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The Notion of Striving from Hobbes to Spinoza

Valtteri Viljanen
University of Turku

By the early modern period, the view that animate things naturally strive to preserve themselves had for centuries been part and parcel of Western philosophy, most importantly by the Stoics, for whom the impulse (*hormê*) to self-preservation forms the basis of all agency. Here is the way in which Cicero Latinizes the term:

> [T]he nature of the universe as a whole has its own chosen movements, those strivings [*conatusque*] and desires which the Greeks call *hormai*, and it directs its actions in accordance with these, just as we ourselves do when we are stirred by our spirits and feelings. (*NG* II.58, translation modified.)

Precisely 'conatus' is the term with which early modern thinkers referred to the intrinsic striving of things. Cicero reports that "[e]very animal, as soon as it is born [...], is concerned with itself, and takes care to preserve itself" (*ME* III.16). So clearly, striving for self-preservation is, for the Stoics, something that *living things* are prompted to do by their nature; however, as we shall see, for the early moderns the principle has a much wider application.

The new seventeenth-century physics led to redefinitions of the notion under scrutiny. Now, according to the Aristotelians there is, of course, a natural terminus, or *telos*, to all change, and things strive to actualize it. On this kind of teleology, also for instance heavy inanimate bodies such as rocks strive to move downwards and attain their natural position by reaching the earth. For instance Aquinas writes, "it is not possible for agents to proceed to infinity: and consequently there must be something, which being attained, the efforts of the agent cease. Therefore every agent acts for an end. [...] [The end is] that wherein the appetite of the agent or mover is at rest" (*SCG* III.2–3).

The novel conception of motion introduced by Galileo caused, gradually, the demise of the teleological worldview and an upheaval in natural sciences. The core of the Galilean conception was formed by the explanation model for the persistence of motion that was later to be known as the principle of inertia. According to it, any moving body – in itself to be primarily understood in geometrical terms – continues its rectilinear motion unchanged *ad infinitum* if not intervened (by something external to the body).

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The pioneering work by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) – perhaps the clearest example of a mechanistically oriented thinker ever to have existed – offers a particularly striking contrast to the Peripatetic philosophical framework. According to Hobbes, reality consists of nothing else but extended bodies in motion. Here

we should focus on the latter term: "Hobbes conceived of motion as the most basic explanatory concept in all of philosophy, so his account of first philosophy must be framed in terms of motion and its principles."[1] Consequently, it is apt to call Hobbes a *kinematist* who also defines striving – or as he calls it, endeavour – in terms of motion alone:

> I define ENDEAVOUR *to be motion made in less space and time than can be given*; that is, *less than can be determined or assigned by exposition or number*; that is, *motion made through the length of a point, and in an instant or point of time*. (*De Corpore* III.15.2; *EW* I, 206.)

In *Leviathan* he writes,

> [t]hese small beginnings of motion, within the body of man, before they appear in walking, speaking, striking, and other visible actions, are commonly called ENDEAVOUR. (*Leviathan* I.6; *EW* III, 39.)

So, 'endeavour' refers to infinitely small beginnings of motion that result, eventually, in activities of different kinds, most importantly self-preservation: "[T]he first foundation of natural right is this, that *every man as much as in him lies endeavour to protect his life and members*." (*De Cive* I.7; *EW* II, 9) However, since "endeavour is to be conceived as motion" (*De Corpore* III.15.2; *EW* I, 206),[2] it is unclear how it could ever be used to *explain* either inertial motion or resistance, which both can be found in Hobbes's theory: just saying that unhindered motion continues forever *because of very small beginnings of motion* is not exactly helpful. And more than a mere contrariety of motions seems to be required for a proper concept of *resistance*.[3] Accordingly, this notion of endeavour seems too weak to have any real explanatory force.[4] This, I think, is the price Hobbes pays for not being prepared to include anything but corpuscules in motion in his ontology.

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Despite being perhaps the most renowned torch-bearer of the mechanical sciences, René Descartes (1596–1650) defends a theory considerably less parsimonious than that of Hobbes. Descartes's famous first law of nature states:

> [E]ach and every thing, insofar as it is in itself [*quantum in se est*], always continues in the same state; and thus what is once in motion always continues to move. (*Principles of Philosophy* 2.37; CSM I, 240, translation modified.)

[1] Jesseph 2006, 129.
[2] Cf.: "[A]ll active power consists in motion[.]" (*De Corpore* II.10.6; *EW* I, 131.)
[3] "I define RESISTANCE *to be the endeavour of one moved body either wholly or in part contrary to the endeavour of another moved body, which toucheth the same*." (*De Corpore* III.15.2; *EW* I, 211.)
[4] Cf. Jesseph 2006, 150, 152.

The difference between this formulation and for instance that by Aquinas is striking. In the early modern framework, changes do not have natural termini, and inertial motion goes on forever. This, in turn, was explicated in terms of striving or endeavour. Descartes writes:

> When I say that the globules of the second element "strive" to move away from the centres around which they revolve [...] I mean merely that they are positioned and pushed into motion in such a way that *they will in fact travel in that direction, unless they are prevented by some other cause.* (*Principles of Philosophy* 3.56; CSM I, 259, emphasis added.)

And "depending on the causes we are considering, we may say that the body is tending or striving to move in different directions at the same time" (*Principles of Philosophy* 3.57; CSM I, 259). In other words, 'conatus' is a disposition term, designating a tendency or inclination: given it, if not interfered with, things will continue to move as they presently do.

However, things are more complicated than they may first appear, for Descartes wants and needs something stronger than this, namely something on which can be grounded the fact that when things encounter opposition, they do not simply cease to be in their present state but *resist* the opposing factors. This is made more explicit in the early work *The World* in which Descartes says that when a body tends to move in a certain direction, this means only that "it is disposed to move there, whether it actually moves or whether some other body prevents it from doing so"; to this Descartes adds, importantly, that "it is principally in this last sense that I use the word 'tend' [*tendre*], because it seems to signify some exertion [*effort*] and because every exertion presupposes some resistance" (*World* XIII; SG, 54). In *Principles of Philosophy* (2.43), he moves similarly from *tending to persevere in one's state* to *resisting change*. But these moves do not provide much of an argument; to make things worse, it is hard to see how one could be extracted out of Descartes's conceptual framework. In a letter to de Volder, Leibniz insightfully expresses the difference between the mere tendency to continue in the prevailing state and the power to resist change:

> I admit that each and every thing remains in its state until there is a reason for change; this is a principle of metaphysical necessity. But it is one thing to retain a state until something changes it, which even something intrinsically indifferent to both states does, and quite another thing, much more significant, for a thing not to be indifferent, but to have a force and, as it were, an inclination to retain its state, and so resist changing. (AG, 172.)

In light of this well-founded distinction, Descartes's reasoning seems to involve an illegitimate move from identifying striving with mere indifferent tendency to claiming that tendency implies ("force-ful") resistance.[5] This is what I would call the Cartesian problem of resistance. Descartes is thus caught in a dilemma: he decisively weakens, arguably to keep his system clear of everything that might even hint at occultness, the notion of striving into a mere tendency to continue, if not interfered with, in the prevailing state; but

[5] Cf. Garber 1994, 48; Des Chene 1996, 311, 339–41; Pietarinen 2001, 75.

at the same time, he thinks that this kind of conatus licenses the idea of resistance. It seems that he cannot have it both ways.

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Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677) is not overly concerned either with ontological parsimony – he wants to build a metaphysical system that explains the world as a whole and our place in it to present lasting ethics – or with the occultness of power – for him, power simply equals causal efficacy with which all genuine things are intrinsically endowed and from which certain and determinate effects follow just as it follows from the nature of a triangle that its internal angles sum up to two right angles. Accordingly, the very last proposition of the opening part of the *Ethics* declares: "Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow" (*E*1p36). In the temporal field of resistance and aid, this intrinsic causal efficacy or power is manifested as precisely striving (conatus), which forms the basis for Spinoza's ethical project proper. The famous proposition runs: "Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being" (*E*3p6, translation modified).[6]

As for context, Spinoza was well aware of the Stoic notion of conatus. Moreover, the way in which he formulates the principle betrays its debt to the first Cartesian law of nature, "each thing, insofar as it is in itself, always continues in the same state" (*Principles of Philosophy* II.37; CSM I, 240, translation modified). It also seems to echo Hobbes's antiteleological kinematic metaphysics. The conatus principle thus expresses in a new intellectual climate Spinoza's view of the doctrine that is a part of a long and venerable tradition concerning the natural operations of things.

The crucial twin propositions – *E*3p6 and p7 – are written in Spinoza's trademark condensed style. E3p6 is the nexus through which certain key tenets of the opening part of the *Ethics* find their way to the latter part of the work. Its demonstration reads:

> For singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by 1p25c), i.e. (by 1p34), things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts. And no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its existence away (by p4). On the contrary, it is opposed to everything which can take its existence away (by p5). Therefore, as far as it can, and it is in itself [*quantum potest, et in se est*], it strives to persevere in its being, q.e.d. (*E*3p6d, translation modified.)

The demonstration, which consists of four elements, has been the topic of a lively discussion. For quite some time, Spinoza was widely seen to derive *E*3p6 from the immediately preceding conceptual considerations (*E*3p4–p5) *alone*. Perhaps because the notion of power – long in disrepute – has recently been rehabilitated in analytic metaphysics, the beginning of the demonstration invoking the power of God-or-Nature does not feel as otiose as it did before; that the demonstration builds on Spinoza's dynamistic

[6] This part of the essay derives from, with modifications, Viljanen forthcoming.

tendencies seems to be nowadays not only quite widely acknowledged but regarded sympathetically. Obviously, we are dealing with *a power that strives against opposition*, and that power certainly must, in Spinoza's framework, have God as its source. Obviously, Spinoza combines *E*1p25c with 1p34 to claim that finite *expressions* of an essentially powerful or causally efficacious God-or-Nature are endowed with *conatus*.

Even if the argument for the *conatus* principle were not as airtight as some would like, the aforesaid shows that, within his framework, Spinoza has solid grounds to think that he has given his readers enough reasons to endorse the principle. The next point he wants to drive home is as follows: "The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (*E*3p7). In other words, *things are strivers by their very essence or nature*. For Spinoza's intended audience, the appearance of the notion of essence is hardly a surprise: the previous proposition does, after all, state that any thing strives to persevere in its being *insofar as it is in itself*, which refers precisely to the thing's essence or nature.[7] In the demonstration of *E*3p7, Spinoza first reminds us that things are causally efficacious, or powerful, by their essences alone; thus, as power, striving is equated with the essence of things. The essence in question is precisely the *actual* essence presumably because conatus is the power at play in constantly varying circumstances of temporal existence – the contrast being with the unchanging and eternal formal essence of things. In other words, if little of what Spinoza says in the opening part of the *Ethics* involves anything temporal, the conatus principle specifies the way in which intrinsically powerful finite things act under the unswerving influence of other finite things or "external causes." Striving is the basic Spinozistic explanation of all change in the world.

With regard to the progeny of the *conatus* propositions, I would like to highlight three elemental points that make their presence felt through the rest of the *Ethics*. First, Spinoza defines a number of psychological items in terms of striving:

> When this striving is related only to the mind, it is called will; but when it is related to the mind and body together, it is called appetite. 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 is generally related to men insofar as they are conscious of their appetites. So *desire* can be defined as *appetite together with consciousness of the appetite*. (*E*3p9s.)

Appetite is thus the general term for conatus of the mind and body of any finite thing; appetites of which we are consciously aware Spinoza calls *desires*. Precisely they figure prominently in Spinoza's theory of action and emotions: clearly, Spinoza is sensitive to the fact that our existence is often a troubled affair, and his view of the dynamics of actual existence is firmly based on the idea that as our essential striving is directed in varying ways, we desire different things.

[7] Moreover, keeping in mind that the concept of essence figures in the immediate ancestry of the conatus principle (E3p4d), the ground is already prepared for the notion to do real work.

Second, there is a close connection between striving and goodness: "[W]e judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it" (*E*3p9s). According to Spinoza, people mistakenly believe in final causes as independent goods; such final causes are part and parcel of a misguided providential worldview in which God has a grand plan, the welfare of human beings as its end. But for Spinoza, God's production of finite things as modifications involves no choice or planning, and the essence of those modifications, in turn, is the striving that manifests itself as desires and appetites, the objects of which are judged good. Thus, "[w]hat is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, *or* primary cause, of some thing" (*E*4pref); *our striving determines what is judged to be good* in the first place.

Third, Spinoza signals that the *conatus* principle amounts to what may be called *power enhancement*. This is expressed in *E*3p12 and p13:

> The mind as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body's power of acting. (*E*3p12.)

> 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. (*E*3p13.)

What does he have in mind here? Let us take a look at the argument for the latter proposition:

> So long as the mind imagines anything of this kind, the power both of mind and of body is diminished or restrained (as we have demonstrated in p12); nevertheless, the mind will continue to imagine this thing until it imagines something else that excludes the thing's present existence (by 2p17), that is (as we have just shown), the power both of mind and of body is diminished or restrained until the mind imagines something else that excludes the existence of this thing; so the mind (by p9), as far as it can, will strive to imagine or recollect that other thing. (*E*3p13d)

The demonstration begins by reminding us that the power of mind and body go hand in hand. The middle part states that when the mind thinks about something that decreases its power, it cannot but continue thinking about it unless there is something else that takes it away.[8] The final part of the demonstration builds on *E*3p9, which in turn is based on the conatus principle, and claims that our mind does not rest content continuing with the power-decreasing thought but strives to get rid of it. Given this, it is understandable that *E*3p12 and p13 are commonly read as saying that we strive to increase our power.[9] In fact, finite things – human and nonhuman alike – strive to do more than just prolong their psychophysical existence; they *strive to be active*, that is, to produce effects that can be conceived through their own essence

[8] As the reference to *E*2p17 indicates, this claim is based on the mechanist strain in Spinoza's psychology.

[9] This is corroborated by later passages such as *E*4d8.

alone. Should this not be the case, Spinoza's activity-stressing ethics would have no grounding.[10] Delving deeper into it would take us too far afield. But I hope to have thrown light on how, incrementally, the notion of striving came to be robustified from a Hobbesian motion, via a Cartesian tendency, to a Spinozistic power. This is what Leibniz, the great champion of powers as change-makers, inherits.

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[10] Does this (re)introduce teleology to Spinoza's system? *Not* in the traditional "full-blown" sense that ends would be involved in *structuring or determining our essences*; what we call ends are things that simply flow from our essences, those essences in turn being what they are because they follow from God's nature. However, less robust senses of Spinozistic teleology have been presented and defended. If teleology is, for instance, understood *not* as a doctrine concerning the very *makeup of things* but merely as *a form of explanation* which proposes to explain things by their (probable) effects, it would be difficult – and probably unnecessary – to deny that the conatus doctrine allows teleological explanations. However,Spinoza is able to reconcile this minimal sense of teleology as *acting for the sake of something* with the essence–property model of causality by reducing final causes to appetites. Thus, while there is still a lively scholarly debate concerning whether or not Spinoza endorses teleology, there can be no doubt that he at the very least profoundly problematizes the received teleological picture of human action.