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### Conatus, the Will to Persist: An Introduction

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# Conatus, the Will to Persist: An Introduction

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### Abstract

*The papers collected in this issue address a variety of aspects of the concept of conatus ranging from the explorations of its roots in early ancient Greek thought to its application on modern theories of democratic education. The conatus is a special relation between the parts of a monad and their subparts and the subparts of the subparts to infinity, which ensures that each part and subpart is a part of this monad and not of any other. As a fundamental trait of monadic existence, the conatus is manifested in a multiplicity of facets that sustain the persistence of any real existence. It is thus obvious that there is still a vast field of such manifestations of conatus that awaits philosophical exploration, especially in the realms of Social Ontology and of the Philosophy of Nature.*

**Keywords:** *conatus; Dasein; democracy; education; erotic; ethics; existence; happiness; hormé; inertia; monad; perception; persistence; Streben; will*

## I. *Conatus* and monadic existence

Since its explicit re-introduction<sup>1</sup> in modern philosophy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of *conatus* has been formulated in as many versions as there are philosophical endeavours regarding the nature of a living resp. thinking monadic existence, be it conceived as a Cartesian *Ego*, a Spinozist

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of *conatus* has its origins in the ancient Greek thought. Cf. the papers of Bagby, Egbekpalu and Kirby in this issue.

*Divine thought*, a Leibnizian *Monad*, a Hegelian *Subject*, a McTaggartian *Self*, or a Heideggerian *Dasein*.

Monadological theories of existence are the best explanations of the phenomena associated with personality or personal existence because they are monistic without being reductionist and incorporate the idea of spirit or thinking without recourse to complicated theories of emergence. This explanatory superiority of monadological theories is due to the concept of monadic existence's ability to combine both the ideas of the one and the many – or the ideas of common and separate – without creating a contradiction.

The rough framework of any monadological ontology is thus a system of discrete units that nevertheless are interconnected by their own intrinsic characteristics. To form such a system, a monad must have a very special internal structure that allows for both the absolute separateness of that monad from any other monad and the formation of an external interrelationship between the monads: A monad is considered a *simple* entity – that is, an entity that is not composed of detachable parts. A monad, however, is neither punctual nor atomic (i.e., indivisible). A monad consists of an infinite number of parts that are of the same nature as the monad itself; each part consists also of an infinite number of parts that are of the same nature as the higher parts and the whole monad (i.e., infinitely divisible). The infinite divisibility of a monad is one necessary condition to the unity of the monad so that the parts of one monad belong only to that monad and not to any other monad; thus, each monad is absolutely and profoundly separated from every other monad. Only then is it possible that the monad exists as a discrete unit.

The unity of the monad, however, requires a second condition: a special relation between the parts of the monad and their subparts and the subparts of the subparts to infinity, which ensures that each part and subpart is a part of this monad and not of any other. This relationship, which connects all parts of the monad and ensures its internal unity, is manifested as activity because the monad is an active unit. This activity traditionally has been termed the *conatus* of the monad.

The active monad possesses another active feature that is oriented towards the other monads and aims to integrate them into its own nature. This second form of activity is traditionally called *perception*.

All conceptual variants of *conatus* employed in monadological theories of existence have in common the idea that the *conatus* manifests itself as 'striving,' or as 'will' to persist. Some philosophers, however, have expanded this concept to the realm of lifeless and non-thinking matter creating the concept of *inertia*. *Inertia* as the tendency of a lifeless and inactive body to

adhere passively to a given state of motion is then the *differentia specifica* that divides the realm of the existent into two ‘species’: The active and perceiving monads *strictu sensu* and the passive and inert units of matter.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, the inert units of matter cannot obviously interact actively via mutual perceptions. Since their only ‘activity’ consists in the change of their relative positions, i.e., in their motions, they interact only by collisions that are governed by physical conservation laws.<sup>3</sup> The expansion of the concept of conatus to the passive concept of inertia raises interesting metaphysical questions regarding the relationship of spirit and matter that cannot be pursued here. However, since the interactions of the units of matter are somehow perceived by the active conative monads and are thus part of their experienced reality, we can safely assume that the world does not consist of two distinct and unrelated realms, and we can also reject the thesis that the relationship between conatus and inertia is merely heuristic.<sup>4</sup>

## II. *Conatus*: Revisiting and expanding the concept

The papers collected in this issue address a variety of aspects of the concept of *conatus* ranging from the explorations of its roots in early ancient Greek thought to its application on modern theories of democratic education.

### a. Revisiting the origins – *Conatus* as the impulse of nature

In his essay *The Organic Roots of Conatus in Early Greek Thought*, Christopher Kirby reflects on the “earliest Greek treatments of impulse, motivation, and self-animation,”<sup>5</sup> and how they inspired later developments of this “cluster of concepts tied to the *hormé-conatus* concept.”<sup>6</sup> Kirby begins with an exposition of the change that the conception of *physis* underwent over time. The Greek concept of *hormé* (ὁρμή) thus “posited an inherent impulse from which all motion”<sup>7</sup> emanated. Roman thinkers then associated *physis* with the Latin *natura*, Kirby continues, and *hormé* with *conatus essendi*. Yet, although they “largely lacked the same implicit growth-principle” Kirby argues, they

<sup>2</sup> In modern physics these units are not any more the classical Newtonian corpuscular *atoms* but have a complicated structure that is described in Quantum Physics.

<sup>3</sup> In this broad sense every physical interaction that is governed by a conservation law is a kind of collision.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Épaminondas Vamboulis, “Le principe d’inertie et le conatus du corps,” *Astériorion* 3 (2005): 105-124.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Kirby, “The Organic Roots of Conatus in Early Greek Thought,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 29-49.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

still made “heavy reference”<sup>8</sup> to the concepts of *conatus* and *impetus*. Some “notion of self-animation” remained crucial, also throughout the medieval period, over Early Modern thinkers, up to late German idealism, Kirby continues. He goes so far to say that the *hormé-conatus* concept “is one of the most successful memes in the history of philosophy.”<sup>9</sup> Kirby argues that one reason for the success of the concept may lie in its ability to address “a long-standing philosophical problem,” namely “the reconciliation of permanence and change.”<sup>10</sup>

Kirby then in detail outlines the history of the concept of *hormé-conatus* in Early Greek thought, beginning with Homer’s treatment, especially in the *Odyssey*, over Hesiod, Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Empedocles. He closes with a discussion of Sarah Broadie’s contribution to the question of how to account for the “underlying causes for the human impulse to philosophize,”<sup>11</sup> and the role that education plays here. Philosophical education “collapses” if it is excessively focused on “nurture[ing] an individual’s growth towards singular ends, in a linear fashion,” Kirby argues here. Both “Homer’s Odysseus” and “Plato’s philosopher king” are alike in that their “impulses toward longer-term, more sustainable good” can override their “impulses towards instant gratification,”<sup>12</sup> the author points out.

#### b. The prefiguration of *conatus* in the Aristotelian thought

John R. Bagby’s *Aristotle and Aristoxenus on Effort* examines the roots of the concept of *conatus* in Aristotle’s thought, more specifically, the connections between Aristotle’s understanding of “life as an internal experience of living force”<sup>13</sup> and the *conatus* doctrine. He argues that both Spinoza and Aristotle agree that effort is not possessed “innately,” but instead “emerges gradually by an effort aimed at improvement.”<sup>14</sup> Although Aristotle does not have one single term to refer to striving, Bagby argues that the concept is still “prefigured” in Aristotle’s understanding of “life, experience, and *energeia*, as an interiority of effort.”<sup>15</sup> Bagby here sees a continuity from Aristotle’s concept to both early modern and early 20<sup>th</sup> century thought,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>13</sup> John R. Bagby, “Aristotle and Aristoxenus on Effort,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 51-74.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 52.

such as in Bergson's attention to *life*, Heidegger's "care structure," and Deleuze's concept of "intensity."<sup>16</sup> All these concepts share a commitment to an "internal principle of causality,"<sup>17</sup> as we find it in Spinoza's notion of *conatus*. All of them, Bagby furthermore argues, are ultimately "consonant with Aristotle's dynamic sense of effort."<sup>18</sup> The mere fact that Aristotle understood the definition of the soul as a geometric task, as Bagby puts it, did not automatically imply a static conception of the soul, instead, Aristotle argued for the need of a "dynamic" definition of the soul. Such a definition must "include and display the cause," which Bagby understands to refer to the "successive emergence of powers."<sup>19</sup>

Bagby then moves on to discuss the role that effort plays in ethics generally, and how it is related, in particular, to pleasure, attention and virtue. He argues here that Aristotle "presents an ethics of effort."<sup>20</sup> Although progress and development require effort, they are "sustained by pleasures that gradually increase the facility and ease of action,"<sup>21</sup> they require habit, which makes them pleasant. One example of "dynamic effort" that Bagby then explicitly addresses is that of music. It is both a "deliberate skillful action" and a "means of relaxation and amusement that releases tension."<sup>22</sup> Attending to the music, is "*work* of the soul."<sup>23</sup> Continuous exercise "progressively increases the richness of its contents," it is thus the action of a "concrete *conatus*,"<sup>24</sup> one that is can only be explicated "by reference to the effort of the soul."<sup>25</sup>

### c. Further on the Aristotelian tracks: Happiness and *conatus*

In *Aristotelian Concept of Happiness (Eudaimonia) and its Conative Role in Human Existence: A Critical Evaluation*, Purissima Emelda Egbekpalu critically reflects on the role of happiness in Aristotle and "its conative role."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Purissima Emelda Egbekpalu, "Aristotelian Concept of Happiness and its Conative Role in Human Existence: A Critical Evaluation," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 75-86.

She ultimately argues that to “sustain man’s inner drive to persist in life,” happiness ought to be “restricted to only cognitive activities.”<sup>27</sup>

On Aristotle’s understanding, Egbekpalu begins, “the pursuit of happiness presupposes an inner drive of continuous striving towards good moral character.”<sup>28</sup> When it comes to the “conative role” of happiness in human existence, both the “activity of the soul,” and desires and emotions related to the “attainment of happiness” are thus relevant, Egbekpalu continues. Happiness in Aristotle “denotes the good life,<sup>29</sup> and is a “lifetime endeavour.”<sup>30</sup> Although we do not find any notion of *conatus* before the Stoics, Egbekpalu argues that we can still find related ideas in Aristotle’s writing on “happiness, human soul, emotions, and rhetoric.”<sup>31</sup> “The drive to attain happiness,” Egbekpalu points out is the “focal point” of all human striving in Aristotle.<sup>32</sup> This “ultimate end of man” is always “conditioned by his nature,” Egbekpalu emphasizes. It thus differentiates him from “animals and inanimate objects.”<sup>33</sup>

Happiness is here understood as an “active state of life,” as the “virtuous activity of the soul that presupposes reason,” as the “actualization of [man’s] potentialities.”<sup>34</sup> Aristotle furthermore understands the “conative role of happiness” to be a man’s desire, namely “towards objects of action that sustain his persistence to maintain his existence.”<sup>35</sup> Desire is here seen as an “activity of the soul” that is closely related to “human emotions,” Emelda Egbekpalu continues. The “cognitive, desiderative, affective aspects of man” equally have a “conative role” in Aristotle, she argues. They are apt to cause various “bodily changes, movements and behaviours,” they are thus “generally considered as survival mechanisms that motivate responsive behaviours to maintain existence,” Emelda Egbekpalu claims. Emotions in Aristotle thus “connote conative experiences.”<sup>36</sup> Aristotle may understand virtuous acts to “culminate in cognitive activities,” Emelda Egbekpalu concedes, and she closes with some considerations about what “other dimensions of human nature” ought to be considered in response to concerns about this exclusive focus on cognition.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 81.

d. *Conatus* and the transition from the teleological to the deterministic view of nature

In his *Nature's Perfection: Aristotle and Descartes on Motion and Purpose*, Justin Humphreys considers the transition from Aristotle's teleological conception of nature to Descartes' conception of nature as purposeless. Humphreys argues that this shift is grounded not in empirical discovery, but instead in "differing conceptions of where perfection lies in nature."<sup>37</sup> In order to undermine the teleology of Aristotle's account of motion, Descartes needs to resort to a "theological doctrine," namely one that "derives the principles of motion from the perfections of God."<sup>38</sup>

Humphreys begins by introducing Aristotle's account of motion in *De caelo*, focusing on the two kinds of motion Aristotle discusses here, circular, and rectilinear, and their importance for Aristotle's distinction between superlunar and sublunar motion – a distinction that according to Humphreys sheds light on Aristotle's conception of teleology. Aristotle here argues on Humphreys reading that circular motion is more "perfect" or "complete" than rectilinear motion and is thus "naturally prior."<sup>39</sup> Rectilinear motion, Humphreys continues, is thus "ontologically dependent on the complete, circular motions of the heavens."<sup>40</sup> Humphreys then moves on to demonstrate that Aristotle's division between two kinds of motion corresponds to an analogous division in the heavens, namely between the sublunary and superlunary heavens<sup>41</sup>: Not only are "sublunary things" spatially lower, they are also "less complete and divine" and thus lower in an axiological sense. When it comes to the "epistemic status" of final causes, Humphreys continues, they are not grounded in empirical claims, but instead Aristotle puts forward "a wholly a priori thesis that derives from his conception of perfection."<sup>42</sup> Aristotle here presents an "axiological order of self-motion," starting from the "perfect rotation of the first heaven," moving down more complex heavenly bodies, and ultimately to earthly creatures, "who participate in the divine only by imitation."<sup>43</sup> Although bodies on all levels are "self-movers," an ultimate reference to the "activities of eternal superlunary creatures" is required to at-

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<sup>37</sup> Justin Humphreys, "Nature's Perfection: Aristotle and Descartes on Motion and Purpose," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 87.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.



tribute purpose to sublunary creatures.<sup>44</sup> The final ends of the latter are thus “conditioned by eternal motion” of superlunar substances, which possess “inherent circular motion” and are both “prior to them” and “more complete.”<sup>45</sup>

The paper then moves on to Descartes – whose conception of teleology diverges from Aristotle’s, in that Descartes’ account of the laws of nature depends on a conception of perfection that is ultimately distinct from Aristotle’s. Descartes’ “banishes final causes from physics,”<sup>46</sup> and his physics has thus been described as a “mathematization of nature” or a “geometricization of space.”<sup>47</sup> Yet, Humphreys points out, in the *Discourse*, Descartes also appears to argue for the claim “that the metaphysical necessity of the laws of nature rests on the perfections of God.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, Humphreys argues, the question of the relationship of mathematics to natural objects is in Descartes’ ontology ultimately “rests on his theology.”<sup>49</sup> In support of this claim, Humphreys points at the three fundamental laws of nature as Descartes presents them in the *Principles* and argues that they metaphysically equally “ground Descartes’ dynamical laws in the perfections of God.”<sup>50</sup> Descartes’ conception abandons the “Aristotelian separation of the heavens and the earth,”<sup>51</sup> and of circular and rectilinear motion, instead requiring of the universe uniformity of motion. Descartes’ “theological foundation of physical law” with its exclusion of final causes thus grounds the physics we find here, namely in the form of a “geometry of uniform space of extended objects.”<sup>52</sup> Both Aristotle and Descartes thus agree that the “principles in natural science” ought to be derived from “aesthetic considerations about the perfection of nature.”<sup>53</sup> The “metaphysical basis of their division,” however, is to be found in where they locate this perfection, Aristotle in the superlunar sphere, and Descartes in the deity, Humphreys argues.

#### e. Back to teleology: A new reading of Spinoza’s *conatus*

In *Spinoza’s Conatus: A Teleological Reading of Its Ethical Dimension*, Neşe Aksoy argues for a reconsideration of the claim that the *conatus* doctrine

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 100ff.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

represents a mechanistically motivated rejection of teleology. Instead, she argues that Spinoza's conception of conatus remains close to a traditional notion of teleology, namely to what she calls a "mild approach"<sup>54</sup> to teleology. Aksoy first discusses Spinoza's approach to teleology, in order to then argue that this concept finds application when it comes to the *conatus* doctrine. Although Spinoza himself expressed a strongly critical attitude towards teleology, Aksoy here argues that "Spinoza's conception of *conatus* is teleological in character," and that therefore his ethics include "objective, humanistic, and essentialist elements."<sup>55</sup> Aksoy builds here on recent work on Spinoza that argues against the received view – according to which "Spinoza dispenses with any form of teleology"<sup>56</sup> – that Spinoza in fact does retain a notion of teleology, namely when it comes to the "explanation of human affairs."<sup>57</sup> Spinoza, Aksoy agrees, has a "mild approach to human teleology."<sup>58</sup>

After discussing the weaknesses of several non-teleological readings of Spinoza's argument, Aksoy concludes that conatus ought to be understood as more than a mere "blind (mechanical) impulse."<sup>59</sup> Instead, it is a "maximization of power towards certain [future] ends."<sup>60</sup> Importantly, the *conatus* argument according to Aksoy thus implies that "human beings are more than mechanical entities as they have certain ends and purposes of their own."<sup>61</sup>

Aksoy then addresses the consequences that her understanding of conatus as manifesting a "weak teleology" has for ethicality. She here stresses the alleged "sharp contrast" between Spinoza's understanding of ethicality as grounded in "the conative act of the ethical agent" and previous conceptions.<sup>62</sup> Yet, with the understanding of conatus as possessing weak teleology in hand, Aksoy here argues for an understanding of striving as directed "towards the ethical good," namely "because of its conformity to the ideal human nature and vice versa."<sup>63</sup> Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine thus represents what Aksoy calls "Ethical Objectivism," she thus disagrees with positions such as Deleuze's who see Spinoza embracing a radical subjectivism about

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<sup>54</sup> Neşe Aksoy, "Spinoza's Conatus: A Teleological Reading of Its Ethical Dimension," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 114.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 114 and 127.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

ethical concepts. Aksoy also argues that Spinoza represents a distinctive kind of *humanism*, and against the claim that Spinoza sees no difference between human and animal nature. On her “teleological reading of human *conatus*,” human beings occupy a “distinguished place in nature” as ethical subjects, for one thing, they have “autonomy of power compared to the other beings,” on Aksoy’s reading.<sup>64</sup> Lastly, Aksoy identifies a distinctive kind of *essentialism* in the *conatus* doctrine, namely one that “considers human essence as an act of *conative* power.”<sup>65</sup>

#### f. *Conatus* vs. *Habitus*: Modernism beats postmodernism

Josep Maria Bech claims in his *Spinoza’s Conatus Undoes Bourdieu’s Habitus* that a closer look at Spinoza’s influence on Bourdieu’s thought “reveals a long-lasting inconsistency”<sup>66</sup> in the latter’s conception of habitus, namely between a commitment to a *strong conatus* and a *weak conatus*. With the notion of a habitus already “staggering,” Bech claims that Bourdieu’s attempts to salvage it by means of the concept of conatus backfire to such an extent as to give it “an unsettling blow.”<sup>67</sup> Bourdieu tried to employ the concept of conatus in two ultimately contradictory ways: First, Bech argues, Bourdieu used the notion of conatus in order to ground his notion of a habitus, thereby endorsing what Bech dubs a *strong conatus*, “i.e., a sort of ‘engine of the habitus’ endowed with un-revisable strength and impervious to the resistances it will eventually encounter.”<sup>68</sup> But second, from 1987 on, Bourdieu also used the concept of conatus in a weak way, namely in order to “reinstat[e] agency in the structuralist mindset.”<sup>69</sup> The *weak conatus* required here is one that is “revisable,” namely once it is “exposed to the interfering resistance of exterior forces.”<sup>70</sup>

Bech here argues that the latter, weak, conatus is “congruent [...] with Spinoza’s doctrine,” whereas the former, strong, conatus represents a “misreading of Spinoza” on Bourdieu’s part.<sup>71</sup> Bourdieu himself realized the problem in 1993, Bech claims, and as a result modified his account by “subordinating conatus to habitus.”<sup>72</sup> Bourdieu’s two inconsistent notions of conatus are also

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>66</sup> Josep Maria Bech, “Spinoza’s Conatus Undoes Bourdieu’s Habitus,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 131.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 132, 136.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 132.

reflected in his varying attempts to defend voluntarism on the one, and determinism on the other hand.<sup>73</sup> Bech ultimately argues that the notion of conatus, as Bourdieu uses it, “acts as a litmus test” when it comes to identifying the “ambiguities and shortcomings of th[e] notion”<sup>74</sup> of habitus.

g. *Conatus* in German idealism: The *Streben* of the Fichtean I

In *Streben of the I as the Fundamental Form of Consciousness*, Andrija Jurić argues that Fichte’s notion of “striving” of the I is a “necessary condition of finite or individual consciousness.”<sup>75</sup> The I thus possesses a “dual nature,” one that is both finite, and yet striving towards the infinite – with the resulting tension being the “moving force of the I.”<sup>76</sup> Jurić stresses a reading of the I in Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* as a “concrete and individually existing I” and of the absolute I as that at which this concrete I strives. For the I to exist concretely, however, it needs to “be in tension and contradiction between its finite and infinite activity.”<sup>77</sup> The I is “always activity” and at the same time a product of this activity.<sup>78</sup> It is thus, “activity itself.” Positing the I at the same time requires positing what is not-I, “therefore, if we have one activity, we immediately have two.”<sup>79</sup>

Jurić then moves on to the topic of striving itself and argues that the “striving of the I must be infinite,”<sup>80</sup> it is the precondition for positing any objects whatsoever. The purpose of striving in Fichte is then, Jurić argues, the “filling out” of infinity. Yet, for there to be an I, “this undefined and undetermined activity that strives towards infinity needs to be limited.”<sup>81</sup> Limiting the “infinite tendency” is required if the self is to posit itself. Thus, although the Self posits itself absolutely, it does not do so “in an undetermined way,” as Jurić puts it.<sup>82</sup>

In Fichte’s terminology, Jurić argues, the *Anstoss* is what puts such limitations on infinity. Denoting both obstacle, hindrance, and also impulse or stimulus, *Anstoss* “puts a task or demand” on the I to limit itself. It thus does not limit the I directly, Jurić argues. It rather motivates the I to “self-limita-

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>75</sup> Andrija Jurić, “Streben of the I as the Fundamental Form of Consciousness,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 153.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

tion.”<sup>83</sup> Yet, *Anstoss* can only occur in the presence on an “infinite activity of the I.”<sup>84</sup> Ultimately, “infinite striving of the I” on the one, and *Anstoss* are thus mutually dependent. In fact, we find here what Jurić calls a “dialectic of infinity and *Anstoss*”<sup>85</sup>: Unless the I strives “outwards,” it cannot be *angeslossen*. *Anstoss* is thus what Jurić calls a “re-action” of the activity of the I. As such it is spontaneous and not necessarily under voluntary control. Yet, it is not “mindless,” as long as it is capable of “return[ing] into itself.”<sup>86</sup> Consequently, the self is of a divided character by necessity, namely split “between its finite and infinite activity.”<sup>87</sup> What ultimately constitutes the I however, according to Jurić’s conclusion, is striving, and it is thus no coincidence that the duality of the self, together with the “dialectic between infinity and finitude” and others, lie at the heart of Fichte’s philosophy.<sup>88</sup>

#### h. Hegel’s legacy: Max Stirner’s *Ego* and its *conatus*

In *At War in Swaddling Clothes: Stiner’s Unique One as a Conative Existence*, Kostas Galanopoulos argues that the Stirnerian egoist – in his striving that is the “fulfillment as the Unique One through ownership” – manifests what Galanopoulos calls “the Stirnerian notion of *conatus*.”<sup>89</sup> Moreover, Galanopoulos argues the animosity between individuals that the Stirnerian egoist confronts is both an “ontological precondition and prefiguration of *conatus*’ conclusion.”<sup>90</sup> Galanopoulos begins by outlining Stirner’s reception of *conatus* in Spinoza’s thought, particularly “through its Hegelian interpretation,”<sup>91</sup> and in Hobbes’s “individualistic ontology.” He argues that whatever the differences between Spinoza and Hobbes may be, they concur on the importance of rejecting freedom of the will. They thus leave no room for *human exceptionalism*, according to Galanopoulos. Stirner’s own “thoughts on man” start out from “man as a newborn existence in the world.”<sup>92</sup> From birth on, man is at war with the surrounding world, “the striving for persistence” is here understood as an “ontological sparking,” Galanopoulos continues.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>89</sup> Kostas Galanopoulos. “At War in Swaddling Clothes. Stiner’s Unique One as a Conative Existence,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 177.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 187.

The “constant combat” that man finds himself in is thus “about the conatus.”<sup>93</sup> According to Stirnerian egoism, the individual “consumes whatever is in its power and moves inwards in order to become the Unique One.”<sup>94</sup> In direct continuation of the combat situation that the newborn finds himself in, the Stirnerian egoist thus understands everything surrounding him as a “potential possession” for him to consume and to expand himself into. We hence find here what Galanopoulos calls an “unlimited and dynamic notion of ownership” – the exact “reverse of the Kantian imperative.”<sup>95</sup> According to Galanopoulos, there exists therefore an important continuity, namely “the same *conatus*” that also “obliged the child to be at war” from the moment he was born.

Ultimately, the Stirnerian egoist will also need to “live within a specific dominion, within a State,” and he will here equally confront the need to engage in “political struggle to defend and preserve his ownership.”<sup>96</sup> When it comes to the political level, Galanopoulos claims in closing, the *insurrection* is in fact that “‘political’ application of the Stirnerian *conatus*.”<sup>97</sup>

#### i. *Conatus* and *Dasein*

In *Conatus and Dasein: The Problem of an Existential Theory of Motivation*, Marko Markič argues in support of an understanding of *Befindlichkeit*, findingness, of *Dasein* in Heidegger as a “specific existential drive,”<sup>98</sup> as a “conative principle.”<sup>99</sup>

*Dasein* always “announces itself in connection with the meaningful structure of the world,” it thus cannot be captured “for itself in its own existence,” Markič points out. Instead, it is “always determined by its relation to being.”<sup>100</sup> The finitude of *Dasein* grounds this relational structure, in the “groundless thrownness.”<sup>101</sup> Findingness of existence, Markič argues, here functions as a “motivational, conative principle.”<sup>102</sup> *Dasein* always requires self-interpretation.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Marko Markič, “Conatus and Dasein: The Problem of an Existential Theory of Motivation,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 193.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 195; see also 203.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 199.

tion. It is thus “not some self-grounded entity.”<sup>103</sup> *Dasein* is instead “constant self-calling-into-existence” and “constantly having to exist.”<sup>104</sup> Thrownness is thus a “motivational principle,” and not merely a “fact about existence.”<sup>105</sup> Findingness, on Markič’s account, thus possesses a “dynamic structure.”<sup>106</sup>

Markič considers the concepts of understanding and care, and then especially the problem of authentic motivation in Heidegger, and in particular the question of how to “practically understand” the concept in the context of the “perspective of life-world interactions.”<sup>107</sup> Authenticity in Heidegger amounts to “taking upon oneself the groundless freedom of one’s existence,” Markič claims. Building on Dilthey’s account of hermeneutics, it is the “freedom of the interpretation always starting from existence itself, not from the life-world.”<sup>108</sup> Of particular importance for the existential analysis is authentic motivation, Markič continues. An authentic existence preserves the “motivationally structured problematic openness,” authentic findingness thus “dilates that it has to always gain it back anew.”<sup>109</sup>

#### j. Beyond the biological givenness – *Conatus* and meaning

In *The Erotic and the Eternal: Striving for the Permanence of Meaning*, Beatrice Kobow presents three different conceptions of *conatus*, all of which manifest a “will to persist” that goes beyond “mere biological givenness,”<sup>110</sup> and that instead primarily reflect the individual’s participation in a culture or other collective. Both Plato, Heidegger, and Scheler describe “human strife” as an activity that occurs within a collective, Kobow argues. *Conatus* is here “an aspect of the permanence of meaning” that is “constitutive of human society and culture.”<sup>111</sup>

In Plato’s *Symposium*, the origin of human striving is described “through the myth of the personified Eros.”<sup>112</sup> The “persistence of man” is thus understood as an “individual’s endeavour” here, Kobow argues. Just as man may “use’ a woman to sire his child,” they may equally use another man “to move

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Beatrice Kobow, “The Erotic and the Eternal – Striving for the Permanence of Meaning,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 213.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

towards the Truth.”<sup>113</sup> The “erotic strife” that we find in the *Symposium* is thus one for “immortality,”<sup>114</sup> Kobow concludes. And she moves on to reject feminist concerns with the “exclusion of the feminine” when it comes to striving in the *Symposium*. Instead, Kobow argues, the *Symposium* does not only deny a “substantial role” to women in particular, but in fact to “all individuals as individuals.”<sup>115</sup> In Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*, the sixth chapter addresses the topic of “Sorge,” care. “Sorge” has a double meaning, Kobow points out, in that it means both “Besorgnis,” “Bekümmernis” and also “Für-Sorge.”<sup>116</sup> It is thus “more than effortful striving,” Kobow emphasizes. Heidegger here understands the “*perfectio* of humans as accomplishment of ‘care.’”<sup>117</sup> “Sorge” always has an “aspect of futurity and anticipation,”<sup>118</sup> Kobow continues, and is thus intimately related to other central themes in Heidegger, such as his thought about despair and the historicity of Dasein. In the third and last position that Kobow discusses, Scheler’s *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, we find a “unified, non-reductivist (non-vitalist) understanding of human beings.”<sup>119</sup> Life is characterized “by certain ‘objective’ properties” but also by an “inner sense” in which “the ‘self’ is experiencing life,” an “Innesein.”<sup>120</sup> Humans can “negate their environment,” and they are at the same time “world-open.” Yet the “urge” (Gefühlsdrang) and other phenomena that we find here are not merely a matter of “addition,” Kobow argues. Humans are “guided by spirit” and those always “categorically different from all manifestations of life Scheler thus has a “cosmological conception” of Geist, Kobow concludes.

#### k. Overcoming Spinoza’s *conatus*: Dewey’s concept of democratic education

In their *A New Conatus for the New World: Dewey’s Response to Perfectionist Conceptions of Democratic Education*, Özel, Beisecker, and Ervin question the claim that Spinoza’s perfectionist conception of education, with the strengthening of the student’s individual *conatus* as its goal, is particularly suitable for democratic social ideas. Instead, they contrast Spinoza’s focus on rational activation in his educational thought with Dewey’s conception of education. We find in Dewey, the authors argue, a more thorough commitment to democratic

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 222; see also 227.



values, specifically when it comes to the “overall aims of schooling.”<sup>121</sup> Education does not merely aim at individual perfection as it does in Spinoza, instead, Dewey claims that education involves acquiring a second nature, namely one that reflects “the norms and expectations of one’s specific community.”<sup>122</sup>

The authors begin by questioning the claim recent scholars have made, namely that Spinoza “usher[ed] in a form of radical humanism,” one that is “distinctly favorable to democratic ideals.”<sup>123</sup> Spinoza’s educational thought is focused on the “perfection of the rational nature of individuals,” on the strengthening of their *conatus*. Spinoza may thus have been a “pioneer” or a “radical” when it comes to the central position that the individual, “at the expense of any deity or community,” plays, the authors agree. Yet, Özel, Beisecker, and Ervin argue, the understanding of perfection that we find in the *Ethics* is an anemic one, largely characterized in terms of “independence, or absence of dependence.”<sup>124</sup> What “fade[s] away” under this conception, the authors argue, are “social aspects.”<sup>125</sup> Education may have positive social consequences in Spinoza’s conception, but these are no more than a “happy byproduct,”<sup>126</sup> the authors argue.

In Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, the authors continue, we find a strikingly different conception from Spinoza’s, especially when it comes to the aims of education. Instead of focusing on the promoting the student’s *independence*, Dewey sees *interdependence* as the main goal of education. Education is supposed to enable lifelong growth of the individual within the society they live in. Instead of raising an “egoistic specialist,” the educator should direct their attention at “fostering *joint intentions*, both as means and ends” of their instructions.<sup>127</sup> “Social factors,” Özel, Beisecker, and Ervin argue, thus “feature much more prominently” here than in Spinoza. Education is a “necessity of life” in complex societies, Dewey argues, and it is of equal importance for the “formation of community” in the first place.<sup>128</sup> Some ends of education can thus not be “found within,” as Spinoza claims, but only within society as a whole, they thus require “continuous readjustment.”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Jasmin Özel, Dave Beisecker, and Joe Ervin, “A New Conatus for the New World: Dewey’s Response to Perfectionist Conceptions of Democratic Education,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 238.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 247; also 249, and 238, n. 1.

### III. Epilogue: The *conatus* of *conatus*

The papers collected in this issue demonstrate that the philosophical treatment and the importance of *conatus* are far from being exhausted. As a fundamental trait of monadic existence the *conatus* is manifested in a multiplicity of facets that sustain the persistence of any real existence. It is thus obvious that there is still a vast field of such manifestations of *conatus* that awaits philosophical exploration, especially in the realms of Social Ontology and of the Philosophy of Nature. Is, for example, the historical phenomenon of empires that survive for centuries a manifestation of *conatus*? And can time itself be conceived as the ultimate manifestation of *conatus* in the universe?

We hope that the present collection will carry on the intellectual momentum for addressing these questions – and many more to come.

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