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Acquiescentia and Power in Spinoza's *Ethics*

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The challenge at the center of this paper is to reconcile three explicit assertions that Spinoza makes in his Ethics: 1. Rational self-esteem is "a joy born of the fact that a man considers himself and his own power of acting"; 2. The power of acting of each singular thing is nothing but the actual essence of the thing; 3. Reason cannot explain the essence of any singular thing. My aim in this paper is to provide an account of how reason, despite its inability to grasp singular essences, can make our singular power of acting accessible to us and thereby ground our proper self-esteem. I will argue that to resolve the puzzle, we must recognize a distinction, within the actual (durational) existence of any singular thing, between two senses of the term "power of acting," or "perfection," in accordance with the distinction between essence and existence of finite modes. On this basis, I will explain in what sense reason can be said to grasp our singular "power of acting" and to thereby ground our proper self-esteem, and how the twofold sense of "power of acting" underlies the distinction between rational self-esteem and the animi acquiescentia of intuitive knowledge.

1. Introduction

'The highest thing we can hope for,' Spinoza tells us in the *Ethics* (4p52s), is rational *acquiescentia in se ipso* (self-contentment or, preferably, self-esteem), which is

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the joy we derive from contemplating ourselves and our own power of acting.[1] Spinoza defines *acquiescentia in se ipso* (hereafter self-esteem) as 'a joy born of the fact that a man considers [*contemplatur*] himself and his power of acting' (3DA25). The ethical value of this affect hinges on the kind of self-cognition it involves. Insofar as we derive joy from an inadequate self-understanding through imagination, the first and lowest kind of cognition, our self-esteem is unwarranted and false. True and justified self-esteem is a joy based on an adequate cognition of oneself and one's power of acting through reason, the second kind of cognition, which in turn involves an adequate knowledge of God—the highest good of the mind and its greatest virtue (4p28).

In Part 4 of the *Ethics*, after having presented in Part 3 various forms of unwarranted self-esteem based on imagination, Spinoza writes: 'Self-esteem [*acquiescentia in se ipso*[can arise from reason, and only that self-esteem which does arise from reason is the greatest there can be' (4p52). This claim is puzzling because it is not clear how reason, the second kind of cognition, can provide the cognitive basis for a rational self-esteem—an adequate cognition of oneself and one's power of acting. By 'power of acting' (*potentia agendi*), Spinoza means the actual causal activity by which every existing thing strives to persevere in its being. And he claims that a thing's causal power or striving to persevere in its being is 'nothing but' the actual essence of that thing: 'the power, *or* striving, by which [each thing] strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, *or* actual, essence of the thing itself' (3p7d).[2] Yet Spinoza's theory of knowledge indicates

1. Unless otherwise noted, all the Spinoza references are given by volume and page from Gebhardt's edition of *Spinoza Opera* (abbreviated G) and Edwin Curley's *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (1985 and 2016). The Latin a*cquiescentia in se ipso*, as many have noted, has no exact English translation. Whereas the verb *acquiesco* signifies 'being at rest,' 'subside,' or 'assent,' the noun *acquiescentia* was coined by Henri Desmarets, the first Latin translator of Descartes's *Passions of the Soul*, for the phrase *satisfaction de soi-même* in the French original. Samuel Shirley translates this phrase as 'self-contentment,' and so do Michael Silverthorne and Matthew J. Kisner in their recent translation of the *Ethics.* Yet I think Curley's choice of 'self-esteem' better conveys the self-evaluative judgment that all species of *acquiescentia in se ipso* involve. I here side with Rutherford (1999: 452n8) who holds that Curley's translation, compared to its alternatives, makes better sense of the conceptual relations Spinoza establishes between *acquiescentia in se ipso*, *humilitas*, *superbia*, and *gloria*. For a dissenting view, see Carlisle (2017: 210–11), who argues that Curley's translation 'distorts and obscures Spinoza's account of the human good.' Compare Laerke (2021: xvi).

2. Spinoza's conception of a thing's actual essence as consisting in that thing's power of acting, that is, in an endeavor to bring about effects, is obviously grounded in his view that God's essence is God's power of acting (1p34), and that 'nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow' (1p36). In the *Ethics*, there is a wide variety of passages where Spinoza identifies power and essence, as well as a thing's 'power of acting' (or 'power of thinking') with that thing's 'striving to persevere,' which constitutes its actual essence. In 3p54d, Spinoza invokes 3p7d in arguing that 'the mind's striving, *or* power, is its very essence.' In 5p9d, he also cites 3p7 in identifying essence with power: 'the mind's essence, i.e., power [*potentia*] (by 3p7), consists only in thought.' The equation of power with essence is also present in the definition of virtue as the same as human power. Relying on 3p7, Spinoza defines virtue-power as 'the very essence, *or* nature,

that reason is universal cognition that has no access to singular essences. The foundations of reason are the *common* properties of things that do 'not constitute the essence of any singular thing' (2p37). Given Spinoza's tendency to equate 'power of acting' with 'striving to persevere' or 'actual essence,' and given his claim that reason cannot 'explain the essence of any singular thing' (2p44c2d), it is difficult to see how reason can provide the self-knowledge required for an adequate self-esteem.

My aim in this paper is to propose an account of how reason, despite its inability to grasp singular essences, can make our *singular* power of acting accessible to us and thereby ground our proper self-esteem. I will argue that Spinoza employs the terms 'power of acting' and 'striving' in two different senses, both of which refer to the *actual (durational) existence* of singular things. The first sense signifies that aspect of a thing's power of acting or striving that constitutes the thing's actual essence and that remains unchanged so long as the thing exists; the second sense signifies the nonessential aspect of a thing's power of acting, which is gradual and progressive, unceasingly increasing or diminishing.[3] I will argue that this implies two ways in which the mind can come to adequately know its own power of understanding, which we must consider in making sense of Spinoza's account of rational self-esteem. Whereas intuitive knowledge alone

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of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone' (4D8). Cf. 4p20d. That 'power' (*potentia*) means 'power of acting' (*potentia agendi*) is clear from the many passages where Spinoza equates a thing's power of acting with its striving to persevere. Consider, for example, 3p28d: 'the mind's striving, *or* power of thinking, is equal to and at one in nature with the Body's striving, *or* power of acting.' Consider also 3p37d: 'Sadness diminishes or restrains a man's power of acting (by P11S), i.e. (by P7), diminishes or restrains the striving by which a man strives to persevere in his being.' Another example is 3p55c2d, where Spinoza claims that envy is 'an affection by which a man's power of acting, *or* striving, is restrained.' 3p57d likewise asserts that 'joy and sadness are passions by which each one's power, *or* striving to persevere in his being, is increased or diminishes, aided or restrained.' And in 4p24, we are told that 'acting, living, and preserving our being' 'signify the same thing.' See also 4p26d. For an insightful discussion of Spinoza's doctrine of the identity of power and essence, see Hübner (2017). See also Don Garrett (2008: 12–15), LeBuffe (2010: 205), Viljanen (2011: 68–82), Della Rocca (2020: 18–26), Kisner (2020: 39), Youpa (2020: 48–51, 128–29), Carlisle (2021: 204n24). Paul Hoffman (1991: 173) addresses some difficulties in reconciling Spinoza's discussion of essence in 4pref with his tendency to treat power of acting and striving to persevere as the same. I address this issue in section 4 below.

3. Some scholars have rightly argued that Spinoza's tendency to identify power of acting with essence, as well as changes in our causal power with changes in our striving to persevere, seems to undermine the possibility of any finite thing maintaining its self-identity over time. Yet there are other passages in the *Ethics*, which I discuss later in section 4, where Spinoza seems to be suggesting that our essence remains unchanged notwithstanding frequent changes in our power of acting. For interpretations of this apparent tension, see, e.g., Hoffman (1991: 173ff.), Carriero (2011 and 2020: 93–98), Viljanen (2011: 145–49), Hübner (2017: 41ff). Although my main concern here is with Spinoza's view of the ability of reason to ground our proper self-esteem, the distinction I propose between essential and non-essential aspects of 'power of acting' or 'striving' has significant bearings on the issue of self-identity as well.

grasps the essential aspect of the mind's power of acting and gives rise to the *animi acquiescentia* or blessedness, I suggest that reason can be said to grasp our singular 'power of acting' and to thereby ground our proper self-esteem only insofar as this power is taken in its gradual and nonessential sense, which I characterize below.

In interpreting Spinoza's definition of rational *acquiescentia in se ipso*, many commentators have justifiably emphasized the importance he accords to rational self-knowledge and its close relation to the knowledge of God.[4] But except for a few scattered remarks, the question of how and whether reason can meet this definition and provide knowledge of one's power of acting has not been explicitly taken up. Another prevailing tendency among scholars is to explain Spinoza's rational *acquiescentia in se ipso* by invoking the related but still distinct affective states he calls *animi* (or *mentis*) *acquiescentia*, which is the satisfaction of the mind with its own perfection when attaining intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*).[5] While there is a fairly broad consensus that the *animi acquiescentia*, for Spinoza, belongs exclusively to intuition, and that the *acquiescentia in se ipso* arises from imagination or reason, some scholars treat the two Latin expressions as interchangeable, explaining the former in terms of the latter.[6] Others have taken the two expressions to denote one and the same affect,[7] or a single affect that varies according to the kind of cognition in which it is grounded.[8] Contrary to this line of interpretation, I will suggest that the two affective states differ fundamentally from one another and deserve to be treated separately.[9]

I begin in section 2 with a brief outline of the limitations Spinoza sets to our self-knowledge through imagination and reason. In section 3, I examine the consequences of this analysis for Spinoza's account of rational self-esteem in Part 4 of the *Ethics*. In section 4, I explain the two senses of 'power of acting' that this

4. See, e.g., Totaro (1994 and 2017: 229–33), Rutherford (1999: 450–60), LeBuffe (2005: 252 and 2010: 23–24, 198, 203–6), Alanen (2012: 248–53), Eugene Marshall (2013: 212–14), Carlisle (2017: 223–24), Newlands (2018: 224–25), Soyarslan (2018: 357–60), Douglas (2020: 146–53), Youpa (2020: 24).

5. Notable exceptions are Totaro (1994: 68–69 and 2017, 230–34) and Rutherford (1999: 458–59). I maintain Curley's translation of *animi acquiescentia* as 'satisfaction of mind' mainly because, on my interpretation, this affective state does not include an element of self-judgment, as opposed to *acquiescentia in se ipso*.

6. See, e.g., Eugene Marshall (2013: 212–14, 213n25, 222, and 225n56). Some commentators rely on a passage from 4app4 where Spinoza discusses the *animi acquiescentia* in order to explain his account of *acquiescentia in se ipso* in 4p52s. See, for example, Wilson (1996: 128), LeBuffe (2005: 251–52 and 2010, 198), and Kisner (2011: 77 and 89).

7. E.g., LeBuffe (2005: 264n24; 2010: 236n7).

8. Carlisle (2017: 211, 217–18, and 218n55). On Carlisle's interpretation, both rational and intellectual *acquiescentia*, albeit pertaining to different kinds of cognition, consist in the qualities of stillness and obedience to oneself (2017: 222–31).

9. Although for different reasons, my interpretation of the issue is in line with that of Giuseppina Totaro (2017: 230–32), who holds that *acquiescentia mentis* is of a different nature compared to *acquiescentia in se ipso*. See also Rutherford (1999: 458–59).

account implies and how it helps us resolve our guiding problem concerning rational self-esteem. I conclude with several remarks on how the twofold sense of 'power of acting' underlies the distinction between rational self-esteem and the *animi acquiescentia* of intuitive knowledge.

2. The Problem of Self-Knowledge

To see how reason can grant us the self-knowledge required for our proper self-esteem, it will be helpful to begin by examining the limitations Spinoza places on our self-understanding, first through imagination and then through reason.

In Part 2 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza maintains that the human mind qua the idea of the human body perceives all that happens in the body (2p12). And he also claims, 'The human mind does not know the human body itself [*ipsum humanum corpus*], nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the body is affected' (2p19).[10] But the mind's ideas of these affections are inevitably inadequate and confused, because they must involve the states of the human body and at the same time the states of the external bodies by which the body is affected (2p16). For Spinoza, an idea is adequate in a given mind when it is causally explainable through this mind alone. When this occurs, the mind is an adequate (complete) cause of the idea (3D1–2). The ideas the mind has of the affections of its body cannot be adequate, because they depend on the ideas of infinitely many singular things that are not contained in the mind. And given that the mind is the idea of the body, this account must apply to the mind's knowledge of itself. Indeed, Spinoza says that the mind does not know itself either 'except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body' (2p23).[11] In a number of passages (e.g., 2p9, 2p19d, 2p24d, 2p28d), he explains that the idea of the affections of the body are in God insofar as he is considered to be affected by infinitely many ideas of infinitely many singular things (by 1p28). The mind's self-understanding is thus as inadequate and confused as its cognition of its own body. Spinoza affirms this in 2p29: 'The idea of the idea of any affection of the human body does not involve adequate knowledge of the human mind.' This leads Spinoza to assert that so long as the mind perceives things 'from the common order of nature' rather than from the order of the intel-

10. By 'affections of the body,' I take Spinoza to mean here any modification of the body by which it is affected by external bodies. See 2p28d and its reliance on 2p13Post3. See also 2p17cs, G ii 106/6–10. Yet not all affections are passive. Spinoza's definition of an affect as a specific kind of affection (3D3) equally applies to passive and active affects. And in 3DA1exp, he defines 'affections of the human essence' as 'any constitution of that essence,' regardless of whether it is innate or has come from outside.

11. See also 3p53d and 3p9d.

lect and is determined externally from fortuitous encounter with things, it has confused and inadequate cognition 'of itself, of its own body, and of external bodies' (2p29s).

With this in hand, let us consider the kind of self-understanding reason provides and the extent to which it can overcome the limitations of imagination. Spinoza's theory of the three kinds of cognition at 2p40s2 suggests two distinctive ways by which we can attain adequate ideas—reason (*ratio*) and intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*). I have argued elsewhere that reason and intuition differ from one another in kind—in both their objects and intrinsic features—and not only in degree. Whereas reason is universal and conceptual cognition, conceiving the necessary relations among things on the basis of their common properties, intuition is experiential and nonconceptual, consisting in the mind's immediate acquaintance with singular essences.[12] For our purposes, however, it suffices to focus on Spinoza's explicit conception of reason as 'universal cognition' that has no insight into singular essences. This will allow us, in the next two sections, to analyze our guiding problem concerning the ability of reason to ground our proper self-esteem.

According to Spinoza, reason derives 'from the fact that we have common notions [*notiones communes*] and adequate ideas of the properties of things' (2p40s2). Common notions are adequate ideas of properties shared by all finite modes under a given attribute, which are present 'equally in the part and in the whole' (2p37, 2p38). Motion and rest are Spinoza's notable examples of such fundamental properties common to all bodies, properties that inhere equally in each part of them as in their entirety (2Le2). The inherent adequacy of the common notions lies in the pervasiveness of the properties they represent, which are said to be found equally in the part and in the whole of each finite mode pertaining to a given attribute (2p38d). And given that the common notions are the foundations of reason (*fundamenta rationis*) (2p44c2d and 2p40s1), knowledge of the second kind is necessarily adequate and true (2p41, 2p42).[13]

12. I defend this interpretation in Naaman-Zauderer (2020). Roughly, in claiming that intuition is experiential and nonconceptual, I mean that (1) as a cognition of singular essences, intuition lacks the generality of concepts; (2) it has an immediate access to singular essences and does not involve any mental movement over time; (3) it consists in the mind's immediate acquaintance with its pure thinking activity without relation to its object. Unlike sensory experience of the first kind of cognition, the experiential nature of intuition is intellectual. And unlike reason, intuition is nondiscursive, because it does not proceed to a conclusion by arguments. As Spinoza describes the intuitive mind, 'the eyes of the mind, by which it sees and observes things, are the demonstrations themselves' (5p23s).

13. Since for Spinoza adequate ideas cannot follow from confused ideas of imagination (2p40, 5p28d, Ep. 37), I side with those holding that the common notions are innate ideas inhering in God's eternal and infinite intellect. See, e.g., Miller (2004), Nadler (2006: 175–76), Eugene Marshall (2013: 52–56, 225n56), LeBuffe (2018: 86–92, 193n21), Justin Steinberg (2018: 198–99). For interpretations holding that the common notions originate in sense experience, see, e.g., Wolfson

Spinoza indicates that the shared properties of things, although necessarily *following* from the essence of each singular thing, do not pertain to its essence, which is singular and belongs uniquely to that thing.[14] He defines that which pertains to the essence of any thing as 'that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing' (2D2).[15] And he explicitly asserts that the properties common to all things on which reason is founded 'do not constitute the essence of any singular thing' (2p37). The essence of each singular thing is accessible only through intuitive knowledge, which 'proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [formal] essence of things' (2p40s2; cf. 5p25d). In having a direct insight into singular essences, intuition perceives things 'under species of eternity' (*sub specie aeternitatis*), that is, 'through God's essence, as real beings' (5p30d) whose ideas 'involve the eternal and infinite essence of God' (5p29s). Reason, by contrast, perceives things from a general point of view, on the basis of their shared properties and not on the basis of the essence peculiar to each singular thing (5p36s). In Spinoza's wording,

> Add to this that the foundations of reason are notions . . . which (by 2p37) do not explain the essence of any singular thing. On that account, they must be conceived without any relation to time, but under a certain species of eternity [*sub quadam aeternitatis specie*]. (2p44c2d).[16]

On these grounds, Spinoza labels reason a 'universal cognition' (*cognitione universali*) and intuition a 'cognition of singular things' (*rerum singularium cognitio*) (5p36s).

So, what kind of self-understanding can reason provide? Is reason restricted to ideas of common properties and whatever follows from them, or can it also

(1934: 155), Guéroult (1974: Appendix, 12), Moreau (1994: 254–56), Deleuze (1988: 122–30), Hübner (2014: 130), James (2020: 21).

14. In 1p16d, Spinoza distinguishes the very essence of the thing from the properties that follow necessarily from it. For the scholastic roots of this distinction see, e.g., Melamed (2018: 107–10), Don Garrett (2018: 363–64), and LeBuffe (2018: 72–86).

15. In some passages, Spinoza seems to be allowing for general essences as well (e.g., 1p8s2, 1p17s, and 4p35c1). See Della Rocca (1996: 86–88; 2008: 194), Hübner (2014: 126–31).

16. By the claim that reason perceives things 'under a certain aspect of eternity' (*sub quadam aeternitatis specie*) in 2p44c2 and 2p44c2d, or 'under this species of eternity' (*sub hac aeternitatis specie*) in 2p44c2d, I take Spinoza to mean that reason derives the necessity of things from general laws such as 1p16, which asserts the necessity of God's eternal nature, rather than from the essence of any singular thing. Intuition, by contrast, as Spinoza asserts in Part 5 of the *Ethics*, perceives things 'under a species of eternity' (*sub specie aeternitatis*), that is, it perceives the essences of singular things 'through God's essence, as real beings' (5p30d). I defend this claim in Naaman-Zauderer (2020). Here, I depart from the more prevalent interpretation according to which reason perceives things *sub specie aeternitatis*. See, e.g., Nadler (2006: 180; 2020: 108), Soyarslan (2014: 244), Justin Steinberg (2014: 181), Newlands (2018: 110), Sangiacomo (2019: 113, 139–41), Youpa (2020: 118).

provide some adequate knowledge of particular beings, including oneself, albeit not of singular essences? This issue is quite controversial.[17] Indeed, in Part 4 of the *Ethics* and the first half of Part 5, Spinoza proposes various techniques and means for increasing the power of reason over the passive affects by acquiring a better understanding of their causes. He claims that 'an affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it' (5p3).[18] He then adds, importantly, that 'there is no affection of the body of which we cannot form a clear and distinct concept' (5p4). But although there is direct textual evidence showing that, according to Spinoza, we can have adequate ideas of our affects and our bodily affections, it remains quite questionable and controversial whether he thinks of the affection-type here, or of the affection token.[19] Some clue is given in 5p4d, where Spinoza invokes the adequacy of the common notions in order to demonstrate that 'there is no affection of the body of which we cannot form a clear and distinct concept.' This may suggest that what we adequately cognize of our affects by means of reason, according to Spinoza, is some of their shared properties, that is, those necessary features in them which they share with all other affections of their sort.[20] In the scholium to 5p4, he accordingly qualifies his claim, saying that 'each of us has—in part, at least, if not absolutely—the power to understand himself and his affects, and consequentially, the power to bring it about that he is less acted on by them' (5p4s).[21] Spinoza seems to be holding, then, that a general (philosophical and scientific) understanding of our affects through their common properties may help us understand their causes, and that in reordering and reconnecting them according to the order of the intellect (5p10), we become less driven by them. And yet, besides knowledge of these shared properties, in order for me to properly esteem myself I must also have some adequate knowledge of my singular power of acting in its particularity and uniqueness. Since Spinoza is explicit that reason cannot capture singular essences, and given his tendency to identify 'power of acting' with 'striving to

17. Representatives of the first line of interpretation include, e.g., Curley (1973: 25–29), Allison (1987: 117–18), Wilson (1996), Soyarslan (2014: 247–48), LeBuffe (2018: 84–90), Naaman-Zauderer (2020: 204–11). Scholars endorsing the second option include, e.g., Yovel (1990: 159–60) and Nadler (2006: 178–83).

18. Commentators have justifiably expressed reservations about the possibility of reason to transform a given passion into an action, because this would require changing the passion's causal antecedents and making oneself its adequate cause. See, e.g., Bennett (1984: 333–36), Della Rocca (2008: 191), Lin (2009: 270–73), LeBuffe (2010: 46, 92–94). Cf. Eugene Marshall (2013: 197–98).

19. See also Colin Marshall (2012: 157n40).

20. Here I follow LeBuffe in claiming that 'it is through imagination that I have cognition of particular things, including myself,' and that 'an idea of reason is the idea of a property, so it might be understood as a component of a given idea of imagination, a property of whatever it is that we represent as present to us' (2018, 86). See also LeBuffe (2010: 93–94; 2018: 84), Aaron Garrett (2003: 189–92), Lin (2009), Sangiacomo (2019: 169–76).

21. See also LeBuffe (2010: 96), Soyarslan (2014: 245n41).

persevere' or 'actual essence,' it remains unclear how reason can allow me to properly esteem myself on the basis of an adequate cognition of my singular power of acting.[22] How, then, are we to acquire true and adequate self-esteem by means of reason? This will be the focus of the next two sections.

3. Rational Self-Esteem

Let us turn to Spinoza's demonstration of the claim that 'self-esteem can arise from reason,' and that 'only that self-esteem which does arise from reason, is the greatest there can be' (4p52). This demonstration has two parts. The first part builds on Spinoza's account of certainty, while the second part builds on his notion of adequacy. Let us consider them in turn.

3.1. Rational self-esteem and certainty

The first part of the demonstration for 4p52 goes as follows:

> Self-esteem is a joy born of the fact that man considers [*contemplatur*] himself and his power of acting (by 3DA25). But man's true power of acting, *or* virtue, is reason itself (by 3p3), which man considers clearly and distinctly (by 2p40 and 2p43). Therefore, self-esteem arises from reason.[23] (4p52d)

22. In the Preface to Part 4, Spinoza says that 'we desire to form an idea of man, as a model [*exemplar*] of human nature which we may look to [*quod intueamur*]' (G II 208/15–18). For the purposes of this essay, I will not enter the scholarly debates over the normative status of this model and its relation to the idea of the free man described in 4p66s–4p73. Whether this model is just a useful practical construct we set to ourselves via imagination and thus an inadequate universal idea (e.g., Carriero 1995: 272; Don Garrett 1996: 289; Douglas 2020: 150–52), or whether it is grounded in abstract and general ideas of reason and is thus a reliable standard for judging things as good (see, e.g., Nadler 2006: 218–19 and 2020: 189–91; LeBuffe 2010: 100; Hübner 2014), it can scarcely help us provide an adequate knowledge of whatever is peculiar to ourselves as Spinoza's definition of adequate self-esteem requires.

23. Michael Della Rocca has pointed out to me that the fact that Spinoza cites 2p40 and 2p43 in 4p52d indicates that by 'reason' he may have in mind here adequate ideas in general (of both the second and third kinds of cognition) and not just of the second kind. In response, let me point out that the context in which Spinoza developes his account in 4p52 concerns the power of reason over the passive affects and the practical workings of the dictates of reason (e.g., 4p46, 4p50, 4p51altd)—understood as the second kind of cognition. Moreover, I have argued elsewhere that it is not until 5p20s that Spinoza makes the transition from the second to the third kind of cognition and, accordingly, from the consideration of the embodied person ('man' (*homo*), as in 4p52s) to the consideration of the mind 'without relation to the body' (5p20s). This transition involves a parallel shift (and change of terminology) from one kind of affective powers arising from reason (namely, *laetitia*, *amor Dei*, and *acquiescentia in se ipso*) to another kind (*beatitudo*, *amor Dei intellectualis*, and *animi acquiescentia*). So, unless otherwise is explicitly stated (as in 4app4, for example), I take it

In this passage, Spinoza reminds us that our true power of acting, or virtue, is reason itself. In Spinoza's view, reason is not a mental faculty but our actual power of thinking itself, insofar as the ideas it forms are explainable through it alone. Qua the mind's power of thinking, reason is not only the object of the mind's self-cognition but also the power itself that cognizes. And unlike sense experience or imagination, when reason cognizes itself, it does so clearly and distinctly. Now, the invocation of 2p40 and 2p43 serves to suggest that in forming adequate ideas through reason, the mind necessarily forms adequate ideas of itself. According to 2p40, 'whatever ideas follow in the mind from ideas that are adequate in the mind are also adequate.' And 2p43 concerns Spinoza's account of certainty: 'He who has a true idea at the same time knows that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt the truth of the thing.' Spinoza adds that 'he who has an adequate idea, *or* (by 2p34) who knows a thing truly, must at the same time have an adequate idea, *or* true knowledge, of his own knowledge' (2p43d). Given that every instance of knowledge, and self-knowledge in particular, is accompanied by certainty and the mind's ensuing awareness of itself as an adequate cause, and since the mind rejoices whenever it contemplates itself and its power of acting (3p53), Spinoza seems to have a strong basis for concluding that 'rational self-esteem arises from reason' (4p52d). This interpretation may gain further support from 3p58d:

> When the mind conceives [*concipit*] itself and its power of acting, it rejoices (by 3p53). But the mind necessarily considers [*contemplatur*] itself when it conceives a true, *or* adequate, idea (by 2p43). But the mind conceives some adequate ideas (by 2p40s2). Therefore, it also rejoices insofar [II/188] as it conceives adequate ideas, i.e. (by 3p1), insofar as it acts. (3p58d)

We see, then, how every instance of knowledge inherently involves reflection on and affirmation of one's knowledge or power of understanding, by which one becomes more powerful and thus experiences joy. Prima facie, rational self-esteem would seem to be the joy (increase in power) born of the rational mind's cognition and recognition (affirmation) of the causal and conceptual self-sufficiency of itself and of its body, with relation to a given effect. Since, for Spinoza, power of acting is coextensive with perfection,[24] virtue,[25] and reality,[26] it follows that in affirming its own knowledge, the mind affirms its own perfection, reality,

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that, in considering adequate cognition, most of Part 4 and the first half of Part 5 (5p1–20) refer to cognition of the second kind.

24. 3p11s; 3p53d; 4pref G ii 208/24–30, 209/1–lo; 5p40d.
25. 4D8; 3p55c1s; 3p55c2d; 4p18s; 4p20; 4p24; 4p52d.
26. 1p11d; 3p6d; 3Gen Def. Aff exp., G ii 204/12; 4pref, G ii 209/1–4; 4p24; 5p40d.

and virtue (3p55c1s; 3p55c2d). As Samuel Newlands puts it, *acquiescentia in se ipso* 'is an attitude that an agent bears toward herself as she reflects on her own power of acting, one that includes representing and affirming various capacities and abilities *as her own*' (2018: 221–22).

But does the account of certainty really provide a complete resolution to the problem at the core of our discussion? Given that a thing's power of acting constitutes its essence, and given that reason cannot grasp the essence of any singular thing (2p37, 2p44c2d), the question still arises as to what precisely the mind adequately knows of itself and its own singular power whenever it forms adequate ideas through reason, and while certain about its own knowledge. To see why, let us take a closer look at Spinoza's account of certainty and his 'idea of idea' doctrine, on which this account relies.

In 2p21d, Spinoza draws on the unity of ideas with their objects (see 2p7s, 2p13, and 2p20) to establish that 'the idea of the mind must be united with its own object, i.e., with the mind itself.' In the scholium, he writes that 'the idea of the mind and the mind itself are one and the same thing, which is conceived under one and the same attribute, viz. Thought.' At this point, however, it is important to note that the unity or 'sameness' of the idea of the mind and the mind itself (and, in fact, of any idea and its own idea) is related only to the *form* of the ideas, and not to their content:

> The idea of the mind, I say, and the mind itself follow in God from the same power of thinking and by the same necessity. For the idea of the mind, i.e., the idea of the idea, is nothing but the form of the idea insofar as this is conceived as a mode of thinking without relation to the object. (2p21s, G ii 109/15–21)

By 'the form of the idea,' I take Spinoza to mean the *formal* being of the idea, as opposed to its objective (representational) aspect as the objective being (*esse objectivum*) of its object (see 2p8c). In 2p5d, he says that 'the formal being [*esse formale*] of ideas is a mode of thinking . . . a mode that expresses, in a certain way, God's nature insofar as he is a thinking thing.' In embracing this scholastic-Cartesian distinction, Spinoza is echoing Descartes, who writes, in the Third Meditation, that the formal reality (*realitas formalis*) of ideas, which he also calls 'formal being' (*esse formale*), refers to the ideas considered simply as modes of thought, as mental events, with no reference to their object. Considered formally, he claims, all ideas have the same degree of reality because they all follow in the same manner from within the thinking substance (AT VII 40, CSM II 27–28). For Spinoza, likewise, only insofar as an idea is considered formally—'as a mode of thinking without relation to the object'—can it be said to 'follow in God from the same power of thinking and by the same necessity' as does the idea of this

idea and thus be united with it (2p21s). Considered objectively, by contrast, an idea of an idea and the idea itself may have different objects belonging to different attributes. And it is for this reason, I suggest, that in both 2p21s and 2p43s when establishing the certainty of every adequate idea, Spinoza insists on the consideration of ideas in their *formal* being, that is, as modes of thinking, without relation to their objects.

Once again, since an idea of an idea has the same form (i.e., the same formal being) as the idea itself, all adequate ideas necessarily involve certainty: 'As soon as someone knows something, he thereby knows that he knows it, and at the same time knows that he knows that he knows, and so on, to infinity' (2p21s, G ii 109/21–24). In 2p43d too, Spinoza derives his notion of certainty from the consideration of ideas in their formal being, without relation to their objects. In 2p43s, he addresses his well-known dictum that 'truth is its own standard,' which no one can doubt 'unless he thinks that an idea is something mute, like a picture on a tablet, and not a mode of thinking, viz. the very act of understanding.'[27]

If it is true that the account of certainty and its underlying doctrine of the unity between the mind and its idea both refer to ideas in their formal reality, as acts of thinking, rather than in their objective (representational) reality, it follows that what the mind knows adequately of itself as a singular power of acting through reason, while certain about its own knowledge, is only *the fact that it acts* in Spinoza's narrow sense of 'acting' in terms of adequate causation (3D2), rather than its power of understanding itself (or, which amounts to the same, itself *as constituting the objective being of its actually existing body*). I return to this point shortly.

3.2. Rational self-esteem and adequacy

The account of certainty discussed so far does not provide a full rejoinder to the question at the focus of our discussion—what the rational mind knows of itself and its singular power while forming adequate ideas through reason. For the account of certainty presupposes or requires that we already have an adequate idea of some object in the first place. As Spinoza himself articulates this in the earlier TIE, 'to know that I know, I must first know' (art. 35). Hence, to have a full answer to our question we need to confront another, more fundamental question that concerns the notion of adequacy itself: what must one know of oneself and one's singular power *in order to form an adequate idea* through reason? In fact, as I now turn to show, this is precisely the question Spinoza confronts in the second part of the demonstration to 4p52, to which we now turn.

27. See the definition of idea in 2D3. Spinoza draws similar conclusions in the earlier TIE (33–35). For discussions, see, e.g., Della Rocca (2008: 127–34), Diane Steinberg (2009: 155–60).

> Next, while a man considers himself [*se ipsam contemplatur*], he perceives nothing clearly and distinctly *or* adequately, except for those things which follow from his power of acting (by 3D2), that is (by 3p3), which follow from his power of understanding. And so the greatest self-esteem there can be arises only from this reflection [*contemplatione*]. (4p52d)

This second part of the demonstration of 4p52 has received less attention in the literature but is crucial to understanding Spinoza's account of adequate self-esteem. Here, we find a different argument for the claim that 'self-esteem can arise from reason,' which relies not on the notion of certainty but on that of action and adequate causation. This argument proceeds in two stages. First, the invocation of 3p3 ('The actions of the mind arise from adequate ideas alone; the passions depend on inadequate ideas alone') serves to suggest that only insofar as the mind forms adequate ideas does it act. This is founded on Spinoza's definition of adequacy and action in 3D2 that we cited earlier: 'I say that we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e. (by 3D1), when something in us or outside us follows from our natures, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone' (3D2). Thus, all ideas that follow from reason are actions of the mind. Second, and even more important, Spinoza seems to be suggesting that in considering itself, what the rational mind perceives adequately is not its power of thinking itself but whatever follows from this power—the adequate ideas it forms. In speaking about what follows from his power of understanding, in other words, Spinoza is considering the contents of his adequate ideas.

The distinction suggested here, then, is between the idea that constitutes our mind (whose immediate object is the actual body) and the adequate ideas our mind *forms* whose immediate objects are the affections of the body. John Carriero (2020) highlights this distinction in connection with 2p23, discussed earlier, where Spinoza maintains that 'the mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body.' As Carriero (2020: 95–96) points out, this proposition implies that 'the mind's perception of itself is its perception of the ideas it has' rather than its perception 'of the idea that it is,' whose object is the human body (cf. Guéroult 1974: II, 236). If we apply this account to 4p52d, we may infer that what the mind perceives *directly* and adequately of itself through reason is the adequate ideas it forms (which are the mind's affections or actions) and not its own power per se. Thus, it would seem that when we say that the rational mind adequately grasps and affirms the body's power of acting and its own power, we are saying only that it adequately grasps (forms adequate ideas of) the affections of its body and their ideas.

I explained earlier how and to what extent, despite its generality and abstractness, reason can have singular objects such as the affections or the actions of

the body.[28] Spinoza explicitly affirms this, recall, when he writes that 'there is no affection of our body of which we cannot form a clear and distinct concept' (5p4). Yet we have seen that the demonstration of this proposition indicates that what reason cognizes of these singular objects is some of the necessary properties they share with all other affections of their sort (5p4d). However, this still leaves us somewhat perplexed as to how the rational mind can adequately capture the actions or ideas that follow from its own power of acting while unable to adequately grasp this power itself. According to Spinoza, we understand things through their causes: 'The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause' (1ax4). Since this pivotal axiom determines what explanation or understanding really is, it must be read into Spinoza's notion of adequacy and action in 3D2. Thus, for an idea to be adequate in a given mind, it must be causally explainable through that mind's power of thinking alone. And to meet the requirement of explainability (1ax4), this idea must involve (*involvere*), and be conceived through, an adequate idea of its cause. So how can we ever grasp the actions or ideas that follow from our power of understanding through reason, while being unable to adequately grasp this power itself?

In response, one might be inclined to suggest that the rational mind's adequate ideas involve an adequate cognition not of itself and its body in their entirety, but only of *that part* thereof that is sufficient to causally and conceptually explain these ideas (3p3d). But this suggestion seems to be at odds with Spinoza's contention that the human mind lacks adequate cognition not only of its body itself but also of its parts (2p24). Given Spinoza's parallelism, the mind must lack adequate cognition of its own parts as well.

The key to the solution of this problem, I suggest, is the distinction we discussed earlier between the formal and objective being of ideas. Once again, an idea is adequate in a given mind only when the causes of the idea are fully within that mind. An adequate idea of motion and rest, for instance, when considered objectively in terms of their representational content, must involve an adequate idea of God's essence under the attribute of Extension. But this idea, considered formally as an act of understanding without relation to its object (2p21s), must also involve an adequate cognition of the mind itself in its formal being, as the adequate cause of this cognitive act. Here again, as in the preceding section (3.1) dealing with certainty, it emerges that what the mind knows adequately of itself as a singular power of thinking while forming adequate ideas through reason is not its own power or essence itself qua the *objective being of its actually existing body*, but only *the fact that it acts* with relation to a given idea. But then, if in forming adequate ideas through reason the mind comes to know its own activity and itself as acting, why does Spinoza insist that the essence of the mind, its

28. See section 2 above.

power of acting or striving itself, is inaccessible to us until we reach intuitive self-knowledge?

The remainder of this paper is devoted to answering this question by pointing to a distinction between two ways in which Spinoza employs the term 'power of acting,' of which only the first signifies the actual essence of the thing. But before moving forward, let me sum up the current section. I argued that to demonstrate that self-esteem can arise from reason in 4p52d, Spinoza draws on two of his most fundamental doctrines, the doctrine of certainty and the doctrine of adequacy. And I also argued that these two lines of argument lead to the common conclusion that what the mind knows adequately of itself and its singular power of thinking—while forming adequate ideas of reason and while certain about them—is the fact *that* it acts or understands with relation to a given idea, which is just itself thought of in its formal being as an act of understanding without relation to its object.

This interpretation, if correct, might point to a resolution of the main puzzle we are discussing in this paper regarding the power of reason to provide adequate knowledge of one's singular power of acting—albeit unable to capture singular essences—and thereby ground our proper self-esteem. For it opens up the possibility that there is more than one way in which a person can come to adequately know her singular power of acting and, accordingly, more than one sense in which the term 'power of acting' is employed in the *Ethics*. The challenge at the center of this paper, recall, is to reconcile three explicit assertions Spinoza makes: 1. Rational self-esteem is founded on an adequate knowledge of oneself and one's power of acting; 2. The power of acting of each singular thing is nothing but that thing's actual essence; 3. Reason cannot explain the essence of any singular thing. Now, if it is true that what the mind knows adequately of itself and its own *singular* power of thinking, whenever it forms adequate ideas of reason, is not its actual essence or power of acting itself—as constituting the objective being of its actually existing body—but merely the fact *that* it acts or understands, which is tantamount to knowing *that* it is the adequate cause of a given idea, this may point the way toward a resolution of the puzzle before us. For it turns out that there is a sense in which one can be said to know some aspect of one's singular power of acting although unable to grasp one's actual essence. The two senses of 'power of acting' that this interpretation implies will be the subject of the next section.

4. Spinoza's Twofold Sense of 'Power of Acting'

In what follows, I propose an account of the two senses in which 'power of acting' or 'striving' are at work in the *Ethics*, of which only the first is identical to the

actual essence of each singular thing. On this basis, I proceed to show how this distinction helps explain the ability of reason to ground our proper self-esteem through an adequate cognition of one's power of acting.

A good place to start would be a passage from the Preface to Part 4, where Spinoza writes:

> But the main thing to note is that when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, *or* form, to another. . . . Rather, we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished. (4pref, G ii 208/24–30)

In this passage, Spinoza is explicit that decreases or increases in our degree of power of acting, perfection, or reality do not change our essence or form. Moreover, as Hübner (2017: 44) rightly emphasizes, in claiming that changes in power must be 'understood through' a thing's essential nature, Spinoza indicates that 'changes in power are not only consistent with a thing's retaining its essence' but also '*require* the existence of such an essence for their intelligibility.' Yet, at first glance, this passage may seem inconsistent with other passages from the *Ethics* in which Spinoza identifies 'power of acting' with 'essence,' as well as changes in a thing's power of acting with changes in its striving to persevere.[29] But there is no inconsistency here once we recognize that there are two distinct senses in which things can be said to have 'power of acting' or 'striving to persevere.' In the remainder of this section, I argue that in cases where 'power of acting,' 'striving,' 'desire,' or 'appetite' are said to be identical with a thing's 'essence,' these terms are used to denote the unchanged aspect of one's power of acting or striving that makes it the thing that it is.[30] In other cases, by contrast, where 'power of acting,' 'striving,' as well as 'desire' or 'appetite' are said to undergo unceasing changes, these terms are used to signify particular determinations or affections of the thing's essence (i.e., of its 'power' or 'striving' in the former, essential sense) rather than its essence itself.[31] In the Appendix to Part 4, for instance,

29. See note 2 above.

30. E.g., 3p7d, 3p54d, 4D8, 4p20d, and 5p9d. Hoffman (1991: 173) reads the above quotation from 4pref as suggesting that what remains constant and unchanged is the essential striving of things to persevere in existence while their power of acting increases or decreases. But Hoffman recognizes that Spinoza often treats these powers as the same. Carriero (2011: 75) and Alanen (2020: 12on32) think that there are limits to how much increase in power of acting an individual can tolerate without being destroyed. Viljanen (2011: 147) suggests that the power through which things persist has a fixed character that makes it the same power despite changes in its strength and intensity (2011: 147).

31. Hübner (2017) and Carriero (2020) make a similar point with regard to Spinoza's use of 'desire' and other forms of striving (such as 'volitions' and 'appetites'), as I will show shortly.

Spinoza points to particular strivings or desires (taken in the nonessential sense) that are said to follow from one's essential nature:

> All our strivings, or desires [*cupiditates*], follow from the necessity of our nature in such a way that they can be understood either through it alone, as through their proximate cause, or insofar as we are part of nature. (4app1)

Consider also the demonstration to 3p56, in which the two senses of 'desire' are at work:

> But Desire is the very essence, *or* nature, of each [man] insofar as it is conceived to be determined, by whatever constitution he has, to do something (see P9S). Therefore, as each [man] is affected by external causes with this or that species of Joy, Sadness, Love, Hate, etc.—i.e., as his nature is constituted in one way or the other, so his Desires vary and the nature of one Desire must differ from the nature of the other as much as the affects from which each arises differ from one another. (3p56d)

One thing to note about this passage is that the three occurrences of the word 'desire' appearing in it do not signify the same thing. Whereas the first occurrence of this word denotes the thing's essence itself, the remaining two denote particular desires that follow from one's essence qua its determinations or affections. The latter alone are said to undergo changes ('as his nature is constituted in one way or the other, so his desires vary') rather than the former. As Carriero (2020: 94) puts it, for Spinoza, that which brings me *laetitia* 'is a matter of my nature being shaped in a certain way, and this shaping structures ("determines") my activity in various ways'.[32]

Another example is a passage from the 'Definitions of the Affects' at the end of Part 3, where both senses of 'desire' are employed, in two different contexts. After having defined desire as 'man's very essence, insofar as it is conceived to be determined, from any given affection of it, to do something,' Spinoza proceeds to explain:

> For by an affection of the human essence we understand any constitution of that essence. . . . Here, therefore, by the word *Desire* I understand any

32. Cf. Hübner (2017: 45–47). Hübner concludes that 'a thing's power (whether it is understood as striving, desire, volition, or appetite) and a thing's essence are not identical simpliciter.' On her reading, 'any Spinozistic essence is identical to a *range* of possible determinations of power, and hence also to a range of possible determinate strivings (determinate desires, volitions, appetites)' (2017: 45). Cf. Carriero (2011: 75–76).

> of a man's strivings, impulses, appetites, and volitions, which vary as the man's constitution varies, and which are not infrequently so opposed to one another that the man is pulled in different directions and knows not where to turn. (3DA1exp)

Here, too, what is said to undergo constant change is not 'desire' considered as 'man's very essence' but rather the affections of one's essence: 'any of one's strivings, impulses, appetites, and volitions.'[33]

The idea that a thing's power, striving, or desire—considered as the thing's essence—remains unchanged notwithstanding unceasing changes in its affections or determinations (in the form of particular powers, desires, strivings, impulses, appetites, or volitions) sits well with Spinoza's conception of the *formal* essence of any particular body as a fixed *ratio* of motion and rest among its parts (e.g., 2le5). In the demonstration to 2p24, Spinoza distinguishes two ways of considering the parts composing the human body: either as individuals, without relation to the human body, or as pertaining to the essence of the body. Although what concerns him here is the *formal* essence of the body, rather than its actual essence, this demonstration is revealing and important for our purposes:

> The parts composing the human body pertain to the essence of the body itself only insofar as they communicate their motions to one another in a certain fixed manner . . . and not insofar as they can be considered as individuals, without relation to the human body. For (by 2post1), the parts of the human body are highly composite individuals, whose parts (by le4) can be separated from the human body and communicate their motions . . . to other bodies in another manner, while the human body completely preserves its nature and form. And so the idea, *or* knowledge, of each part will be in God (by 3p3), insofar as he is considered to be affected by another idea of a singular thing. . . . The same must also be said of each part of the individual composing the human body. (2p24d)

The human mind lacks adequate cognition of the parts composing the human body because none of these parts, considered in itself, belong to the body's essence—a certain fixed proportion of motion and rest among its parts (2Le3ax2 Def). So long as this fixed proportion is maintained, the particular parts of the body can be removed or replaced 'while the human body completely preserves its nature and form' (cf. 2Le4). Thus, insofar as each of these parts is considered

33. As Hübner (2017: 46) aptly emphasizes, this passage indicates that a thing's essence is determinable as particular exercises of power, strivings, desires, appetites, and volitions.

as an *actual component* of the individual body, without relation to the body's essence or form, its perception can only be inadequate because the human mind does not contain the ideas of its causal antecedents (2p11c).[34] Now, for Spinoza, the formal essence (*essentia formalis*) of the body is eternally contained in God's attribute (2p8) even when the body does not exist. And given that the human mind is the idea of an actually existing body, the formal essence of the existing body manifests itself in actuality as its 'actual essence' (*essentia actualis*), which is the unique causal power by which any particular body strives to maintain the fixed ratio of motion and rest among its parts (4p39). Thus, both the actual and the formal essence of the body, in being singular and unique, grant unity to the composite individual and make it the individual that it is. Presumably, there must be something in the mind analogous to the body's ratio of motion and rest, something that constitutes its form, granting it its unique temper or character and making it the singular mind that it is. Genevieve Lloyd (2020) has recently argued that the body's fixed ratio of motion and rest manifests itself in the mind as a fixed balance between adequate and inadequate ideas. This seems implausible to me, for two reasons. First, the proportion of motion and rest in bodies is not equivalent to that of activity and passivity, respectively, because 'a body which moves or is at rest must be determined to motion or rest by another body' (2Le3). Second, since Spinoza's ethical progress consists in increasing our power or activity and thereby enhancing our participation in the power of nature, it is unlikely that he would hold that the human mind, while increasing its power of understanding, must maintain a fixed balance of adequate and inadequate ideas in order for it to persevere (cf. Lucash [1992: 61–64]).

Let us now turn to consider Spinoza's two senses of 'power of acting' (and 'power of understanding,' with relation to the mind), both of which are related to the actual (durational) existence of singular things. The first sense signifies the actual essence of the thing, that is, the peculiar and unchanged force that determines how this particular thing strives to persevere in its being through its variable causal activity. When so conceived, a thing's 'power of acting' signifies its 'determinate nature' (3p7d) or essential striving, which structures its particular powers, or strivings to persevere. Let us look more closely at the demonstration of 3p7:

> From the given essence of each thing some things necessarily follow (by Ip36), and things are able [to produce] nothing except what follows necessarily from their *determinate nature* (by Ip29). So the power of each thing, *or* the striving *by which* it (either alone or with others) does any-

34. See Alexandre Matheron's distinction between the material and the formal elements of an individual, which he associates with the individuality of the state (1969: 38–39).

> thing, *or* strives to do anything—i.e. (by IIIp6), the power, *or* striving, *by which* it strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, *or* actual, essence of the thing itself. (3p7d, my emphases)

In this passage, importantly, Spinoza *does not* say that the striving that constitutes a thing's actual essence can itself incorporate others and undergo changes. He claims, rather, that the actual essence of a thing is the power, or striving, or determinate nature '*by which* it (either alone or with others) does anything [*quo ipsa vel sola vel cum aliis quidquam agit*], or strives to do anything' (3p7d, my emphasis). The causal power or striving that constitutes a thing's essence structures, so it seems, the character not only of its particular actions but also of its ability to be affected by external things. Thus, when considered in the essential sense, a thing's causal power or striving constitutes its idiosyncratic nature that remains the same so long as the thing exists notwithstanding the everchanging decreases and increases in its particular powers or strivings (taken in the second, nonessential sense). Spinoza refers to this essential aspect of a thing's 'power of acting' or 'perfection' when he writes:

> Finally, by perfection in general I shall, as I have said, understand reality, i.e., the essence of each thing insofar as it exists and produces an effect. . . . But any thing whatsoever, whether it is more perfect or less, will always be able to persevere in existing *by the same force by which it begins to exist* [*eadem vi qua existere incipit*]. (4pref, G ii 209/1–4, 8–10, my emphasis)[35]

In this passage, as in many others, Spinoza employs the term *vis* (translated by Curley as 'force') rather than *potentia* (which is usually translated as 'power'), to denote that aspect of a thing's striving or power that constitutes its essence. But Spinoza does not consistently maintain this terminological distinction. On some occasions, he treats the two terms as equivalent. To take just one example, near the end of Part 3, he speaks of the body's 'power of acting or force of existing' (*agendi potentia sive existendi vis*) as something that is increased or diminished, aided or restrained.[36]

The second sense in which Spinoza used 'power of thinking'—which is gradual and cumulative—signifies aggregates of actions or powers that unceasingly

35. Spinoza says that the perfection or essence of each thing has 'no regard to its duration.' By this, he does not mean to deny that the actual essence of things belongs to their durational existence. Rather, since the striving or essence of things involves no definite time (see 3p8), 'the duration of things cannot be determined from their essence,' and things are not considered more perfect for having persevered in existence for a longer time (4pref).

36. 3GenDefAff.exp. See also 4p60d. For Spinoza's notions of power, including *potentas*, see Barbone (2002: 102–4) and Viljanen (2011: 68–82; 145–49).

increase or diminish while the body's essence or 'power of acting' in the former sense remains completely the same. This gradual and nonessential sense of 'power of acting,' as well as of 'reality' and 'perfection,' is the pillar and ground of Spinoza's account of the affects and ethical theory that runs through the last three parts of his *Ethics*: 'The more each thing is perfect, the more reality it has (by 2D6), and consequentially (by 3p3 and 3p35), the more it acts and the less it is acted on' (5p40d). Given Spinoza's parallelism, the twofold sense of 'power of acting' must apply equally to the mind's power of understanding as well.[37]

The foregoing discussion implies two distinct ways in which the mind can be said to know itself and its power of understanding. The first, which Spinoza reserves for intuitive knowledge alone, is the immediate knowledge the mind has of its own essence or power of acting itself, which it perceives through the essence of God. By 'power of acting itself,' I mean the force (*vis*) that determines how any particular mind perseveres in existing, or understands, in a way peculiar to itself that sets it apart from all other finite minds in nature. This is how I read Spinoza's account in 2p45s of what he calls 'the very nature of existence,' which is attributed to singular things insofar as they are in God and follow from its nature (by 1p16):

> I am speaking, I say, of the very existence of singular things insofar as they are in God. For even if each one is determined by another singular thing to exist in a certain way, *still the force [vis] by which each one perseveres in existing follows from the eternal necessity of God's nature*. (2p45s, my emphasis)

Notice, importantly, that the force (*vis*) by which each thing strives to persevere in existence pertains to the *actual* essence of the thing and is the *actual* counterpart of its eternal (formal) essence that inheres in God's attribute. And as the next section will show, the knowledge of this force is involved in the *animi acquiescentia* through intuitive knowledge.

37. Spinoza's notion of 'power of acting' is intrinsically connected to that of 'action' or 'activity' (taken in the narrow sense of 3D2) because 'power of acting' is nothing but an endeavor to bring about some effects. God is pure activity, because God's essence is God's infinite power of acting (1p34) that, according to Spinoza, is 'everywhere one and the same' (3pref). For Spinoza, every existing thing must be active to a certain degree, because 'Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow' (1p36). Yet a question I will not dwell on here is whether the notions of 'power of acting' and of 'activity' are coextensive. This is an intricate question given Spinoza's view that our power of acting often increases through the force of external causes. When this occurs, the increase in our power of acting is not a case of activity (in the sense just described), because it cannot be explained through our own essence or nature alone. By the same token, as mentioned above, Spinoza recognizes that we strive to do things and persevere in existence 'either alone or with others' (3pd; cf. 3p9). It would go beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the difficulties that this issue involves. For other forms of activity, see Kisner (2020). Cf. Hoffman (1991: 176ff.). For the relation between power of acting, activity, and existence, see Della Rocca (2020).

The second way in which Spinoza allows the mind to adequately know itself and its singular power of acting is harder to characterize. It is tempting to suggest that he allows for ideas of reason that capture, if not the mind's power of acting itself, at least the particular powers or actions composing it. However, given my previous analysis of 2p24d, Spinoza firmly denied this possibility. As we have just seen, insofar as the parts composing the human mind are considered as individual components rather than as pertaining to the essence of the mind, they cannot be perceived adequately. Since reason cannot perceive the essence of the mind, it cannot form adequate ideas of the parts composing the mind's power of thinking, which can in principle be separated from it and integrated with another mind in a different fixed manner.

What, then, is the second way in which Spinoza allows the mind to adequately know itself and its *singular* power of acting? In the previous section, we have seen how the two doctrines involved in 4p52d, the doctrine of certainty and that of adequacy, refer to ideas in their formal reality, as pure thinking activity, without relation to their objects. Only on this basis, I have argued, can Spinoza assert the unity of the mind (as the idea of the body) with its idea. Given that, for Spinoza, the idea of the mind has the same form (i.e., the same formal being) as the mind itself, and given his principle that we understand things through their causes (1ax4), both the certainty and the adequacy doctrines entail (independently) the same conclusion: whenever the mind forms an adequate idea through reason, this idea must involve knowledge not only of God's essence under the attribute of Thought (as the cause of the idea's objective being), but also of the mind itself as a cause, considered formally, as a pure thinking activity. Now, this is equivalent to saying that whenever the mind knows something through reason, it necessarily has an unmediated knowledge of its own power of thinking considered in its nonessential sense. This self-knowledge is unmediated, I argue, precisely because it consists in the unity of the mind (qua the idea of the body) and its idea, insofar as they are considered formally. It is at this point that the distinction between the two senses of 'power of acting' takes on its full relevance. It is one thing for the rational mind to know its own 'power of thinking' considered in the nonessential sense just described, and quite another thing for it to know its own 'power of thinking' qua the mind's actual essence, which Spinoza reserves for intuitive knowledge alone. Thus understood, the two parts of 4p52d indicate that the second way in which the mind comes to know itself and its own singular power consists in the mind's unmediated but still adequate acquaintance with its own activity or causal and conceptual self-sufficiency, with regard to the effects (ideas) it produces. It is this gradual, cumulative, and nonessential aspect of the mind's 'power of acting,' I argue, that Spinoza means in 4p52d when he says that in forming adequate ideas through reason, the mind contemplates itself and its power of acting and enjoys the greatest self-esteem there can be.

In the scholium to 4p52, Spinoza says that 'self-esteem is the highest thing we can hope for. For (as we have shown in 4p25) no one strives to preserve his being for the sake of any end' (4p52s). By this, I take him to mean that rational self-esteem is a form of self-preservation and, as such, our highest hope and highest good (*summum bonum*)—the thing we pursue for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else (4p25), and the sole evaluative standard in relation to which things are considered good (4D1, 4p8). A full discussion of this challenging passage, however, goes far beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, let me note that, as I read Spinoza, what grants rational self-esteem its ethical primacy is the self-understanding in which it consists, by which we become acquainted with ourselves as acting.[38] This rational self-understanding includes, as we have seen, metaphysical and theoretical knowledge of our true power of acting and its place within the infinite power of nature, as well as of how this power enhances our ethical perfection and participation in God. But to have a proper self-esteem through reason, as I have tried to show, we must also have a true sense of ourselves as singular beings and be acquainted with ourselves *as acting and existing*, even while lacking an adequate cognition of our essence or power of acting itself. In increasing our power of acting through reason, moreover, our self-understanding causes us to feel love toward ourselves as the internal cause of our own knowledge and our joy. And because the adequate cognition we attain via reason necessarily involves rational knowledge of God, without which nothing else can ever be conceived (1p15 and 1ax4), we feel rational love not only toward ourselves but also toward God (5p15).[39]

5. Conclusion

I have argued that explaining Spinoza's account of rational self-esteem (*acquiescentia in se ipso*) requires explaining how one can have adequate knowledge of one's singular power of acting through reason. Given the equation of 'power of acting' with 'actual essence,' and given that Spinoza denies the ability of reason to grasp singular essences, a question arises as to what Spinoza has in mind when claiming that, in forming adequate ideas through reason, a person contemplates itself and its power of acting and enjoys 'the greatest self-esteem there can be' (4p52d). Spinoza's account of rational self-esteem presupposes a distinction between two

38. In 4p26–28, Spinoza establishes that understanding, whose highest form is knowledge of God, is the mind's self-preservation and highest good. Qua the mind's activity, understanding is sought for its own sake and not 'for the sake of some end' (4p26d), and it is also the mind's sole evaluative measure in relation to which things are considered useful or good (4p26–27).

39. I defend the distinction between rational and intellectual love of God in Naaman-Zauderer (2020: 199–204).

senses of 'power of acting,' which implies two distinctive ways in which the mind can come to adequately know itself as a *singular* power of understanding. Rational self-esteem emerges as the joy one derives from having adequate cognition of the gradual and nonessential aspect of one's power of acting, which amounts to knowing *that* one acts with relation to a given effect. What the rational mind adequately captures of itself as a singular power of thinking, then, is nothing but its own causal and conceptual self-sufficiency or activity in any particular instance. What the mind cannot adequately capture of itself through reason is the unchanged force (*vis*) that constitutes its essence, by which this or that particular person strives to persevere through her variable actual causal activity.

Recognizing these two senses of 'power of acting' may provide a better understanding of the distinction between rational *acquiescentia in se ipso* and the *animi acquiescentia* of intuitive knowledge. In the second half of Part 5, Spinoza shifts his focus from the second to the third kind of cognition, as well as from one kind of affective power arising from reason (mainly joy, self-esteem [*acquiescentia in se ipso*], and rational love of God) to another kind that arises from intuition. The latter includes intellectual love of God (*amor Dei intellectualis*) and blessedness (*beatitudo*) (5p27, 5p36s), which is the satisfaction of the mind (*animi acquiescentia*) with its own perfection that arises from intuitive knowledge (5p27, 5p33s). In 5p33s, Spinoza contrasts blessedness with ordinary joy (*laetitia*): 'If joy, then, consists in the passage to a greater perfection, blessedness must surely consist in the fact that the mind is endowed with perfection itself' (5p33s). The distinction between these two affective states deserves a separate study. But the reading I have proposed in this paper brings to light at least one crucial aspect of this distinction. Whereas the *animi acquiescentia* in which blessedness consists is the mind's satisfaction with its present perfection or power of thinking itself, which it captures through God's infinite power, rational self-esteem consists in the knowledge we have of our power in the gradual and nonessential sense, whose increase is experienced as ordinary joy.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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