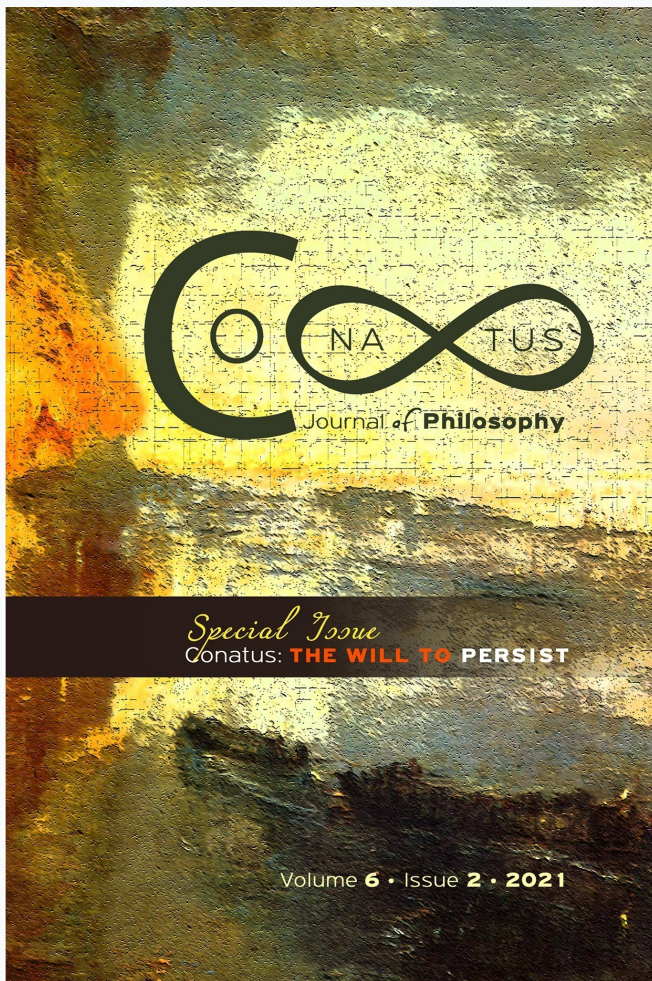


Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 6, No 2 (2021)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy SI: Conatus - The Will to Persist



Spinoza's Conatus: A Teleological Reading of Its Ethical Dimension

Neşe Aksoy

doi: [10.12681/cjp.25661](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.25661)

Copyright © 2021, Neşe Aksoy



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Aksoy, N. (2021). Spinoza's Conatus: A Teleological Reading of Its Ethical Dimension. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 6(2), 107-130. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.25661>

Spinoza's Conatus: A Teleological Reading of Its Ethical Dimension

Neşe Aksoy

Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Turkey

E-mail address: aksoynese@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3815-4350>

Abstract

In this article I examine how a teleological (or purposive) reading of Spinoza's conatus shapes the ethical framework of his philosophy. I first introduce Spinoza's criticism of teleology and argue contra many critics that Spinoza has a mild approach to human teleology. On the basis of this idea, I develop the claim that the human conatus includes purposive elements such that it is envisioned as a purposive being that is oriented towards the adequate knowledge of Nature or God, the conceptions of wisdom, love and joy and the notion of an ideal human nature. From the teleological reading of human conatus, I draw the conclusion that Spinoza's ethics is inclusive of objective, humanistic, and essentialist elements in the sense that it situates human agents as directed towards ethical ends to be pursued through their conative activity. In this sense, throughout this paper, I take issue with the anti-teleological reading of conatus that is predominantly related to the subjectivistic, anti-humanistic, and non-essentialist interpretation of Spinoza's ethics. In doing so, I argue that Spinoza's ethics is not entirely free from objective, humanistic and essentialist elements, by putting a particular emphasis on the distinguishing character of the purposive essence of his human conatus.

Keywords: conatus; humanistic; Spinoza; essentialist; teleology; ethicality; objectivistic

I. Introduction

Spinoza's severe criticism of teleology¹ is notoriously known to eradicate any element of teleology in his ontology and ethics. It is generally acclaimed that Spinoza's anti-teleological attitude leads to a subjectivistic, anti-humanistic, and non-essentialist reading of his ethics. In this paper I take issue with this widely accepted view by suggesting that Spinoza's con-

¹ The translations of Spinoza's works such as the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TdIE) and *Ethics* (E) are of Edwin Curley in the *Collected Works of Spinoza* (1985). Throughout the paper, Spinoza's *Ethics* will be abbreviated as follows: Ethics (E), Part (1-5), Axiom (A), Proposition (P), Appendix (Ap), Preface (Pf), Definition (Df), Demonstration (D), Scholium (S), Note (n).

ception of *conatus* has teleological elements in character which ultimately leads to interpret Spinoza's ethics as inclusive of objective, humanistic, and essentialist elements.

I divide my paper into three main sections. In the first section, I dwell upon Spinoza's criticism of teleology. Here, I argue that Spinoza, as deeply influenced by the advancements in the seventeenth century natural sciences, emerges as a harsh critic of teleology. However, I present that there is a group of scholars, such as Garrett (2003), Curley (1988, 1990) and Lin (2006), which holds the view that Spinoza has a milder approach to human teleology,² namely the fact that the human beings are teleological (or purposive) agents that strive towards the final ends. And, in parallel to these critics, I elaborate on the idea that Spinoza countenances human teleology.

In the second section, I closely focus on the teleological character of human *conatus*. After I expound the anti-teleological arguments of Bennett (1984), Carriero (2011, 2017), and Hübner (2018) who basically hold that the *conatus* is 1) a mechanical tendency to persist in existence; 2) a maximization of one's power or activity; or 3) an act of causing effects, I take side with Viljanen (2008, 2011), Garrett (2003), and Lin (2006) in considering that Spinoza's *conatus* is not merely a mechanical act of creating certain effects, but it is an act of inclination/orientation toward certain goals and ends.

In the third section, I proceed to draw conclusions with regard to the ethics of Spinoza on the basis of the teleological reading of *conatus*. As is known, the anti-teleological reading of *conatus* usually leads to interpret Spinoza's ethics as inclusive of subjective, anti-humanistic, and non-essentialist elements. For example, Gilles Deleuze (1988) holds the view that Spinoza's ethical concepts, namely good and bad, are determined subjectively by the individual *conatuses* as a matter of non-essentialist elements. Unlike this view, I argue that, in Spinoza's ethics, the good and bad are defined by the conative activity of human agents that is ultimately directed toward conforming to the objective and real essence of Nature or God, which suggests that the good and bad are structured by the subjective activity of human *conatus*, albeit not entirely freely but based on a purposive activity toward the real essence of Nature or God. In this regard, I argue that the human *conatus* is not completely free from the essential and objective elements, though not in a traditional sense but in a highly original sense.

All in all, in this paper I aim to give a comprehensive overview of the Spinozian ethics as inclusive of objective, humanistic, and essentialist elements that are grounded on the teleological reading of his

² As is well known, teleology, in a general sense, is a highly broad term. It is mainly a doctrine that explains all natural phenomena by the final causes. However, in the context of Spinoza's ontology and ethics, I narrow down my scope to studying "human teleology," namely the study of the human beings as purposive entities that strive toward the ultimate cause of nature by means of their conative activity in ontological and ethical senses.

conception of human *conatus*. In doing so, I propose that, on a deeper level, Spinoza's human *conatus* is a purposive being that pursues objective and essential moral ends created by his conative activity that fundamentally aims to accord with the necessary laws of Nature or God.

II. Spinoza's criticism of teleology

Spinoza's criticism of teleology is sharply articulated in his *Ethics*, Part I, Appendix. In this text, Spinoza literally claims that the teleological account of nature is baseless as it has simply arisen from the "ignorance" of the people about the "causal order of nature."³ As Spinoza puts it, the majority of people think of themselves as free because they act on their volitions and appetites but ignore the real causes behind their volitions and appetites. By this means, Spinoza points out that the human beings "act always on account of an end, namely, on account of their advantage, which they want"⁴ and thus they act on a purposive basis. However, as he suggests, this is only a prejudice that is caused by the ignorance of people. In this regard, Spinoza presents the teleological explanation as an inaccurate way of explaining the order of nature by suggesting that there is a necessary order in nature that is grounded on efficient causality.

As a matter of fact, Spinoza's anti-teleological outlook is deeply influenced by the advancement in the mechanical sciences in the seventeenth century. The seventeenth century natural sciences and philosophy in relation to teleology can be seen as a clear break with the medieval tradition. In parallel to the scientific advancements in the century, philosophers such as Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes view nature as a mechanical structure that operates on a causal basis. They come to reject any form of purposiveness in nature since the sciences demonstrate that nature can be explained simply through the mechanical principles. For instance, Rene Descartes bluntly suggests that the teleological premises have no place within the domain of natural sciences and philosophy.⁵ He utterly banishes the teleological premises from the domain of natural sciences and philosophy especially because he thinks that the finite intellect of the human being cannot grasp the infinite purposes of God. Similarly, Francis Bacon removes teleology from the domain of natural sciences because he thinks that the study

³ See Benedictus Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 440 (E1Ap).

⁴ E1Ap.

⁵ See Rene Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, trans. John Veitch (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 15. Also see Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40.

of the final causes perverts the scientific explanations.⁶ Like Descartes and Bacon, Spinoza known as a stern advocate of the efficient causality and mechanistic account of nature, attacks teleology severely. However, his criticism extends beyond the anti-teleology of Descartes or Bacon since he does not only remove teleology from the domain of metaphysics and natural sciences, but he also bluntly claims that God has no end/purpose. So, we should ask, how could Spinoza's attack on teleology be explicated so that we can get a firmer grasp of it?

As has been stated, it is primarily the Appendix to the First Part of *Ethics* that provides a clear indication of Spinoza's assault on the traditional understanding of teleology. Throughout this text, Spinoza argues that the teleological explanations have simply arisen from a lack of understanding about the real essence of Nature or God. In other words, on Spinoza's view, the misunderstanding of people about the true causes of the universe is what leads them to imagine that there are purposes/telos in nature to pursue.⁷ Spinoza's anti-teleological account, instead, maintains that the universe/nature has no purposes. He mainly describes nature as a causal structure necessitated and determined by God. In this causal structure, nothing contingent can be conceived to exist. In the *Ethics* Spinoza explains this as follows:

God acts from the laws of his nature alone and is compelled by no one.⁸

A thing which has been determined to produce an effect has necessarily been determined in this way by God; and one which has not been determined by God cannot determine itself to produce an effect.⁹

In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way.¹⁰

From the above excerpts, one can readily see that in Spinoza's causally determined universe natural beings or facts follow from the absolute necessity of God. As is well known, there is room in Spinoza's system only for one substance, namely the necessarily existing nature or God without which nothing can exist or be understood.¹¹ The finite beings,

⁶ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, eds. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 102.

⁷ See E1Ap.

⁸ E1P17.

⁹ E1P26.

¹⁰ E1P29.

¹¹ See E1P14.

however, are identified as the modifications or affections which are produced by God in a causal and determinate manner.¹² In such a system of Spinoza, it is widely acclaimed that God and finite beings interact in a non-teleological manner. In parallel, Spinoza explicitly argues that God or Nature knows no final ends since God is the efficient cause of all things and it acts from absolute necessity:

With these [demonstrations] I have explained God's nature and properties: that he exists necessarily; that he is unique; that he is and acts from the necessity alone of his nature; that (and how) he is the free cause of all things; that all things are in God and so depend on him that without him they can neither be nor be conceived; and finally, that all things have been predetermined by God, not from freedom of the will or absolute good pleasure, but from God's absolute nature, or infinite power.¹³

Here Spinoza expresses that God's actions are caused by the infinite necessity of itself and hints that there is no way to ascribe a teleological end or purpose to nature. As regards, Yitzhak Y. Melamed says that the necessitation of God's actions by his nature makes the teleological explanation redundant.¹⁴ For him, since God's nature/essence is the sufficient cause of his actions, teleological explanations emerge to be groundless.¹⁵ Similarly, Steven Nadler argues that, in Spinoza's causal system, the fact that God has intentions, aims, etc., is nothing more than an anthropomorphising story.¹⁶

In relation to his anti-teleological standpoint, Spinoza goes on to criticize the teleological explanation in the Appendix to Part I in two steps:

- a) By treating the final causes as the first causes, teleology turns the causality of nature upside down (*naturam omnino evertere*).
- b) Upon depicting God as an agent who aims at something, teleology attributes a lack of self-sufficiency to God.

How should the preceding arguments be explicated? One useful way to study this part is to analyse it in relation to Spinoza's doctrine of caus-

¹² See E1P26-27.

¹³ See E1Ap.

¹⁴ See Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "Teleology in Jewish Philosophy," in *Teleology: A History*, ed. J. K. McDonough, 123-149 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 141.

¹⁵ Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 114.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

al determinism. In the first statement above, we read that the teleological approach, on Spinoza's view, is not acceptable as it dismantles the causal order of nature. Spinoza basically holds that the teleological account explains things by appealing to their conclusion. For instance, he imagines a scenario where the stone falls from the roof and kills the man. In this very situation, Spinoza interprets the reason for the death of the man as the falling down of the stone. By this, he literally gives a causal explanation to the situation. However, the teleological account, Spinoza thinks, would explain the situation in an opposite way: the stone falls from the roof so as to kill the man. Spinoza finds this explanation absurd because he thinks that by taking the effects as the causes, the teleological account turns the law of causality upside down.¹⁷

As to the second statement (b), Spinoza asserts that the teleological explanation is erroneous because, upon depicting God as an agent who aims at something, it disregards the self-sufficiency of God. For him, however, God is a self-sufficient agent that would have no aims because he does not lack anything.

The two reasons Spinoza offers to defend his anti-teleological approach, I believe, are consistent within the context of his causal determinism. Arguing that God is the efficient cause of unthoughtful (unliving) things, and that he is a self-sufficient agent, Spinoza obviously leaves no room for divine teleology and unthoughtful teleology.¹⁸ However, I am not so sure, if Spinoza, offering that the teleology is unacceptable due to the afore-mentioned reasons, does abruptly conclude that the teleology is erroneous altogether. Or is it possible to claim that he is sympathetic to some form of teleology in his metaphysics?

Some commentators of Spinoza like Bennett (1983), Carriero (2005), and Melamed (2020) maintain that these two reasons formulated in the First Part of *Ethics* suffice to say that Spinoza rejects teleology altogether.¹⁹ For instance, Melamed in "Teleology in Jewish

¹⁷ E1Ap.

¹⁸ By the term "unthoughtful teleology," I mean the teleology of the non-living or inanimate things in nature.

¹⁹ Jonathan Bennett in his article "Teleology and Spinoza's *Conatus*" mainly argues that Spinoza rejects all final causes, including the teleological explanations of the human action. However, Bennett affirms that Spinoza has an inconsistency in his system as he presents *conatus* as a teleological concept. See Jonathan Bennett, "Teleology and Spinoza's *Conatus*," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 8 (1983): 143-160. Likewise, John Carriero in "Spinoza on Final Causality" and elsewhere, argues that Spinoza is against the human teleology. Carriero basically argues that Spinoza sees the final ends as the appetites of the human beings. In this way, he suggests that the human ends or purposes are nothing but the motive tendencies. To illustrate his point, Carriero holds that when we build a house, we generally assume that we have an end: to build a house. However, he then puts that when we think of the issue more deeply, we will

Philosophy,” pointing to the connection between freedom of will and teleology, argues that Spinoza dispenses with any form of teleology (divine, human, or unthoughtful teleology) as he has already eliminated the freedom of will.²⁰ The human agents in Spinoza, according to Melamed, behave in a causal and determinate manner as they are conditioned by God. But they cannot be considered as free agents who have purposes or intentions of their own.

Some other scholars, such as Curley (1990), Garrett (2003), Manning (2002), and Lin (2006), on the other hand, have argued fairly persuasively that Spinoza does not wish to eliminate teleological explanations altogether. These scholars mainly hold that even though Spinoza is against divine teleology, he countenances the teleological explanations regarding human nature. That is to say, the second group of scholars points out that, in rejecting teleology for the above reasons, Spinoza does obviously deny the teleology of God or unthoughtful things, but he does not necessarily object to the fact that there might be certain teleological elements in human nature, which they define as “human teleology.” Garrett, Curley, Manning and Lin each have their own reasons to support the idea that Spinoza has a milder approach to human teleology.²¹ For example, Curley, attacking the non-teleological reading of Bennett, argues that the human teleology is highly central to the Appendix of the part of the *Ethics*. He cites some passages from the *Ethics*, which he thinks are supportive of his teleological reading of the human nature: “Not many words will be required now to show that Nature has no end set before it, and that all final causes are nothing but human fictions.”²² Curley thinks that this passage from the Appendix, which is widely held to be a rejection of human teleology, is

realize that we actually have no end other than being part of a causal chain of the construction of a house. According to Carriero, in Spinoza’s trajectory, building a house is nothing more than a mechanical process; John Carriero, “Spinoza on Final Causality,” in *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy: Volume 2*, eds. Daniel Garber and Steven Nadler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 140-142.

²⁰ Melamed, “Teleology in Jewish Philosophy,” 141-145.

²¹ Garrett, Manning, and Lin all propose their own reasons for the idea that Spinoza is friendly with human teleology. Garrett, for example, has defined four textual reasons that are supportive of the human teleology. One of the reasons that Garrett holds is that Spinoza in *Treatise on the Emendation of Intellect* explains the human activity primarily as oriented toward certain ends. For Garrett, the fact that the human beings by their very essence are envisaged to pursue the absolute good as an ultimate end is a clear proof for human teleology; See Don Garrett, “Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism,” in *New Essays on the Rationalists*, eds. Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann, 310-336 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 312. Also see Richard N. Manning, “Spinoza, Thoughtful Teleology and the Causal Significance of Content,” in *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, eds. Olli Koistinen and John Biro, 182-209 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 183. See Martin Lin, “Teleology and Human Action in Spinoza,” *The Philosophical Review* 115, no. 3 (2006): 320.

²² E1Ap.

merely a rejection of divine teleology. By rephrasing the statement as “all final causes we are apt to ascribe to Nature (or God) are nothing but human fictions,”²³ Curley claims that, by this statement, Spinoza does merely attack divine teleology but not necessarily human teleology. In line with this second line of interpretation, in the aftermath of this paper, my goal will be to claim that *conatus* as the main element of human nature and the highest virtue of human beings can be interpreted in a teleological manner that will lead to viewing Spinozian ethics as inclusive of objective, humanistic and essentialist elements, albeit in a highly original sense.

III. A teleological reading of conatus

Admittedly, Spinoza's sympathy to human teleology can be most vividly traced in his conception of *conatus*. The concept of *conatus*, which is first incorporated in the *Ethics* in its third Part, steps into the scene as a way to define the ultimate characteristic of the human beings as self-preserving entities. Thus, *conatus* appears to be a more solid and definite characterization of the human beings given in the *Ethics* after the metaphysical account of human essence discussed in the first two parts of the book.²⁴ So what is *conatus*, and in what sense is it definitive and constitutive of human nature?

Conatus originally comes from the Latin verb *conatur* which literally means “to try or strive.”²⁵ It is used by early modern philosophers, including Thomas Hobbes, to express the notion of striving for what is advantageous.²⁶ Spinoza incorporates it into his metaphysics in a distinctive manner. In the *Ethics*, he first uses it when he says: “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.”²⁷ Then he adds: “The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in

²³ See Edwin Curley and P. F. Moreau, eds., *Spinoza: Issues and Directions: Proceedings of the Chicago Spinoza Conference* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1990), 40.

²⁴ Don Garrett, for instance, in his article “Spinoza's *Conatus* Argument” says that the *conatus* argument reveals the behavioural nature of the human beings as opposed to their being characterized as metaphysical figures in the first part of the *Ethics*; Don Garrett, “Spinoza's *Conatus* Argument,” in *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza's Philosophy*, ed. Don Garrett, 352-390 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 378. Likewise, Steven Nadler argues that *conatus* is the finite or solid manifestation of the infinite power of Nature or God. Nadler also proposes that *conatus* involves the things' individuation. This being so, he suggests that the finite things are distinguished from each other “insofar as their parcels of power are distinct from each other;” Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 195.

²⁵ Edwin Curley's translation for the Latin word *conatur* is “to strive, try or endeavour.” See Beth Lord, *Spinoza's Ethics: An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 88-89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

²⁷ E3P6.

its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.”²⁸ Ontologically speaking, Spinoza’s *conatus* argument holds that the human being, just like any other finite thing,²⁹ is an agent who strives to preserve its existence as its essential feature. So, Spinoza proposes that *conatus* – striving for self-preservation – is the essence of things “which makes each particular thing what it is.”³⁰ *Conatus* as the act of self-preservation shows that the human beings are essentially active in maintaining their essence. Things are determined to act by their *conatus* in a way to ground their existence and promote their well-being.³¹ As is well known, the traditional theology appeals to God as the ground for the maintenance of finite things.³² Spinoza’s *conatus* theory, however, opposes the traditional metaphysics by attributing a great power to the finite beings in terms of their self-maintenance. In that sense, although Spinoza’s system is deterministic where God determines everything as they are, Spinoza leaves room for self-determination to the finite things through *conatus*. By this means, things are regarded to be what they are in terms of their *conative* power.

Conatus has a central role in Spinoza’s ethics as well. Spinoza says in the *Ethics* that *conatus* is the most essential virtue since no other virtue can be antecedent to it:

The striving to preserve itself is the very essence of a thing (by IIP7). Therefore, if some virtue could be conceived prior to this [virtue], viz. to this striving, the very essence of the thing would be conceived prior to itself (by D8), which is absurd (as is known through itself).³³

As is clear from this excerpt, Spinoza believes that *conatus* is a foundation for ethics which suggests that we cannot conceive of any other virtue without one’s *conative* activity. By holding that *conatus* is the

²⁸ E3P7.

²⁹ Thomas Cook holds the view that it is not only the human beings but also each finite thing that strive to exist in Spinoza. In that sense, Cook points to the universality of *conatus*. See Thomas Cook, “*Conatus*: A Pivotal Doctrine at the Centre of the Ethics,” in *Spinoza’s Ethics*, eds. Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz, and Robert Schnepf, 147-166 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 153.

³⁰ Beth Lord, *Spinoza’s Ethics: An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 90.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

³² For example, Judeo-Christian religions assume that God is the cause of the essence and existence of creatures. Therefore, the creatures are seen to be totally dependent on God. Although Spinoza similarly claims that God is the cause of the essence and existence of finite beings, he attributes an active power through *conatus* to the finite beings to determine their existence.

³³ E4P22.

most primary virtue, Spinoza centralizes the notion of self-preservation in his ethical theory which ultimately leads to the fact that the ethical concepts, mainly good and bad, are defined through *conatus*. Spinoza radically opposes the traditional ethical theory by holding that we can judge good or bad not because they are good or bad in themselves but we judge them good or bad because we desire (or strive for) them or not. This radical difference in Spinoza's ethical theory suggests that there is no good or bad in themselves independent of the subject. Rather, it is suggested that good and bad are defined by the subject's *conative* act.

Now that I have briefly elaborated on *conatus* as an ontological and ethical subject, I shall turn to expounding my teleological view of *conatus*. When I take a glance into the Spinoza literature, I can readily see that there is a dominant view in the literature to interpret Spinoza's system as thoroughly non-teleological in character. As far as I hold sway over the Spinoza literature, scholars such as Bennett (1984), Carriero (2011) and Hübner (2018) offer such an anti-teleological reading of the *conatus*. In *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Bennett defines the *conatus* as the appetite for survival. In this study, although Bennett believes that the appetite for survival is not a "blind" impulse because we are aware of where they are taking us, he still argues that it might be seen "blind" in the sense that we are not aware of where we are taken into.³⁴ Hence, Bennett implies that appetite for survival is not a conscious act towards the attainment of a certain end, but it is an unconscious impulse. Similar to that, Carriero discusses that *conatus* is nothing more than a motion for survival without any goal in itself.³⁵ Observing a close relation between Spinoza's *conatus* argument and the seventeenth century theories of conservation of motion, Carriero proposes that Spinoza's *conatus* is nothing more than a motive tendency for survival.³⁶ Carriero also argue in his article "*Conatus*" that there is a theoretical upper limit to the reality to which the individuals with their *conative* power can reach.³⁷ However, he argues that this upper limit does not refer to any end. For Carriero, the natural things do not exist for the sake of this upper limit, that is, it does not mean that the things get deprived of their existence if they fail to reach this limit. Rather, they just exist to maximize their activity and power. Another anti-teleological argument has been defended by Karolina Hübner (2018). In her article "Spinoza's Unorthodox Metaphysics of the Will,"

³⁴ Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1984), 223.

³⁵ John Carriero, "Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXXV (2011): 86.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

³⁷ John Carriero, "Conatus," in *Spinoza's Ethics: A Critical Guide*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed, 142-168 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 150-151.

Hübner basically states that *conatus* in Spinoza is identified with the essence and that the essence is identified with activity and power.³⁸ Therefore, for Hübner, Spinoza's conception of the human being is not an inert substance in its essence but an active agent. This active agency, namely *conatus*, is simply an act of causing/bringing about some effects in relation to one's essence. For this reason, Hübner's anti-teleological reading of *conatus* suggests that *conatus* is a causally productive essence³⁹ that has no end to realize.

On the other hand, as opposed to this anti-teleological approach, there is a line of interpretation in the literature to offer a teleological reading of the *conatus*. As opposed to Bennett and Carriero's anti-teleological reading, Edwin Curley (1988) argues that *conatus* cannot be simply seen as a blind impulse. Instead, Curley holds that *conatus* has two meanings.⁴⁰ In traditional sense, it means "striving for something." For Curley, *conatus*, in this sense, implies that one strives for a certain end. However, Curley argues that *conatus* has another connotation in Cartesian philosophy, namely as "the tendency that bodies have to persist in a state either of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line."⁴¹ Curley states that this technical meaning of *conatus* has no implication for an end or goal that the thing literally wants to achieve. According to Curley, Spinoza's usage of *conatus* has been deeply influenced by this Cartesian usage of the term. However, for Curley, unlike the *conatus* of the inanimate things, Spinoza's human *conatus* might not be limited to this technical interpretation of the term. Rather, he supposes that the human *conatus* has an inner representation of future which clearly implies a conscious act towards a future end.

Moreover, as to the anti-teleological argument of Carriero, one could appeal to Viljanen's (2011) counter-argument which identifies Carriero's argument as "inertial reading."⁴² Viljanen first argues that Carriero's "inertial reading" is erroneous because the human *conatus* does not act purposelessly (through motive tendency) in that it is not inert, but it aims to have good ideas rather than bad ideas in order to preserve its well-being.⁴³ Secondly Viljanen argues that Carriero's "inertial reading" ignores the fact that the *conatus* is not self-destructive. According to Viljanen, because we, the human beings, are *conatively*

³⁸ Karolina Hübner, "Spinoza's Unorthodox Metaphysics of the Will," in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 352.

³⁹ See *ibid.*, 353.

⁴⁰ See Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza's Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 107.

⁴¹ See *ibid.*, 107.

⁴² See Valtteri Viljanen, "The Meaning of the Conatus Doctrine," in his *Spinoza's Geometry of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 105-112.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 110.

not self-destructive, we cannot be moving inertly and merely through our motive tendencies.⁴⁴ Rather, as he suggests, we have some conscious act in preserving ourselves which manifests itself in our attempt to avoid anything self-destructive to us. And likewise, Viljanen holds that Spinoza's concept of *conatus* is end-directed because it is an act of preserving some essential features of the human being such as freedom, virtuousness etc.⁴⁵ So, Viljanen's view shows that despite the fact that Spinoza defines the essence of man as *conative agent*⁴⁶ that is active and transformative in character, he affirms the essential features that are stable and unchanging in human nature by offering that the finite essences are pre-determined by God.⁴⁷

In line with this teleological interpretation of the conatus, I shall elucidate some aspects of Spinoza's conatus to suggest that it has a purposive character in itself.

First and foremost, arguing against the idea that the human beings are "dominion within a dominion in nature"⁴⁸ but they are part of the necessary and pre-determined structure of Nature or God, Spinoza affirms that the human beings are part of the causal laws in nature that they are to follow necessarily. This suggests that human agents have no ends or purposes by themselves but they are necessitated to act and behave in the way they are pre-determined by Nature or God. This apparently leaves out any room to suggest that human agents are purposive by nature. It strictly entails that things are what they are as necessitated by the causal laws of Nature or God without any possibility of orienting themselves toward a certain end. However, as far as I see, Spinoza's conception of conatus as the most primary virtue of the human beings demands that the human beings pursue the adequate ideas in order to grasp the true understanding and comprehension of God through the second and third forms of knowledge (*ratio* and *scientia intuitiva*).⁴⁹ Spinoza literally calls the third form of knowledge as the highest good of the human beings that corresponds to the highest ethical state in Spinoza's ethics for manifesting the highest level of conative power. Further, the fact that Spinoza conceives of the true knowledge of Nature or God as a means to increase our active existence or conative power entails the idea that the blessedness or salvation (*beatitudo*) of the human beings is impossible if we fail to orient

⁴⁴ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁵ Valtteri Viljanen, *Spinoza's Geometry of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 127.

⁴⁶ See E3P7.

⁴⁷ See E2P26 and E2P29.

⁴⁸ See E3Pf.

⁴⁹ E2P40Dn2.

ourselves towards the real essence and truth of Nature or God. In this respect, Spinoza explicitly writes in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that the human beings are necessitated to direct themselves towards divine law as their highest end and the highest good in their quest for attaining blessedness and salvation:

Since, then, the love of God is man's highest happiness and blessedness, and the ultimate end and object of all human actions, the only one who follows the divine law is the one who devotes himself to loving God, not from fear of punishment, nor from love for another thing, such as pleasures or reputation, etc., but only because he knows God, or because he knows that the knowledge and love of God is the highest good.⁵⁰

For the idea of God dictates this: that God is our supreme good, or that the knowledge and love of God is the ultimate end toward which all our actions ought to be directed.⁵¹

In those excerpts from the *Treatise*, Spinoza reveals that human beings as conative entities, on a deeply metaphysical and ethical level, do not simply act without any end or purpose as they are necessitated by the laws of Nature or God but, in fact, they are obliged to orient themselves towards the end of knowing and loving the true essence of Nature and God as a way to attain blessedness and salvation. In doing so, Spinoza does not avoid claiming that human conatus is purposive toward the end of understanding and comprehending the divine law that is necessary for its ultimate well-being.

Moreover, it is widely argued that, in Spinoza's Nature, things exist out of necessity and without any purposive orientation. However, some passages from Spinoza's *Ethics* indicate that *conatus* or the act of self-preservation might be interpreted to have certain goals or ends to achieve. We can read the following remarks in this vein:

We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to Joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to sadness.⁵²

When we love a thing like ourselves, we strive, as far as we can, to bring it about that it loves us in return.⁵³

⁵⁰ Benedictus Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 128.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵² E3P28.

⁵³ E3P33.

A free man who lives among the ignorant strives, as far as he can, to avoid their favors.⁵⁴

In these remarks, Spinoza clearly suggests that the human beings strive toward certain ends such as to maximize joy and to minimize despair, to be loved back by our lovers or to avoid the favour of the ignorant people etc. So, one can readily see that we, the human beings, do not exist without any ends, but we aim to maximize our power and activity towards certain ends such as joy, love, and wisdom. In other words, as far as I see, Spinoza's Nature or God as a necessary causal unit does not leave out the idea that human agents as conative beings orient themselves toward the affirmative feelings or affects of love, joy and wisdom as a way to increase their conative power. This ultimately suggests that the human beings necessarily orient their conative activity toward the positive affects which promote their well-being and moral fulfilment.

Furthermore, Spinoza's conception of freedom as a way to overcome the bondage of the passive affects and increasing their active existence or conative activity by developing adequate ideas is a clear indicative of the idea that the human beings are not free from orienting themselves toward a certain moral end.⁵⁵ In this regard, Spinoza argues that living under the burden of the passive affects create a bondage that leads us into a state in which we are incapable of active existence. However, as he suggests, the active affects and ideas increase our activity and power. This may be linked to the Aristotelian idea of self-actualisation in some special sense. As is well known, Aristotle defines self-actualisation as a change from potency to the actuality. Although Aristotle's theory of potentiality and actuality is highly criticized in the later centuries, the Scholastic Aristotelian thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and Avicenna reformulated it in their own way.⁵⁶ They mainly argue that things have a certain level of perfection and reality which is to be actualized.⁵⁷ Do we see a similar picture in Spinoza's ethical theory? One could answer that question by saying yes and no. I should definitely note that Spinoza's theory of self-preservation is highly original. This being so, Spinoza never formulates self-preservation as a clear-cut transition from potentiality to actuality in one's state, as is held by Aristotle and scholastic Aristotelians, but as a transition in the degree of the conative power of the agent. Hence, one could argue that although Spinoza discards the Aristotelian notion of potentiality-

⁵⁴ E4P70.

⁵⁵ See E4pf.

⁵⁶ See Carriero, "Spinoza on Final Causality," 107-108.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

ty and actualisation from his ontology and ethics, he offers that the human agents go through a transition in their state of existence from passivity to activity by overcoming the bondage of passive affects and liberating themselves by orienting their conative activity toward the active affects.

Another significant teleological element in Spinoza's ethics in relation to the human *conatus* is the notion of model of human nature (*exemplar humanae naturae*) that Spinoza formulates as the self-constructed human ideal according to which our conative activity determines the ethical good and bad. In the Preface to the Fourth book of his *Ethics*, Spinoza generally gives a criticism to the traditional view of perfection, imperfection, good and evil etc.⁵⁸ He basically claims that the idea that perfection or imperfection as an objective ideal is a prejudice that is caused by a teleological point of view, namely attributing fictional ends to the things. However, as he further argues, he shows that we are not completely free from developing or creating a model of human nature by ourselves, according to which we define the good and bad. By this means, Spinoza suggests that the model of human nature as a subjectively constructed "ideal" guides our conative activity toward the good and ultimately to the highest good. Spinoza thus seems to claim that our conative activity as a way to define the good and bad is not free from the "human ideal" that we construct as a model of moral perfection for our conative activity.

Based on the teleological arguments I have suggested above, I can safely draw the conclusion that the *conatus* can be read in three possible ways: a) it is more than a purposeless entity but it has a projection towards a certain moral goal, namely the true understanding of Nature or God; b) it is not merely a maximization of power but it is a maximization of power towards certain ends like joy, love and wisdom; and c) it is not merely an act of producing certain effects but a matter of orienting ourselves toward the goal of liberating ourselves by means of the adequate ideas and the highest human ideal. Thus, it can be suggested that Spinoza's human *conatus* can be seen as a much broader concept than it is suggested by the proponents of the mechanistic notion of conatus. This being so, I can suggest that the human *conatus* is not merely a necessary act of producing certain effects but it is an act of maintaining one's existence toward certain ends and ideals.

IV. What does the teleology of conatus imply in ethical sense?

Based on the foregoing teleological interpretation of Spinoza's human conatus, I can now turn to his ethical theory to claim that there are certain objective, humanistic and essentialist elements in it. As a matter

⁵⁸ E4Pf.

of fact, in the *Ethics* and his other ethical writings, one could never see that Spinoza dictates or formulates moral principles to be followed but rather he aims to provide a certain ethical orientation. Gilles Deleuze in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* draws a distinction between the Spinozian version of ethics and traditional morality.⁵⁹ He stresses that despite rejecting the moral norms and values, Spinoza is deeply concerned with structuring a non-moralistic ethics. This is primarily exemplified by Spinoza's conception of conatus. Accordingly, Spinoza holds that ethicality is not gained through conformity to the moral values and norms but rather through one's *conative* act, namely striving toward what is useful and avoiding what is not.⁶⁰ Spinoza is commonly viewed to offer a subjectivistic, anti-humanistic, and non-essentialist ethical theory mainly because of his conception of *conatus* that is regarded to be egoistic (seeking what is useful and avoiding what is not) and non-teleological. However, my teleological reading of *conatus* in the previous chapter has crucial implications for Spinoza's ethics. In this respect, I will mainly claim that the afore-mentioned teleological arguments of the human *conatus* in Spinoza usher us to interpret the Spinozian ethics as inclusive of objective, humanistic, and essentialist elements.

I. *Ethical Objectivism.* Spinoza's reformulation of ethicality, namely his attempt to ground ethicality on the *conative* act of the ethical agents, exposes a sharp contrast with the traditional moral theories. As is well known, the traditional moral theories, from the Platonic and Aristotelian ethics to scholastic Aristotelianism and Cartesian theory, embrace the following dictum: there are certain objective moral values and norms out there which ought to be pursued by the human beings. Spinoza, however, considers that the ethical conceptions of good and bad are subjectively determined by the *conative* activity of the human beings, namely their striving toward what is useful and avoiding what is not.

This might prompt us to think that the ethical agents are egoistic and subjectivistic in terms of their ethical choices and decisions. For instance, Deleuze in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* holds that Spinoza disregards the notion of moral values that are objectively graspable. Rather, to Deleuze, Spinoza is subjectivistic in terms of ethical concepts as he claims that they are determined in accordance with the fact that they are useful to us or not.⁶¹ For Deleuze, the fact that we are ethically driven towards something or avoid it just because it "agrees with our nature or disagrees with our nature" implies a subjective and

⁵⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1988), 17-30.

⁶⁰ See E4Df1-Df2.

⁶¹ See Deleuze, 22-23.

modal conception of ethicality.⁶² This kind of Deleuzian interpretation might lead us to think that the Spinozian ethics is relativistic and egoistic. In parallel, Melamed clearly proposes that the Spinozian ethics is egoistic. By calling it “Egoism without Ego,” Melamed says that every being in Spinoza seeks to promote his own individual good.⁶³ According to Melamed, Spinoza indicates his egoism in ethics especially through his concept of *conatus*.⁶⁴ Because the human beings are regarded to be virtuous depending on their individual conative power, Melamed concludes that Spinozian ethicality is subjectively determined.

However, there is another way of interpreting the Spinozian ethics as inclusive of ethical objectivism. As regards, Edwin Curley argues that the ethical good in Spinoza cannot be regarded as a subjective concept because it is deeply connected to the “ideal of human nature” (*exemplar humanae naturae*). Curley holds that the human beings strive toward the ethical good which conforms to the idea of ideal human nature.⁶⁵ In other words, we, the human beings, have a self-constructed conception of ideal human nature according to which we define the good and bad. Accordingly, we call something good because it approximates to the ideal of human nature, and we call bad what does not approximate to the ideal. Hence, Curley suggests that the Spinozian ethical agent structures an objective criterion to determine what is good or bad. However, note that the good and bad in Spinoza are in no way transcendent values but they are defined by the human beings.⁶⁶ In this regard, Spinoza affirms that the good and bad are determined by our conative activity that aims to accord with the necessary laws of Nature or God. Along similar lines, Andrew Youpa argues that Spinoza is more of a moral realist than an anti-realist. Arguing that the instances of goodness and badness do not depend on one’s desires, emotions or appetites, Youpa suggests that Spinoza is a moral realist. For Youpa, the fact that Spinoza proposes an ideal human nature that the individual human beings set for themselves shows that the goodness and badness are not determined on the basis of one’s emotions, desires or beliefs, but on their objective notion of ideal and perfect human nature that they have in their mind.⁶⁷

In this regard, If I turn to my teleological view of *conatus*, I shall claim that Curley and Youpa’s interpretations of the Spinozian ethics

⁶² Ibid., 22.

⁶³ See Yitzhak Y. Melamed, “Spinoza’s Anti-Humanism: An Outline,” in *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, eds. Carlos Fraenkel, Dario Perinetti, and Justin Smith, 147-166 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 159.

⁶⁴ See *ibid.*, 159-160.

⁶⁵ See Curley, 123.

⁶⁶ Deleuze, 23.

⁶⁷ See Andrew Youpa, *The Ethics of Joy: Spinoza on the Empowered Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 46-54.

fit into to my approach nicely. To put it simply, I shall point out that the Spinozian ethical agent strives towards the good as an end because of its conformity to the ideal human nature. In other words, it seems that we do not simply follow what is useful to us or avoid what is not on a purely subjective basis, but we construct a model of human nature in our mind that guides us to the subjective determination of the good and bad but this is not independent from our goal to accord with the necessary laws of Nature or God. In other words, although Spinoza claims that the good and bad are not part of the necessary Nature or God but they are self-constructed conceptions, it is apt to suggest that our subjective notions of the good and bad are not structured independently of our conative activity since it is aimed at establishing a harmony and accord with the real essence of Nature or God. Hence, my teleological view of *conatus* implies that Spinoza's ethical agent is not egoistic (pursuing only what is useful or avoiding what is not) on a subjective basis but rather it is oriented towards the objective ethical good as an end that is constructed by human mind in accordance with its necessary goal to conform to the laws of Nature or God. Thus, I shall claim that Spinoza is neither offering a transcendently objectivistic ethical theory nor a pure subjectivism but a *conatively* constructed objectivism.

II. *Humanism*. Spinoza is widely acclaimed to offer that the human nature has nothing distinctive than other natural beings.⁶⁸ This very notion that dominates the literature is mainly grounded on the idea that Spinoza regards all finite beings as the modes of one substance, Nature or God. For example, Melamed argues that the Spinozian rationalism “rejects the existence of any “islands” within nature which are governed by “special” laws.”⁶⁹ In this way, offering an anti-humanist reading, Melamed holds that the humanity in Spinoza by no means has a distinguished place in nature. According to Melamed, the fact that the animals, and even rocks, have self-consciousness or “a second-order idea of body”, shows that they are not radically different from the human being who is primarily composed “of a body” and “an idea of his body.”⁷⁰ On this ground, Melamed claims that the human beings and other entities of nature, namely animals and inanimate things, have only a degree of difference but they are fundamentally equal. This anti-teleological and anti-humanist view of *conatus* has a highly strong basis in the Spinozian ethics. As is well known, Spinoza is surely against the idea that the human beings can be conceived as “a dominion within

⁶⁸ As is clear, by humanism, I mean a view that assigns the human being a distinctive place among other natural things.

⁶⁹ Melamed, “Spinoza’s Anti-Humanism: An Outline,” 151.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

a dominion in nature.”⁷¹ In the Preface to the Third Part of the *Ethics* Spinoza discusses about this issue at length where he suggests that because nature is the same everywhere and for every being, no being can be conceived of differently than the others.⁷² Spinoza’s claim, here, mainly addresses the issue of free will (of the human being). As is well known, the traditional metaphysics (The Stoic and Cartesian philosophy) has a strong notion of free will (of the human being). For example, Descartes argued that since the human will is absolutely free, the human being is distinctive in its nature for having an autonomy of power compared to the other beings which are simply part of the mechanical nature.⁷³ Spinoza’s metaphysics, however, offers a severe criticism to this traditional view. As regards, Spinoza holds that no natural being, that is to say, neither the human being nor God, has free will as they are all determined by the causal laws of Nature or God. On a casual reading, this account could suggest that the human *conatus* and (let’s say) animal *conatus* are equivalent on the ground that they are both part of the same causal laws of nature or God. However, as far as I see, the fact that the human beings have the highest capacity for epistemic and ethical activity by orienting themselves toward the adequate ideas of causal laws of nature or God does distinguish their level of conative being/existence from the other natural entities.

This can be better exemplified and demonstrated within the context of Spinoza’s theory of knowledge. As is well known, In the *Ethics* and elsewhere, although Spinoza observes that animals, and the human beings are part of the same causal laws of Nature or God, he clearly distinguishes between their epistemic capacities, albeit as a matter of difference in degree. In this regard, Spinoza distinguishes three kinds of knowledge: opinion or imagination [*opinio vel imaginatio*], reason [*ratio*], and intuitive knowledge [*scientia intuitiva*].⁷⁴ Observing a hierarchical difference between the three types of knowledge in terms of their degree, Spinoza argues that the second and third kinds of knowledge are the highest forms of knowledge, the acquisition of which is peculiar only to the human beings. As far as I understand, by offering that the knowledge of the *ratio* and *scientia intuitiva* are the highest forms of knowledge to be attained by the intellectual human activity that seeks the cause of Nature or God, he ascribes a special role to the human *conatus*. In parallel, Yirmiyahu Yovel in “Spinoza and Other Heretics” proposes that Spinoza’s theory of ethical emancipation

⁷¹ See E3Pf.

⁷² See E3Pf.

⁷³ Spinoza criticizes the Stoics’ and Descartes’ notion of the freedom of will as a distinguishing feature of the human beings in the Preface to the Fifth Part of his *Ethics*.

⁷⁴ In the *Emendation (TdE)*, however, Spinoza identifies four types of knowledge: *report, experience, belief and clear knowledge*. See Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. 1, 12-13.

through self-knowledge is indicative of his humanistic stance.⁷⁵ Yovel puts that the human beings are exceptional and distinguished in terms of their level of self-knowledge.⁷⁶ In that sense, although Spinoza observes that the human beings and animals share the same nature and they derive from the same substance of God and thus they all have a conative activity toward the laws of Nature or God, he clearly distinguishes between their epistemic and ethical positions in terms of their levels or degrees of understanding the true essence of Nature or God. This way of putting things shows that the Spinozian human *conatus* has the highest capacity of structuring the good (and finally the highest good, or the intuitive knowledge of Nature or God) which does position him into a distinguished place in nature not in the traditionally humanistic sense but in a more original way, namely by the more elevated capacity of his conative activity.

III. *Essentialism*. In a traditional sense, essentialism is mainly associated with the Platonic philosophy which holds that we have universals that are stable, necessary and unchanging (Ideas, Forms) on the one hand and the particulars that are mutable and variant on the other.⁷⁷ The Platonic essentialism mainly entails the idea that the human essence has universal Forms or Ideas that are stable, necessary and unchanging. Undoubtedly, Spinoza offers a highly different ethical framework than the Platonic essentialism. But, as far as I see, there is a possible way to view some essentialist elements in Spinoza's ethics construed in some original manner. How is that so?

As is known, having defined the essence of human being as *conatus* (self-preservation),⁷⁸ Spinoza proposed that the human essence is mobile and active. Hence, the human essence is basically expressed to strive to gain power to preserve itself. Spinoza puts forward that the more *conative* power one has, the more real he becomes. In ethical sense, this means that agents with high level of *conative* power are more virtuous than the ones with less *conative* power. Denying the fact that the good, bad, imperfection and perfection etc. are real properties of things⁷⁹, Spinoza asserts that we define the good and bad etc. in terms of how things affect our essence or power of acting. In this scheme, things are good insofar as they increase our *conative* power or help us to actualise our power whereas they are bad insofar as they diminish our *conative* power or prevent us from realizing our power.

⁷⁵ Yimiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 164-165.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷⁷ Constantin V. Boundas, *Deleuze and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 31.

⁷⁸ See E3P7.

⁷⁹ E4Pf.

Nevertheless, it is apt to suggest that although the good and bad, etc. are human constructions, they are not independent from our conative activity that necessarily aims to understand the essence of Nature or God. This also fits with the afore-mentioned theory of “model of human nature” (*exemplar humanae naturae*) which has been taken as a self-constructed objective criterion according to which the good and bad etc. are defined. Accordingly, as Justin Steinberg puts it nicely in “Striving, Happiness, and the Good: Spinoza as Follower and Critic of Hobbes,” the model of human nature emerges to be “a paradigm of human power or reality, that is a model of a fully realized human essence.”⁸⁰ So, it seems clear that Spinoza denounces the Platonic notion of essence but offers that the essence of the human being depends upon our conative activity and power. With this regard, Spinoza affirms that our essence is not a strict and defined entity but a mobile and active one that determines its degree of reality, power and perfection through its conative activity. We can therefore suggest that Spinoza considers human essence not as a strict and immobile entity but as an act of *conative* power. However, at this point, we shall also examine if the *conative* power of the human agent is oriented toward something stable and unchanging, namely something essential.

Spinoza defines essence in the *Ethics* as follows:

I say that to the essence of anything belongs that which, being given, the thing is [NS: also] necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily [NS: also] taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing.⁸¹

Thus, for Spinoza, essence is fundamentally associated with necessity. That is to say, the essence of the things is what necessarily makes the thing itself. If we casually think that *conatus* is simply an increase and decrease in power without any purpose, we shall find ourselves defending the idea that every *conatus* is free to act or decide on its own without taking into account anything necessary about its nature. However, if we recall our discussion in the previous section that suggests that the human *conatus* is oriented towards the necessary laws of Nature or God, this idea loses its validity. I have primarily suggested that the human *conatus* necessarily seeks the necessary truth of Nature or God since this enables him to increase his activity and power. In ethical sense, this means that *conatus* is not free and purposeless in its

⁸⁰ Justin Steinberg, “Striving, Happiness and the Good: Spinoza as Follower and Critic of Hobbes,” in *A Companion to Hobbes*, ed. Marcus P. Adams, 431-447 (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2022), 441.

⁸¹ E2P10D2s.

orientation but instead it is necessarily oriented toward structuring the ethical concepts that are unchanging and essential on the basis of its conative activity, namely whether they increase their conative power or not. Hence, this shows that the ethicality in Spinoza is not a subjective way of discovering the good and bad etc. in one's specific experience independent from their conative activity toward the real essence of Nature or God. But, on the contrary, the ethical good and bad etc. are structured and created by the *conative* act of human agents who fundamentally aim to accord with Nature or God. In this way, I can conclude my discussion by emphasizing that the human beings do not create the ethical values, such as good and bad etc. by themselves on a purely subjective basis but construct them through their *conative* activity that is aimed at according with the real essence of Nature or God.

V. Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have argued that even though Spinoza severely criticizes divine teleology, he has a milder approach to human teleology. So, I have suggested that, although Spinoza is radically critical of the traditional metaphysics, he still does not completely avoid the traditionally teleological framework of human ontology but retains some of its features in some original and special sense.

Situating Spinoza in a more traditional context of teleology has certain implications in terms of his ethics. As opposed to the dominant view in Spinoza scholarship that Spinoza's ethics is subjectivistic, anti-humanistic and non-essentialist based on the anti-teleological reading of his ontology, I have proposed that his ethics has objective, humanistic and essentialist elements, albeit not a traditional sense, but in a highly original sense. This being so, I have shown that the teleological character of *conatus* plays a crucial role on the reformulation of the objectivism, humanism, and essentialism of Spinoza's ethics. In this sense, I have argued that Spinoza's ethical objectivism, humanism, and essentialism are grounded on the fact that the human *conatus* peculiarly defines and creates some objective and essential values by its purposive activity with the ultimate aim to accord with the necessary laws of Nature or God.

References

- Bacon, Francis. *The New Organon*. Edited by Lisa Jardine-Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Bennett, Jonathan. "Teleology and Spinoza's Conatus." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 8 (1983): 143-160.
- Bennett, Jonathan. *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1984.

Boundas, Constantin V. *Deleuze and Philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

Carriero, John. "Conatus." In *Spinoza's Ethics: A Critical Guide*, edited by Yitzhak Y. Melamed, 142-168. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Carriero, John. "Spinoza on Final Causality." In *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy: Volume 2*, edited by Daniel Garber and Steven Nadler, 105-148. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Carriero, John. "Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXXV (2011): 69-92.

Cook, Thomas. "Conatus: A Pivotal Doctrine at the Center of the Ethics." In *Spinoza's Ethics*, edited by Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz, and Robert Schnepf, 147-166. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011.

Curley, Edwin. *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza's Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Curley, Edwin, and P. F. Moreau, eds. *Spinoza: Issues and Directions: The Proceedings of the Chicago Spinoza Conference*. Leiden and New York: Brill, 1990.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Translated by Robert Hurley. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Book, 1988.

Descartes, Rene. *The Principles of Philosophy*. Translated by John Veitch. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010.

Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Michael Moriarty. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Garrett, Don. "Spinoza's Conatus Argument." In *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza's Philosophy*, edited by Don Garrett, 352-390. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Garrett, Don. "Teleology in Spinoza and Early Modern Rationalism." In *New Essays on the Rationalists*, edited by Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann, 310-336. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Hübner, Karolina. "Spinoza's Unorthodox Metaphysics of the Will." In *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, edited by Michael Della Rocca, 343-369. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Lin, Martin. "Teleology and Human Action in Spinoza." *The Philosophical Review* 115, no. 3 (2006): 317-354.

Lord, Beth. *Spinoza's Ethics: An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

Manning, Richard N. "Spinoza, Thoughtful Teleology and the Causal Significance of Content." In *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, edited by Olli Koistinen and John Biro, 182-209. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Melamed, Yitzhak Y. "Teleology in Jewish Philosophy." In *Teleology: A History*, edited by J. K. McDonough, 123-149. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Melamed, Yitzhak Y. "Spinoza's Anti-Humanism: An Outline." In *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, edited by Carlos Fraenkel, Dario Perinetti, and Justin Smith, 147-166. Dordrecht: Springer, 2011.

Nadler, Steven. *Spinoza's Ethics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Spinoza, Benedictus. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. 1. Edited and translated by Edwin Curley. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.

Spinoza, Benedictus. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. 2. Edited and translated by Edwin Curley. Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016.

Steinberg, Justin. "Striving, Happiness and the Good: Spinoza as Follower and Critic of Hobbes." In *A Companion to Hobbes*, edited by Marcus P. Adams, 431-447. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2022.

Viljanen, Valtteri. *Spinoza's Geometry of Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Viljanen, Valtteri. "Spinoza's Essentialist Model of Causation." *Inquiry* 51, no. 4 (2008): 412-437.

Youpa, Andrew. *The Ethics of Joy: Spinoza on the Empowered Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Yovel, Yirmiyahu. *Spinoza and Other Heretics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.