza shows that because we strive to affirm those things that we represent joyfully, we also strive to affirm (i.e., imagine or think about) those things that preserve or empower those things that we represent joyfully (3p19, 3p21), so that

To sum up: one's essential activity under the attribute of thought is to affirm the actual existence of—that is, to think about—one's body. We are, in this sense, fundamentally narcissistic.⁴⁸ The mind's affirmation of the body in turn grounds one's affirmation of other things and of changes in one's body's power or reality. Desire is a particular expression of one's essential self-affirmation: a determination to affirm things, or represent them as existing, in virtue of how one's idea of these things coheres with one's essential self-affirmation. Desires, like all ideas, are belief-like (i.e., they affirm the existence of something); but they are unique in that they determine one to form further belief-like states in virtue of one's essential self-affirmation. If one represents the existence of the chocolate bar as supporting one's essential self-affirmation, one will in turn tend to (continue to) represent the chocolate bar as actually existing. If, by contrast, one affirms of the chocolate that it jars with one's essential self-affirmation (if, for instance, one is a diabetic), one will be determined instead to think of things that exclude its existence. In effect, striving under the attribute of thought tends toward cognitive coherence, as one is determined to affirm things that support one's essential doxastic commitment to the existence of the body.⁴⁹ We are, then, motivated believers, determined only to think of things that cohere with our essential doxastic commitment to our existence.

3. Clarifying Account and Responding to Concerns

In this final section, I will clarify my reading in response to possible concerns.

3.1. *Not a Phenomenological Description, but an Explanatory Theory*

The first thing that I want to underscore is that the preceding is not intended as a phenomenological description of emotion or desire.⁵⁰ I am not claiming that

we rejoice when we think that something that we love and desire is preserved or supported and feel sad when that thing that we love and desire is destroyed or diminished. All of this is rooted in one's essential self-affirmation.

48. Lest on worry that this commits Spinoza to a very dubious view of human psychology, see §3.1.

49. I take it that Schmid is making a similar claim when he writes: "the human mind strives to entertain only ideas that conduce to the goal of self-preservation and accordingly seeks to integrate ideas that maximally contribute to maintaining the mind. Therefore, ideas will most likely only be integrated in a certain mind to the extent that they serve its preservation" (2014: 264). The reference to "self-preservation" here is a bit unclear. But if Schmid means by mental self-preservation nothing other than affirming the body, then his discussion of integration resembles my claim about coherence.

50. Spinoza's views regarding consciousness awareness and selective attention are the subject of much scholarly dispute. For a range of analyses, see Bennett (1984), Wilson (1999), Garrett (2008), LeBuffe (2010).

Spinoza thinks that people experience joy as a strengthening of one's belief in one's own existence or that desire feels like a tendency to think of something as actually existing.⁵¹ Rather, the analysis above provides the explanatory framework through which Spinoza explicates the will, or striving under the attribute of thought, fleshing out exactly what it means to say that all ideas are affirmations, and showing how desire fits into this account.⁵² The challenge, as captured in Lin's concern about equivocation, is to show that the affirmations (as assents) that are involved in all ideas can be seen as expressions of striving and that desires can be understood as just a special set of affirmation-involving ideas. The reading that I have offered shows that Spinoza has the theoretical resources, or explanatory framework, to meet this challenge.

3.2. *Direction of Fit Revisited*

Does this mean that I deny that, for Spinoza, there is a difference in direction of fit between beliefs and desires? Well, yes and no. On the one hand, I am claiming that affirming is a matter of assenting to something or positing its existence and that desiring is just a special case of affirming. Further evidence that Spinoza denies that cognition and conation have fundamentally different directions of fit can be found in 3p2s, where he claims that "decisions [*decretum*]" are "one and the same thing" as "appetites and determinations of the body." The language of "decisions" seems unmistakably *purposive*, exhibiting a world-to-mind direction of fit that would set such ideas apart from the affirmations described in 2p48–49. And yet, he writes that:

The decision of the mind . . . is not distinguished from the imagination itself . . . nor is it anything beyond that affirmation which the idea, insofar as it is an idea, necessarily involves (see IIP49). And so these decisions of the mind arise by the same necessity as the ideas of things which actually exist. (3p2s)⁵³

This provides further support for the univocal account of affirmation: to decide is just to affirm, imagine, or think of something based on how one's ideas about

51. Spinoza is generally suspicious of treating experience as a guide to how things are, as for instance when one appeals to one's experience of free will (see 3p2s; 1 Appendix; Ep. 58). Experience plays a supporting role, at best, in Spinoza's normative epistemology (see Curley 1973).

52. Compare with Renz's notion of explaining experience as opposed to doing phenomenology (2018).

53. Donald Rutherford has recently offered a helpful interpretation of Spinoza's notion of decision [*decretum*] (2020). Rutherford's analysis of practical judgment accords well with my analysis of will, affirmation, and desire.

those things relate to one's essential doxastic commitment. And desires, no less than (mere) beliefs, have a mind-to-world—or affirming as existing—direction of fit.

What, though, are we to make of 2p48s in which, as Lin notes, Spinoza seems to sharply distinguish affirmation and desire? My proposal is that he is trying to distinguish his account of will from the traditional scholastic understanding of will as a mental faculty that is distinct from, and operates posterior to, the intellect. He directly targets such a view elsewhere in his writings, claiming in the *Metaphysical Thoughts* that willing “should not be confused with wanting” and that those who think that willing takes place after intellection plainly “do not understand what the will is. For they confuse it with the appetite which the soul has after it has affirmed or denied something” (CM, I.278). The scholastics are wrong to present desire as a mode of will that is posterior to an affirmation (or denial) of this or that. Against this, he advances a view of will or volition according to which it is what the mind is determined to do from its nature alone, namely to “think, i.e., affirm and deny” (CM, I.277). Spinoza is not claiming that desire is utterly unlike affirmation; rather, he is at once rejecting the division of mental acts into intellection and appetite and the tendency to align the will with the latter. All mental acts are acts of intellection or affirmation, and desiring is just a special case of affirming.⁵⁴

This is not to deny that desires have a distinctive character and, indeed, something like a world-to-mind direction of fit. We will recall that one way of construing what it means for a mental state to have world-to-mind direction of fit is that it takes as its object, some *faciendum*, or a condition to be brought about. On Spinoza's account, desires could be said to represent a *faciendum* (e.g., chocolate bar consumption), even while they also purport to represent *facta*. Once again, in this light, desires can be seen as motivating beliefs: in representing the desired state, one necessarily (to some degree and in some respect) affirms the object, and one is determined to form further belief-like states that support one's essential self-affirmation. Desires are thus distinguished from other ideas in that the former direct one's cognitive activity or mental striving, leading one to represent and affirm—that is, posit as existing—those things that one takes to support one's essential self-affirmation. Desires are just how emotions (affirmations of a thing, T, as positing my body's existence) direct one's mind in virtue of one's essential self-affirmation: they promote further ideas. This *directing* or *determining* character sets them apart from other ideas.

At this point one might object that all ideas direct the mind in the sense of giving rise to other ideas through relations of entailment and association, and that

54. It is worth pointing out, however, that the details of his account are different in his early writings, where he presents desire as involving affirmation of some good (KV, I.84; CM, I.278). By contrast, in the *Ethics* he takes the affirmation of a good to depend on desire (3p9s).

all ideas are such that we will continue to affirm them (2p17). But while it is true that all ideas, even sad ones (3p13d), have a tendency to persevere in our minds unless excluded by other ideas, desires are distinctive in that they follow from our essential self-affirmation, which engenders a kind of internal determination to imagine the exclusion of things that are contrary to the existence of the body. So, while sad ideas in themselves, like all ideas, tend to cling or persevere in their being, insofar as one strives to affirm one's body, one will tend to form ideas that eradicate sadness. If one is incapable of dislodging these sad ideas, this just shows that one's cognitive activity is governed more by external causes than by one's own striving (4p20s). Desires are those ideas that direct one's cognitive activity because of the way that the idea relates to one's essential self-affirmation.

3.3. *Inapt Counterparts*

The final worry to which I want to respond is that thinking of something, or assenting to its existence, simply does not look like an apt counterpart to physical striving, which consists in tending to obtain or preserve something (3p28). One cannot, alas, satisfy one's hunger simply by thinking about food.

The concern here is predicated on a misunderstanding of Spinoza's view. We must bear in mind that desire is specifically the determination to think of something because of how one represents that thing in relation to one's body. One desires food because one affirms it as positing one's body's reality. Consequently, one does not strive to imagine food *simpliciter*, but rather one strives to represent it as existing such that it would promote the affirmation of one's body's existence, for example, one strives to represent oneself consuming the food, etc.

Moreover, striving to affirm as present amounts to more than just imagining in the sense of pretending or feigning the existence of the desired object. To feign is to represent something as merely possible, as for the sake of argument or illustration (TdIE, §52). To desire something is not to feign, or to "imagine" in the sense that we, in the twenty-first century, might understand the term. What we desire is to affirm the object *as present or actual*: to "imagine" in the seventeenth century sense that includes perceptual experience. And in order to affirm *as present* that which I desire, I often have to affirm a number of other things that I affirm as conditions for its present existence (e.g., If I desire freshly baked bread, I know that in order to affirm the bread as presently existing I must affirm a sequence of preceding states: joining the ingredients, kneading the dough, letting it rise, and so forth). This makes clear that the mental counterpart to physical striving is not simply striving to imagine in any old way; it is striving to affirm something as actual such that it posits the existence of one's body, which often requires affirming a sequence of other things.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that, despite apparently equivocating on the meanings of both *voluntas* and *affirmatio*, Spinoza in fact advances univocal accounts of these concepts. “The will” is just a shorthand way of referring to particular volitions, which are themselves nothing but the affirmations that ideas involve as ideas. This is consistent with the account of will as striving under the attribute of thought because striving under the attribute of thought consists in an idea affirming its object. And, like will, affirmation has a univocal meaning, namely, assenting to or positing the existence of an object. Desire fits into this account as an idea that affirms its object and which determines the mind to form further ideas based on how this idea coheres with one’s essential self-affirmation. On Spinoza’s account, under the attribute of thought, the doxastic is conative in that the affirmations that beliefs involve are expressions of one’s striving or essential mental activity, and the conative is doxastic in that desires are belief-like states that determine the mind to form further belief-like states.

The interpretation that I have advanced makes sense of a range of remarks about ideas and affirmation, overcomes apparent tensions in Spinoza’s thought, coheres with the standard understanding of the role of affirmation in early modern philosophy, provides a consistent, causal-barrier-respecting account of what it means to strive under the attribute of thought, and sheds light on Spinoza’s understanding of the relationship between cognition and conation. To be sure, the resulting account of will and desire is quite peculiar. But as scholars of Spinoza know very well, peculiarity in Spinoza is often a feature, not a bug.

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