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DESIRE IN SPINOZA'S VALUE EPISTEMOLOGY

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Spinoza argues that the good is what leads us to perfection. Yet he also affirms that whether we judge something to be good depends on whether or not we desire it. It is thus unclear whether he understands the nature of value in terms of perfection or in terms of desire. The debate over this question is well-known, but its dialectical complexity is underappreciated. Defenders of the first reading must explain not only how Spinoza might analyze the good in terms of perfection, but also why he would nevertheless insist that our value judgments depend on our desires. They standardly argue that, for Spinoza, desires provide *epistemic justification* for value judgments. In this paper, however, I argue that this claim is mistaken because it cannot account for Spinoza's remarks on the relation between our desires and our value judgments. My argument thus supports readings on which desire plays a role in Spinoza's account of the nature of value itself, and not merely in his value epistemology.

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Spinoza is often read as a moral perfectionist.[1] Perfectionism is a family of ethical theories centered on the realization of our essential or natural capacities. Typically, such theories rely on a *perfectionist theory of value*, where the property of goodness is analyzed in terms of the property of perfection. In this vein, Spinoza defines good and evil in terms of a model of human nature that offers a standard of perfection: "I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves […] men are more perfect or imperfect, insofar as they approach more or less near to this model" (4pref | G II/208, p. 545).[2] He then identifies our *power of acting* as the property constitutive of perfection: "when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, […] we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished" (4pref | G II/208, pp. 545–46).

Many scholars hold that in these passages Spinoza accepts a perfectionist theory of value. This would suggest that Spinoza's metaethical stance is best understood as a kind of moral realism, for it implies the existence of fundamental value properties whose instances do not depend on any mental attitudes. On this view, what makes something good (or evil) is the relation it bears to the realization (or inhibition) of the capacities essential or natural to the kinds of beings we are—regardless of what we happen to believe or desire. Because this would mean that good and evil are objective properties for Spinoza, I will call it the *Objectivist Interpretation*.[3]

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1. Recent monographs that highlight Spinoza's moral perfectionism include LeBuffe 2010, Kisner 2011, Sangiacomo 2019, Youpa 2020, and Nadler 2020. Related to these are readings that link Spinoza with the *eudaimonist* tradition, to which moral perfectionism belongs (e.g., Miller 2015, Ch. 4; Rutherford 2013; Steinberg 2021; and Smith 2023), with the caveat that not all forms of eudaimonism are perfectionist—most notably those of the Epicureans and of the Pyrrhonian Skeptics (thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this connection). See Smith 2024 for recent discussion on similarities between Spinoza's ethical thought and that of the Epicureans in particular.

2. All references are to the *Ethics*, unless otherwise noted. Citations refer to both the Gebhardt (G) and the Curley editions, using the following abbreviations: app = Appendix, c = Corollary, D = Definition, d = Demonstration, E1 = Part 1, lem = Lemma, NS = *De Nagelate Schriften van B.D.S.* (an alternative formulation from a posthumous Dutch edition published the same year as the Latin *Opera Omnia*), p = Proposition, pref = Preface, s = Scholium.

3. For two especially influential and recent statements of the Objectivist Interpretation, see Nadler 2006, 2015, 2019, and Youpa 2010a, 2010b, 2020. Key parts of this interpretation are defended by Viljanen 2011, Ch. 5; Steinberg 2014, p. 179 and pp. 183–4; 2018a, pp. 15–16; 2021, pp. 435–36; and Marshall 2017. Miller 2005, p. 165–70; 2014, pp. 122–23; 2015, pp. 154–55 and pp. 168–69; and Kisner 2010, 2011, Ch. 5, also support parts of this reading. One might ask whether all objectivist readings are necessarily perfectionist. Insofar as they argue that Spinoza analyzes fundamental value properties in terms of perfection, the answer is yes. And it is unclear what alternative objective analysis—one that does not rely essentially on a subject's mental attitudes—Spinoza might offer. See Moauro 2024 for discussion. In contrast, it seems to me that not all perfectionist readings need be objectivist. For even if Spinoza rejects a perfectionist theory of value, he might

The Objectivist Interpretation offers a plausible basis for understanding Spinoza's ethical theory, which indeed enjoins us to increase our power of acting, or perfection (cf. 4p18s, 4p28, 4appVI). However, it seems to do less well in accounting for Spinoza's moral psychology, which assigns a key role to the *affects*. In particular, Spinoza insists that what we regard as good or evil is determined by what we desire, from which he infers that good and evil themselves must be understood in terms of joy and sadness – not perfection:

> From all this, then, it is clear that we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge [*judicare*] something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it (3p9s | G II/148, p. 500).

> By good here I understand every kind of Joy, and whatever leads to it, and especially what satisfies any kind of longing, whatever that may be. And by evil [I understand here] every kind of Sadness […] For we have shown above (in 3p9s) that we desire nothing because we judge it to be good, but on the contrary, we call it good because we desire it (3p39s | G II/170, p. 516).

3p9s and 3p39s threaten the Objectivist Interpretation because they appear at first glance to affirm an *antirealist* theory of value – one on which the properties of good and evil directly depend on an individual's mental attitudes.[4] But defenders of the interpretation standardly reply that the passages in fact offer only a *theory of evaluative judgment* – an account of how we form judgments of good and evil – not a theory of value itself. If this is right, then 3p9s and 3p39s pose no threat to the interpretation. Spinoza could maintain that good and evil

nonetheless retain a perfectionist structure in his ethical theory for pragmatic purposes. For such readings, see LeBuffe 2010, Ch. 11, and Jarrett 2014.

4. There are two forms such an antirealism might take. The first is a *desire-satisfaction reading* on which the good is analyzed in terms of the content of an individual's desires. On this reading, our value judgments depend on our desires because value itself does. See Kisner 2010, 2011, Ch.5. The second is a *projectivist reading* on which our desires cause us to represent external things as instantiating objective value properties, but through a non-perceptual process. Because it concerns only our judgments of value, value projectivism is not itself a theory of value. It thus agrees with the Objectivist Interpretation that 3p9s and 3p39s concern only value judgments, not value itself. Yet it still rivals realist theories because it aligns naturally with *error theoretic* and *expressivist* accounts of value, since it explains our judgments of value without positing the existence of any value properties. See, e.g., LeBuffe 2010, Ch. 9; Jarrett 2014; and Moauro 2024. The desire-satisfaction reading is what Matthew Kisner and Andrew Youpa call a *qualified* antirealist reading, inasmuch as it agrees that "judgments of [value] are grounded in the natures of things" (Kisner and Youpa 2014, p. 6). By contrast—and against Kisner and Youpa's own classification—the projectivist reading might be viewed as an *unqualifiedly* antirealist reading, as it seems to deny that value judgments agree with the natures of things.

are objective properties grounded in perfection, but also that our *judgments* of good and evil depend on our desires. His metaethical stance could remain realist, since neither desire nor any other affect would play a role in his metaphysical explanation of value properties.[5]

Yet this defense raises a new set of questions. In what way do our value judgments depend on our desires for Spinoza, even as the properties of good and evil themselves do not? In what sense of "because" do we judge a thing good *because* we desire it? Such questions represent a new explanatory demand that the Objectivist Interpretation must satisfy: it must explain how the central role of the affects in forming value judgments can cohere with a realist theory of value. The standard reply is that, for Spinoza, desires offer *epistemic justification* for value judgments. Our desires determine our value judgments because they constitute *evidence* of (desire-independent) value. Since this reading makes out the connection between desire and value to be epistemic rather than metaphysical, I will call it the *Epistemic Reading* (ER).[6]

I argue in this paper that ER is mistaken because it fails to actually explain 3p9s and 3p39s. As we will see, defenders of ER can appeal to some initially promising features of Spinoza's theory of the affects for support. In particular, Spinoza argues that the affects necessarily co-occur with and represent changes in our power of acting—the same property he identifies as constitutive of our perfection. Ultimately, however, I argue that there are three components of the passages that ER cannot explain all at once. Spinoza posits a dependence relation of our value judgments on our desires that is (i) asymmetric, (ii) metaphysical, and (iii) unlimited in scope. In short, he affirms that our desires metaphysically determine all our value judgments, and that they are themselves not metaphysically determined by any value judgments. I argue that, on any plausible construal of it, ER is forced to contradict either (i) or (iii). So, ER fails to account for 3p9s and 3p39s and leaves the Objectivist Interpretation with no principled

5. A final preliminary note: Perhaps the complexity of the relationship between desire, perfection, and value in Spinoza indicate that his metaethical stance is *neither* straightforwardly realist *nor* antirealist. Even though Marshall 2017 associates Spinoza's stance with a kind of moral realism, he also suggests that Spinoza's views may not fit neatly into contemporary metaethical categories. Granting Marshall's point, I believe the opposition between realism and antirealism is still useful to grasp Spinoza's views—even more, Spinoza himself seems aware of this distinction. For instance, he recognizes the difference between notions well-founded in reality, independent of our representations, and those depending entirely on our representations and failing to agree with the natures of things themselves (in 1app, he calls the latter "beings of the imagination," including the notions of order, beauty, warmth, cold, and—suggestively —good and evil). Realist and antirealist readings therefore disagree meaningfully about where value properties fall in this division.

6. The Epistemic Reading has its origin in Broad 1930, pp. 51–52, but is defended most recently by Nadler 2019, Youpa 2020, and Kisner 2021. Other defenses of the reading include Frankena 1977, p. 24; Lin 2006, pp. 399–400 fn. 13; Viljanen 2011, pp. 137–38; and Garrett 2018, p. 487.

explanation of why Spinoza should claim that our value judgments depend on our desires, even if value itself does not.

1 The Epistemic Reading

In *Ethics* 3, Spinoza makes two important claims about the relationship between desires and value judgments. The standard view in his time, inherited from the Scholastic tradition, is that our desires and other conative states always follow a judgment of value. For Aquinas, "The intellectual appetite […] desires something because it is good" (ST 1a 80.2 ad2, 125). Similarly, Descartes argues that the origin of all the passions lies in a belief that something is good or evil: "When we think of something as good with regard to us, i.e. as beneficial to us, this makes us have love for it; and when we think of it as evil or harmful, this arouses hatred in us […] This same consideration of good and evil is the origin of all the other passions" (AT IX 374 | CSM I 350).[7] Against this, Spinoza affirms that it is our value judgments that depend on our desires, not the other way around, and that we should understand good and evil themselves in terms of joy and sadness (3p9s, 3p39s).[8]

At first glance, these claims appear to support an antirealist theory of value. If we judge something to be good *because* we desire it, as Spinoza claims in 3p9s, it seems that its goodness must somehow depend on our desire. The fact that Spinoza infers from this claim that "good" refers to all kinds of joy, in 3p39s, seems to confirm the antirealist interpretation. The value of joy is explained by our desire for it – it consists in the fact that it is desired.

But as we saw, the Objectivist Interpretation resists this view by arguing that 3p9s and 3p39s do not express a theory of value at all, but only a theory of evaluative judgment. In other words, the passages concern not what *makes* things good or evil but only why we *regard* things as such. This would follow from a literal reading of Spinoza's remarks: "[W]e *judge* something to be good

7. An important exception here is Hobbes, who makes a claim very similar to Spinoza's: "But whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire that is it which he for his part calleth good; and the object of his hate and aversion, evil; and of his contempt, vile and inconsiderable. For these words of good, evil, and contemptible are ever used with relation to the person that useth them, there being nothing simply and absolutely so" (*Leviathan* 1.6, pp. 28–29).

8. Interestingly, in the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being* (*KV*)—a precursor to the *Ethics* likely finished ten years before it—Spinoza makes the opposite claim: "Desire, we have said, is that inclination which the Soul has toward something it considers good […] before our Desire extends externally to something, a decision has already taken place in us that such a thing is good. This affirmation, then, or taken generally, the power of affirming and denying, is called the Will" (KV II.16 | G I/80, p. 121). It is not entirely clear why Spinoza may have reversed himself. It may have to do with a shift in his views on the relation between mind and body, which in the early works are more similar to Descartes' (see Garber 2015).

because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it" (3p9s | G II/148, p. 500, emphasis added). And it seems even clearer in his later statements: "Because each one judges from his own affect what is good and what is bad, what is better and what is worse (see 3p39s) it follows that men can vary as much in judgment as in affect" (3p51s | G II/178–9, p. 522).

In addition, the Objectivist Interpretation claims that, despite initial appearances, 3p9s and 3p39s actually rely on the existence of objective value properties. This would be the case if, for Spinoza, our desires determine our value judgments by providing *epistemic justification* for them—the Epistemic Reading (ER). 3p9s claims that we judge something good because we desire it. This is consistent with the claim that desires simply serve as *evidence* of value. 3p39s may initially seem less amenable to ER since it infers from 3p9s a claim about *what is* valuable (joy and sadness). But Spinoza also identifies joy and sadness with increases and decreases in our power of acting (3p11s). If he accepted a realist theory of value, then his claim in 3p39s could be that joy and sadness constitute the *experience* of good and evil.[9]

ER has a long history in Spinoza scholarship. In his classic 1930 *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, C.D. Broad cautions against reading Spinoza as a kind of hedonist. On Broad's view, joy and sadness are not themselves good and evil, but only *signs* of value: "pleasure and pain, though they are thus not the *ratio essendi* of good and evil, are the *ratio cognoscendi* thereof. Pleasure is the infallible sign of heightened vitality, pain is the infallible sign of lowered vitality, and these are the only ultimate good and evil" (Broad 1930, pp. 51–2). Writing almost thirty years later, Frankena claims that, for Spinoza, joy and sadness are *perceptions* of good and evil states of affairs: "On Spinoza's view, a joy or pleasure is or includes a kind of perception of good, since it is or includes a perception […] of an affection of the body in which its power of acting, etc., are increased or helped, i.e. it is a kind of knowledge of good" (Frankena 1977, p. 24). For both scholars, Spinoza holds not that joy and sadness *are* good and evil but that they allow us to *know* that things are good or evil.

In this sense, ER would seem to make out Spinoza as a faithful Cartesian. For Descartes, the passions serve to alert us to the presence of good and bad things and ensure that we remain motivated in their pursuit: "Joy is a pleasant emotion

9. Note, however, that this leaves unexplained why Spinoza believes we can *infer* the claim in 3p39s from 3p9s. Even if joy and sadness were good and evil only insofar as they constitute increases and decreases in our power of acting, we would still need to explain why that follows from the fact that we judge to be good any object we desire or strive for (rather than the other way around). This point alone might prompt a search for an alternative reading of that better preserves the connection between 3p9s and 3p39s. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point. I set it aside here, noting only that one might agree that 3p9s and 3p39s express only a theory of evaluative judgment but still deny that ER offers the correct account of that theory. The projectivist reading (see note 4) offers one alternative.

which the soul has when it enjoys a good which impressions in the brain represent to it as its own. I say the soul has this emotion when it enjoys a good, for in fact the soul receives no other benefit from all the good it possesses" (*Passions* 91 | 396 p. 360).[10] Malebranche is even more explicit: "pleasure and pain are the natural and indubitable characteristics of good and evil' (*Search*, p. 21), the "natural marks of good and evil" (*Search* p. 66), and "the soul's natural signs for distinguishing good from evil" (*Search*, p. 348). The passion of joy signals the presence of something good and so functions as evidence of goodness.[11]

But what is the argument for ER? Why should we think that, for Spinoza, our affects play an evidentiary role for our value judgments? We can start with his definition of "affect," which analyzes affect in terms of our *power of acting*: "By affect I understand affections of the Body by which the Body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections" (3D3 | G II/139, p. 493). Recall that Spinoza identifies our power of acting with our perfection.[12] It follows that affects are constituted by increases or decreases in our perfection. And, indeed, this is exactly how Spinoza defines joy and sadness: "By *Joy*, therefore, I shall understand in what follows that passion by which the Mind passes to a greater perfection. And by Sadness, that passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection" (3p11s | G II/149, pp. 500–1).[13]

10. For discussion, see Shapiro 2003 and Greenberg 2007. More recently, some have called into question whether Descartes actually assigns the passions a signaling role, suggesting instead that, when all goes well, they keep our attention fixed on good and evil things, and so perform only a motivating function (see Brassfield 2012 and Jayasekera 2020). Whatever the case for Descartes, later Cartesians like Malebranche (writing after Spinoza) do appear to give the passions a value signaling role. And of course, whether this turns out to be a departure from Descartes' own position is immaterial to my argument, as I hold that Spinoza rejects this understanding of the relationship between value and the passions.

11. It should be noted, however, that neither Descartes nor Malebranche claims, as Spinoza and Hobbes do, that we call things good or evil *because* we desire or are averse to them. If (at least in Spinoza's case) this nevertheless expresses a view similar to that of Descartes and Malebranche, some explanation would be needed. Of course, I do not think that, in 3p9s and 3p39s, Spinoza defends a view similar to that of Descartes or Malebranche, so my account faces no such (unmet) explanatory demand.

12. This is because, according to the *conatus* doctrine, our power of acting is our actual essence: "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being" (3p6 | G II/146, p. 498), and this striving is "nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (3p7 | G II/146, p. 499). Elsewhere, Spinoza explicitly refers to this striving as a *power of acting* (4p20d). Consequently, an increase or decrease in our power of acting corresponds to an increased or decreased power with which we strive to persevere—which is an increase or decrease in our essence, reality, or perfection: "And because […] we understand by perfection the very essence of the thing, it follows that the Mind passes to a greater or lesser perfection when it happens that it affirms of its body (or of some part of the body) something which involves more or less reality than before" (3GDA | G II/204, p. 542–3).

13. Note that Spinoza defines a "passion" as an affect with an external cause, contrasting it with an "action," whose cause is internal (3D3). He later states that there are species of joy that

Desire, in turn, is our essence insofar as it is determined by an affection of joy or sadness: "Desire is man's very essence, insofar as it is conceived to be determined, from any given affection of it, to do something" (3DA | G II/190, p. 531).[14] Finally, Spinoza argues that we always desire or strive to promote or avoid what we associate with joy or sadness: "We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to Joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to Sadness" (3p11s | G II/161, p. 509).[15]

Spinoza's theory of the affects can be taken to support ER in two distinct ways, which yield two distinct versions of ER. I will treat each version separately in what follows. The first is based on the nature of desire. As we have seen, Spinoza holds that we desire to promote whatever we represent as a cause of joy and to avoid whatever we represent as a cause of sadness. Joy and sadness, in turn, are transitions in our power of acting, or perfection. Now, when we add to this the claim—maintained by the Objectivist Interpretation—that the properties of good and evil are grounded in increases and decreases in our perfection, it follows that desire will invariably accompany the experience of something good or evil. As Steven Nadler puts it, desire functions as a "reliable indicator" of value (Nadler 2019, p. 193). He goes on to explain:

> '[I]t is impossible for something to bring about an increase in an individual's power without thereby bringing about a concomitant desire. Something cannot be a source of joy, and thus cannot be good, without by that very same means being an object of desire. The upshot is that for Spinoza, desire is both a necessary and constitutive part of the objective state of affairs that is something's presently being good for a person and the ground for that person's judgments about the thing's goodness' (Nadler 2019, p. 193).

Nadler argues that our desires determine our value judgments for Spinoza because they necessarily co-occur with good things. We may justifiably infer that

count as actions in this sense (3p59). So, a passion should be understood as a subspecies of affect, specifically one whose etiology involves external causes.

14. Spinoza calls joy, sadness, and desire the three "primary" affects (3p11s), which compose all other affects. They are not distinct entities but rather different aspects of one and the same thing: "Joy and Sadness are passions by which each one's power, *or* striving to persevere in his being, is increased or diminished, aided or restrained (by 3p11 and 3p11s). But by the striving to persevere in one's being, insofar as it is related to the Mind and Body together, we understand Appetite and Desire (see 3p9s). So Joy and Sadness are the Desire, *or* Appetite" (3p57d | G II/186, p. 528).

15. Elsewhere, Spinoza makes the same point in terms of our power of acting: "The Mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the Body's power of acting" (3p12 | G II/150, p. 502). Within the context of his theory of the affects, Spinoza treats joy and increases in power interchangeably, as he does striving and desire.

something is good (or evil) from the fact that we desire to promote it (or to avoid it), and this is because we necessarily desire to promote (or avoid) anything that affects us so as to increase (or decrease) our power of acting—i.e., anything that is thereby good (or evil). Because of the key role that inference plays here, I will call this view the *inferential version* of ER.

The second way ER may be supported by Spinoza's theory of the affects focuses not on desire but on joy and sadness. In the definition we saw above, Spinoza specifies that affects involve *ideas*. He stresses this point in a second analysis of affect: "An Affect that is called a Passion of the mind is a confused idea, by which the Mind affirms of its Body, or of some part of it, a greater or lesser force of existing than before" (3GDA | G II/203, p. 542). For Spinoza, each idea affirms whatever representational content it has (2p49). So, each affect is not only constituted by but also represents a transition in the body's power of acting or perfection. Joy represents an increased level of perfection of the body; sadness a decreased level. If the properties of good and evil are grounded in such increases and decreases in perfection—per the Objectivist Interpretation—it follows that joy and sadness are representations *of good and evil*. In the words of Andrew Youpa, joy and sadness offer "axiological information" (Youpa 2020, p. 34). He explains:

> Emotions, for Spinoza, are not Humean original existences. Spinoza believes that passions contain a 'representative quality.' Active emotions also contain such a quality. Passions and active emotions are representations in virtue of representing changes in the body's power of acting. An emotion's qualitative character is representational in the way that a symptom represents that of which it is symptomatic. […] [E]motions disclose a metaphysical-natural norm that gauges our perfection, namely, our adequate causal power and its increases and decreases (Youpa 2020, p. 72).

According to Youpa, our desires give rise to value judgments precisely because they are identical to affects of joy or sadness, which themselves directly represent a thing as good or evil. I will call this the *perceptual version* of ER.[16]

In sum, ER holds that the affects ground our judgments of value because they provide evidence for them. This justification may involve an inference—

16. The idea that, for Spinoza, our affects involve representations of value is also proposed by Matthew Kisner: "[D]esires for Spinoza are necessarily associated with thoughts of a thing's value. The argument runs as follows: since desires are motivating, the ideas involved must also be motivating […] While Spinoza never comes out and says that ideas motivate us by representing things as good and bad, it's not clear how else mental content could motivate us. I am motivated to eat the cake by affirming an idea of the cake as delicious or satiating, in other words, as having some value. It follows that desiring a thing will necessarily involve thinking of it as good" (Kisner 2021, pp. 43–4). I discuss Kisner's reading, together with Youpa's, in the last section.

leading to the inferential version of ER—or direct perception of value—leading to the perceptual version. Either way, the link between the affects and value properties is epistemic rather than metaphysical. According to ER, it is in virtue of increasing or decreasing our power of acting that something is good or evil for Spinoza, and it is in virtue of desire, joy, and sadness that we know it to be such.

2 Getting to the Bottom of 3p9s and 3p39s

Thus far, we reviewed the basis for the Objectivist Interpretation, which claims that, for Spinoza, good and evil are objective properties grounded in the perfection of our essence. We then saw that this interpretation is threatened by some parts of Spinoza's moral psychology, particularly as expressed in 3p9s and 3p39s, which initially seem to support value antirealism. Lastly, we noted how defenders of the Objectivist Interpretation employ the Epistemic Reading (ER) to defuse this threat by treating the connection between desire and value for Spinoza as merely epistemic.

Yet I will argue that ER fails. More specifically, I will argue that it fails to offer an adequate account of 3p9s and 3p39s. To see why, we can begin by bringing the passages into greater focus. 3p9s will be particularly important in this effort and is worth restating here: "From all this, then, it is clear that we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it" (3p9s | G II/148, p. 500). I contend that 3p9s states the following claim: *All* value judgments *metaphysically depend on* some desire, and *no* desire metaphysically depends on any value judgment. In this section, I elucidate three parts of this claim, each of which represents a distinct *explanandum* of the passage. As we will see, proponents of ER also accept these points. In a nutshell, my argument against ER is that, however one interprets it, it cannot account for all three parts of the claim at once. I explain why in the next two sections, where I address ER both in its inferential version and in its perceptual version, as described above.

The first important part of 3p9s and 3p39s is their claim of *explanatory priority*. Spinoza does not just say that our value judgments and desires co-occur; he says that our value judgments depend on our desires, and that our desires do not depend on our value judgments. After stating in 3p39s that by "good," he understands all kinds of joy (citing 3p9s), Spinoza adds: "So each one, from his own affect, judges, or evaluates [*unusquisque ex suo affectu judicat seu æstimat*], what is good and what is bad, what is better and what is worse, and finally, what is best and what is worst" (3p39s | G II/170, p. 516). Our affects explain the occurrence

of value judgments, but our value judgments do not explain the occurrence of our affects.[17]

Second, this explanatory relation is a matter of *metaphysical dependence*. By this, I mean simply that, for Spinoza, a desire explains the *existence* of a value judgment, and not merely its aptness. This is clear not only from 3p9s but also from examples that illustrate 3p39s: "So the Greedy man judges an abundance of money best, and poverty worst. The Ambitious man desires nothing so much as Esteem and dreads nothing so much as Shame" (3p39s | G II/170, p. 516). For Spinoza, greed is simply an immoderate desire and love of wealth (3DAXLVII). The greedy man's desires lead him to regard wealth as the greatest good. His desire *produces* his judgment of value.

The crucial point here is that the metaphysical dependence claim differs from ER's epistemic justification claim. The claim that desires provide evidence of something's value is not the same as, nor does it imply, the claim that they cause us to judge that thing as good.[18] Of course, there is no contradiction between the two claims, but I want to note that, even if ER embraces the second claim, as its defenders argue, 3p9s and 3p39s also make the first one. When we desire to promote or avoid something, associating it with an affect of joy or sadness, we in fact judge it to be good or evil. The judgment does not and cannot come apart from the desire, as the examples of the greedy man and the ambitious man make clear.[19]

Proponents of ER themselves accept this point. Nadler argues that, for Spinoza, when "a person desires something [she] thus judges the thing to be good" (Nadler 2019, p. 195fn). Youpa is even more explicit: "an occurrent

17. This is a fairly uncontroversial reading of 3p9s and 3p39s, so I do not discuss it further. It is worth noting that Youpa disputed it in earlier work, arguing that for Spinoza, value judgments can sometimes give rise to desires, specifically rational desires (see Youpa 2010a). At times, Spinoza seems to suggest as much: "From the laws of his own nature, everyone necessarily wants, or is repelled by, what he judges to be good or evil" (4p19 | G II/224, 556). But as Kisner (2010, pp. 101–2) and Steinberg (2018a, pp. 21–22) both argue, we need not read this passage or others like it as making any *explanatory* claim. Indeed, Youpa has since distanced himself from his earlier interpretation (Youpa 2020, 44–46).

18. Note that epistemic justification is different from other kinds of justification, such as *logical entailment*. According to many scholars, Spinoza regards metaphysical determination and logical entailment as coextensive. This is arguably a defining feature of his rationalism. But epistemic justification is not logical entailment. In general, some fact provides epistemic justification for a claim if it constitutes a *reason to believe* that claim or counts in favor of believing it, even if it does not logically entail belief in the claim. So, ER does not simply fall out of Spinoza's rationalism. I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

19. Possibly this is because, as Spinoza suggests in 4p8, our value judgments are in some sense *identical to* our affects: "The knowledge of good and evil is nothing but an affect of Joy or Sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it" (4p8 | G II/215, p. 550). Steinberg argues that for Spinoza, our representations (and judgments) of value are *constituted* by our desires (Steinberg 2018a, p. 19–24). Though I am inclined to agree, I remain neutral about the precise nature of this metaphysical dependence. My argument requires only that desires necessarily cause value judgments.

evaluative judgment follows necessarily from an occurrent episode of joy. An individual X occurrently judges 'This orange is good' as a result of an occurrent episode of the qualitative joy that the orange causes when it increases X's power" (Youpa 2020, p. 21). According to both, Spinoza maintains that the relationship between our affects and our value judgments is not limited to epistemic justification—a relation that a body of evidence bears to a particular proposition it warrants. Rather, the affect itself necessitates the *existence* of the value judgment—our desire for something in fact elicits the judgment that it is good.

The third relevant aspect of 3p9s is its unlimited scope. According to Spinoza, *all* our value judgments depend metaphysically on our desires, and *no* desires depend metaphysically on our value judgments. We cannot have knowledge of value other than by experiencing joy (or sadness) and a related desire.[20] Again, this is a claim that proponents of ER accept. Nadler writes that, for Spinoza, "when 'we judge something to be good' or when we 'evaluate what is good,' it is on the basis of some affect or desire, of some pro-attitude toward the thing that we experience" (Nadler 2019, p. 192). And Youpa agrees: "For Spinoza, it is not necessary presently to undergo an episode of joy or sadness to make an evaluative judgment, although all evaluative judgments and thus all knowledge of good and evil presuppose prior changes in power" (Youpa 2020, p. 22).

Some may object to this scope claim. Perhaps value judgments whose content is general —such as the statement that "what we certainly know to be useful to us" is good (4D1 | G II/209, p. 546) —do not, for Spinoza, depend on our desires. In fact, Spinoza distinguishes between value judgments about particulars and those about universals: "[T]he true knowledge we have of good and evil is only abstract, *or* universal, and the judgment we make concerning the order of things and the connection of causes, so that we may be able to determine what in the present is good or evil for us, is imaginary, rather than real" (4p62s | G II/257, p. 582). If this is right, then Spinoza may recognize two kinds of value judgments – one that depends on our affects and one that is independent of them. While the greedy man judges the good from his affects, we need not do the same.

Yet for Spinoza, universal ideas arise from abstraction rooted in particular ideas. More specifically, we form universal ideas either "from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses," "from signs," or, finally, "from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things" (2p40s2 | G II/122, pp. 477–78). Ideas about particulars thus precede

20. This does not entail that we can form a value judgment only when we experience an *occurrent* desire. It only entails that that any given value judgment can be traced back to some desire. I might now judge that "leafy greens are good" because I once desired them, or because I currently desire to stay healthy and associate leafy greens with continued health. I need not be currently experiencing a desire for kale. Accordingly, Youpa distinguishes between "basic" and "non-basic" value judgments in Spinoza (see Youpa 2020, 23).

universal ideas and provide a basis for them. So, universal *value* judgments must be abstracted from particular value judgments, which depend on desires. The claims that the good is "what we certainly know to be useful to us" and that we can have "true knowledge" of good and evil are no different. Indeed, Spinoza *identifies* the true knowledge of good and evil with an affect (4p14). This makes sense because, as I explain at greater length in the next section, he holds that the affects give rise to the very notions of good and evil—concepts without which universal value judgments would be impossible (cf. 4p64, 4p68). We should therefore continue to read the scope of 3p9s as unrestricted.

3 Against the Inferential Version of ER: Desire as Reliable Indicator of Value

With this better understanding of 3p9s and 3p39s, we can now turn to ER itself. According to ER, our affects give rise to value judgments because they offer epistemic justification for them. As we have seen, Spinoza's theory of the affects suggests two possible paths for this justification. First, in the inferential version, desire acts as a *reliable indicator* of value: because we necessarily desire what increases our power, we may infer that an object increases our power (and is thus good) from the fact that we desire it. Second, in the perceptual version, the feelings of joy and sadness offer *axiological information*. Joy represents an increase in power, and so leads us to represent its cause as good.

Yet in what follows, I will argue that both versions of ER fail. Neither offers a satisfying explanation of 3p9s and 3p39s because each contradicts at least one of the three parts of the claim I outlined above. I address the first version in the remainder of this section and then turn to the second in the following one.

Let's begin. As we saw above, the first version of ER focuses on the connection between our desires and increases in our power of acting. As Nadler explains, "desire is *both* a necessary and constitutive part of the objective state of affairs that is something's presently being good for a person *and* the ground for that person's judgments about the thing's goodness" (Nadler 2019, p. 193). According to Nadler, desires act as reliable indicators of value because they necessarily co-occur with transitions in power, which ER takes Spinoza to regard as objectively good or evil.

Now, there is nothing inherently mistaken in Nadler's inference here. If we grant that increases and decreases in power are intrinsically good and evil, and also grant that desires necessarily co-occur with such transitions, it follows that desires do indeed signal or indicate the presence of something good or evil. But problems arise if we consider this account specifically as a reading of 3p9s and 3p39s—namely, this account fails to address the scope claim (iii).

To begin, note that construing desire as a reliable indicator of value does not, by itself, explain the passages. If there is a relation of metaphysical dependence between our desires and our value judgments, then our desire for some object *in fact* determines us to judge that it is good, rather than simply *supporting* this inference. But the claim that desire is a reliable indicator of value only accounts for the latter. Even if our desires are reliable indicators of value, we might fail to treat them as such. Thus, the inferential version of ER must make a stronger claim—that we *in fact* treat our desires as reliable indicators of value.

Yet if we do treat our desires as reliable indicators of value, then we must be *aware* of this fact. For we can only treat something as an indicator of a given state of affairs if we *believe* that it is reliably connected to that state of affairs. We might think of this as a "meta-level" judgment about the relationship between our desires and the properties of their objects.[21] One we have this meta-level judgment, we can treat our desires as evidence that certain value properties are instantiated in their objects. Consider, by analogy, the advice to "trust your gut." Here, our vague sense of unease is taken as a reliable indicator of danger. Equipped with the meta-level judgment that our unease tracks danger, we can infer, from our sense of unease, the judgment that danger is present. In the same way, 3p9s and 3p39s might suggest that we infer the judgment "this is good" from our desire for it.

But relying on a meta-level judgment of this kind to explain the dependence of our value judgments on our desires—and specifically to capture its universal scope—faces two problems. First, it would have to apply to *all* individuals. Yet it seems highly implausible that everyone makes meta-level judgments about the link between desire and value. Indeed, in one case, Spinoza suggests that some make *opposite* judgments: "Superstition, on the other hand, seems to maintain that the good is what brings Sadness, and the evil, what brings Joy" (4appXXXI | G II/275, 593). Recall that for Spinoza, joy and sadness are identical with desire. The superstitious believe that joy and desire for some object reliably indicate its *disvalue*. So, not all individuals can be making the meta-level judgment that systematically connects our desires to value in the way ER suggests. And if such judgments are necessary to explain the dependence of value judgments on desires, it would follow that 3p9s and 3p39s cannot be universal in scope—contrary to (iii).[22]

21. The natural contrast here is with object-level judgments, which directly ascribe some property to a particular thing (e.g., "the pizza is good"). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this terminology.

22. If our value judgments depend on our desires for perceived sources of joy, and our aversion for perceived sources of sadness (cf. 3p28), how can the superstitious associate joy with evil and sadness with goodness? Spinoza does not address this question directly, but we might venture a guess: perhaps the superstitious systematically associate episodes of joy with thoughts of great sadness, leading them—contrary to joy's usual implication—to label as evil the object associated

The second problem has to do with Spinoza's views on the *origin* of value concepts. For Spinoza, the affects do not merely determine particular judgments of value; they give rise to the notions of good and evil themselves. Spinoza makes this claim in 4p8: "The knowledge of good and evil is nothing but an affect of Joy or Sadness insofar as we are conscious of it" (4p8 | G II/215, p. 550). Sadness, he then notes, arises only from inadequate ideas: "Knowledge of evil (by 4p8) is Sadness itself, insofar as we are conscious of it. But sadness […] is a passion, which (by 3p3) depends on inadequate ideas" (4p64 | G II/259, 583). Since knowledge of evil depends on sadness, and sadness depends on inadequate ideas, a mind with only adequate ideas would form no notion of evil: "if the human Mind had only adequate ideas, it would form no notion of evil [*nullam formaret mali notionem*]" (4p64c | G II/259, 583). Finally, Spinoza draws a parallel conclusion about goodness and joy: "[he who] has only adequate ideas […] has no concept of evil [*mali conceptum habet nullum*] (4p64c). And since good and evil are correlates, he also has no concept of good" (4p68d | G II/261, 584).[23]

The problem here is that, on the inferential version of ER, value notions must already be available to form the meta-level judgments linking desires to good and evil. Desire is a reliable indicator *of goodness*. If, however, Spinoza insists we acquire the very concepts of good and evil by experiencing the affects, then he cannot appeal to meta-level judgments to explain *how* those concepts originate—for the process of acquisition of value concepts would rely on our making a judgment that already employs them. We could not come to know good and evil unless we already knew what good and evil are! One might reply that 3p9s and 3p39s are not meant to apply to the acquisition of value concepts themselves—that it is only describes what occurs once we have these concepts. But, of course, this would imply that the passages make a claim that is limited in scope—again, contra (iii)—and this cannot be right.

Some might object that making a meta-level judgment is unnecessary for treating our desires as reliable indicators of value. Perhaps we can take an emotion or other mental state as evidence for some claim without forming any beliefs

with joy. (While this may seem incredible in general, it might be more plausible when restricted to particular species of joy—e.g., pleasure of the body, or the joys of play and laughter. The superstitious might attach a stick to every carrot and fear the stick more than they hope for the carrot.)

23. See also Scribano 2011, 579–582. Note that for Spinoza, the affects of joy and desire (but not of sadness) can also arise from adequate ideas (3p58, 3p59). So, it is not immediately obvious that a mind containing only adequate ideas would experience no affects at all. But if the argument in 4p64 and 4p68 is right, then it seems that affects arising from adequate ideas do not give rise to notions of good and evil. This suggests that the scope claim I identified as one of three parts of 3p9s and 3p39s must, after all, be qualified: only affects arising from inadequate ideas necessarily determine value judgments. But note that this actually tells *against* ER, for it would imply that value judgments depend on ideas that are inadequate—i.e., ideas that are "mutilated" and "confused," and thus lead to falsity (2p35).

about the evidential connection. For example, children might treat their desire for candy as evidence that candy is good, or their fear of jumping in a pool as evidence that its deep water is dangerous, without also forming the belief that desire and fear are generally reliable indicators of goodness and danger.

In reply, I do not deny the plausibility of such examples. But I do deny that they are genuine cases of using a reliable indicator in judgment formation. If fear leads a young child to believe that danger is present, is she really treating her fear as *evidence* of danger? Does she go through this intermediate step before backing away? It seems more plausible to say that her fear is *directly* connected with the idea of danger in a way that does not involve any evidential reasoning. How would Spinoza explain this direct relation? On the one hand, he might say that the idea of danger simply follows from fear as a brute fact. But many scholars regard such brute facts as anathema to Spinoza's metaphysical rationalism. A more plausible explanation would be to say that the emotion of fear itself involves a *representation* of danger—which is precisely the claim of the perceptual version of ER. In that case, the value judgment based on fear would rely on a representation of value *internal* to the affect itself. I now turn to this version.

4 Against the Perceptual Version of ER: Joy and Sadness as Axiological Information

I have argued that the inferential version of ER fails. According to my argument, Spinoza's desires determine our value judgments not because we regard them as evidence of value. What about the perceptual version? As we saw earlier, joy and sadness are *also* representational states in Spinoza's framework: they involve ideas that represent states of the body through which our power of acting increases or decreases. So, joy and sadness offer information of transitions in power. And if we suppose that transitions are themselves good or evil, it follows that joy and sadness provide *axiological information*: joy indicates that something good is occurring, while sadness indicates that something evil is occurring. According to the perceptual version of ER, we then judge things good or evil based on these representations.

Spinoza might appear to endorse this view in 4p8d: "We call good, or evil, what is useful to, or harmful to, preserving our being (by 4D1 and 4D2), i.e. (by 3p7), what increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our power of acting. Therefore (by the Definitions of Joy and Sadness in 3p11s), insofar as we perceive that a thing affects us with Joy or Sadness, we call it good or evil" (4p8d | G II/215, pp. 550–51). To start, what increases or diminishes our power of acting—what is useful or harmful—by definition qualifies as good and evil. Next, Spinoza identifies these transitions in power with the affects of joy and sadness. From this,

he seems to conclude that we call things good or evil insofar as we believe that they bring us joy or sadness, which themselves are representations of increases or decreases in power. As Youpa writes: "The qualitative character of joy and the qualitative character of species of joy track and reveal enhancements to our nature while the qualitative character of sadness and species of sadness track and reveal impairments. Emotions are therefore axiological information" (Youpa 2020, p. 72).

Based on passages like 4p8d, the perceptual version of ER seems initially to be on strong footing. Nonetheless, I believe it fails as well. In what follows, I will argue that it faces a dilemma about the representational content of joy and sadness. In short, this representational content either involves the *concepts* of good and evil or does not. If it does *not*, then Spinoza could provide no reason for treating affects as axiological information; while joy and sadness might involve representations of things that are (by hypothesis) good or evil, they would not represent these things *as good or evil*. As with someone who sees Clark Kent *only as Clark Kent*, and thus has no reason to believe he is seeing Superman, merely having an affect would not suffice to form a value judgment.[24]

Alternatively, if the perceptual version of ER claims that the representational contents of joy and sadness do involve value concepts—that is, that joy and sadness represent increases and decreases in power *as good and evil*—then it would imply that, for Spinoza, value judgments determine our desires. This contradicts 3p9s. I will argue that it does so because Spinoza also contends (a) that the representational content of joy and sadness involves a judgment, and (b) that the affects of joy and sadness determine our desires. So, if joy represents an increase in power *as good*, then joy would be a judgment of goodness that determines us to desire whatever we represent as its cause.

Ultimately, then, while the inferential version of ER holds that some value judgments are independent of the affects—contradicting (iii)'s claim that all value judgments depend on our desires—the perceptual version holds that desires are determined by value judgments, contradicting (i)'s claim of explanatory priority.

The dilemma for the perceptual version of ER rests, as I have said, on two further claims that I believe Spinoza accepts. We find strong evidence that he does so in the *General Definition of the Affects*. As shown, Spinoza defines affects as ideas that *affirm* something about the body: "An Affect that is called a Passion of the mind is a confused idea, by which the mind affirms of its body or of some

24. I am of course speaking of "subjective" reasons for belief here, which are indexed to the body of evidence available to the epistemic agent. If we already believed that increases in our power of acting are objectively good—perhaps after reading Parts 3 and 4 of the *Ethics*—then we could infer the presence of something good from the feeling of joy. But this simply amounts to another version of the inferential version of ER and runs into the same problems.

part of it a greater or lesser force of existing than before, which, when it is given, determines the Mind to think of this rather than that" (GDA | G II/203, p. 542). These affirmations correspond to joy and sadness, while the mind's determination to think of one thing rather than another is desire: "I added *which determines the Mind to think of this rather than that* in order to express also, in addition to the nature of Joy and Sadness (which the first part of the definition explains), the nature of Desire" (GDA | G II/204, p. 543). So, Spinoza makes two points in this definition. First, the mental component of joy and sadness is an *affirmation* of a bodily state. Second, these affirmations *determine* us to desire one thing rather than another.

These points correspond to the two claims outlined above. To begin, there is good evidence that Spinoza regards the affirmations involved in our ideas as judgments. For Spinoza, a judgment is a mental attitude that involves propositional content—a claim that can be evaluated for truth and other epistemic norms. Spinoza takes affirmations themselves to be truth-evaluable as well. We see this in his account of volition, which he defines as a faculty "by which the Mind affirms or denies something *as true or false*" (2p48s | G II/129–30, p. 484, my emphasis). When an idea affirms something, it presents that thing as true or false. Crucially, Spinoza holds that nothing more is required for a judgment than such an affirmation. So, affirmations *are* judgments.[25]

Furthermore, for Spinoza, every idea involves an affirmation of whatever it represents: "In the Mind there is no volition, *or* affirmation and negation, except that which the idea involves insofar as it is an idea" (2p49 | G II/130, p. 484). Affirmations are built into the very structure of ideas. We cannot represent something without also affirming it as true: "I deny that a man affirms nothing insofar as he perceives. For what is perceiving a winged horse other than affirming wings of the horse? For if the Mind perceived nothing else except the winged horse, it would regard it as present to itself, and would not have any cause of doubting its existence" (2p49s | G II/134, p. 489). To affirm something, and judge it as true, simply involves having an idea that represents it.[26]

25. In this, Spinoza follows Descartes, who in the Fourth Meditation identifies judgment with the operations of "affirming" and "denying" proper to the will (AT 57–60 | CSM 39–41). Spinoza departs from Descartes in two ways: by eliminating denial as an operation distinct from affirmation, and by abolishing the distinction between will and understanding (the two mental powers that, for Descartes, jointly produce a judgment). According to Spinoza, each idea is both a *representation* of some content and an *affirmation* of that same content – a judgment that the content is true.

26. This does not imply that we believe everything we think. Rather, what we believe is a function of all the ideas whose contents we affirm, which may contradict one another. We can entertain the idea of a winged horse without regarding it as true when "either the imagination of the winged horse [is] joined to an idea which exclude[s] the existence of the same horse, or the Mind perceive[s] that its idea of a winged horse [is] inadequate" (2p49s | G II/134, 489). For recent discussion of how Spinoza's epistemology handles ideas with conflicting contents, see Steinberg 2018b.

Crucially, joy and sadness also involve affirmations—and therefore judgments. They include affirmed propositional content.[27] More specifically, they involve a judgment that some affection in the body leads it to a greater or lesser power of acting. But if, in addition, the representational content of the affects is normative, as the perceptual version of ER holds, then joy and sadness must include judgments that an increase or decrease in power is good or evil. That is, they must involve judgments of value. This is the first point.

I now move on to the second point. As we have seen, the second claim of GDA is that desire is determined by the affirmations involved in joy or sadness. The objects of our desires are always determined by the affections in which our essence's power is increased or decreased. So, what we desire follows entirely from the affects of joy or sadness which we have experienced:

> 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 3p9s). 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 | G II/185, p. 527).

For Spinoza, there is an explanatory relation *within* every affect between (i) joy or sadness and (ii) desire. We desire certain things because we associate them with joy, and we avoid other things because we associate them with sadness: "The Mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the Body's power of acting" (3p12 | G II/150, p. 502); "We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to Joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, *or* will lead to Sadness" (3p28 | G II/161, p. 509). For instance, the greedy man's desire for wealth is determined by the species of joy he has experienced most strongly—joy associated with money. In other words, joy and sadness determine desire. This is the second point.

We can now see why the perceptual version of ER fails as an account of 3p9s and 3p39s. For Spinoza, our desires are determined by particular affections of our essence—joy and sadness—that involve a particular judgment about the state of our bodies. To characterize joy and sadness as axiological information, ER must treat them as judgments of value. But this cannot be right, for it would imply that our desires are determined by judgments of value—namely, the judgment that

27. Della Rocca 2003, 2008; Marshall 2008; Steinberg 2016; and Alanen 2018 argue that, for Spinoza, the affects involve judgments with propositional content. Della Rocca also argues that they consist *entirely* of such judgments.

the body's power of acting has increased or decreased, *and that this is good or evil*. And this contradicts the explanatory priority Spinoza asserts in 3p9s.[28]

One possible reply is to deny that my two points above accurately reflect Spinoza's views —especially the first. For even if joy and sadness involve affirmations of normative content, perhaps these affirmations fall short of constituting full-fledged judgments. If this is right, then Spinoza could distinguish between (a) the representations of value in joy and sadness and (b) the value judgments that, per 3p9s and 3p39s, do not determine but are determined by our desires. This distinction might allow him to preserve the dependence claim even as he insists that joy and sadness are representations of value—exactly what the perceptual version of ER maintains.

What difference might Spinoza see between mental affirmations and judgments? We can consider two possibilities. First, he might regard affirmations and judgments as different kinds of doxastic attitudes. Affirmations—at least those the affects involve—could represent an increase in the body's power of acting without involving any propositional content, whereas judgments would add propositional content to affirmations. Second, he might regard judgments as a subspecies of affirmation. For instance, he could claim that affirmations and judgments both involve propositional content, but judgments, unlike affirmations, rise to the level of full belief. If either possibility is correct, Spinoza could say that joy and sadness involve affirmations of value while insisting that full value judgments occur only as a result of desire.

Youpa pursues the first option. According to Youpa, joy and sadness represent transitions in power for Spinoza not because they involve judgments with propositional content but because they function as *natural signs* of those transitions. On this reading, the affects would represent good and evil in the way that smoke represents fire, or a symptom represents a disease: "an episode of the qualitative feeling of joy is symptomatic of an increase in the power of the joyous subject's body like an episode of the qualitative feeling of an abnormally high body temperature is, in some cases, symptomatic of an infection" (Youpa 2020, p. 13). If this is right, then the representations involved in joy and sadness would differ in kind from the value judgments of 3p9s.

But construing joy and sadness as natural signs of value does not help ER. ER must explain why, for Spinoza, our affects *in fact* determine us to judge things

28. Recognizing this problem, Lin goes so far as to deny that 3p9s represents Spinoza's actual position: "what Spinoza says in 3p9s oversimplifies and even misrepresents his actual views about the relationship between desire and value judgment, which he states more carefully elsewhere in the *Ethics*" (Lin 2019, p. 163). I find this too high a cost to save ER. Of course, scholars may disagree which passages in Spinoza merit interpretive priority or the most natural reading. But Lin is not proposing a "less natural" reading of 3p9s; he effectively claims that Spinoza *contradicts himself*. While this is possible, interpretive charity demands treating self-contradiction as a last resort.

good or evil. And just like reliable indicators, natural signs could determine our judgments only if we interpret them as such—i.e., only if we have made a meta-level judgment that our affects are natural signs of value. We treat fevers as symptoms of infections only when we have prior knowledge that the two are reliably connected. Thus, in arguing that joy and sadness are natural signs, Youpa simply offers a variant of the inferential version of ER and faces the same problems I listed in Section 3.

Matthew Kisner pursues the second option when he argues that, for Spinoza, judgments are a subspecies of affirmation (what Kisner calls "volition"). According to Kisner, Spinoza regards affirmation as a truth-apt mental representation involving propositional content, while judgment is a fuller doxastic attitude. In a word, affirmations are belief-like, whereas judgments are fully developed beliefs. Such a distinction is critical to Spinoza's epistemology because, as we have seen, Spinoza denies that representation and judgment are distinct mental powers; rather, when we represent an object, we also affirm it as true. We do not believe that our idea of a winged horse is true only because we also possess other ideas that are incompatible with it. In such cases, the idea whose power is greatest determines what we believe. For Kisner, then, when Spinoza speaks of "judgment", he is referring only to the affirmations that *are* beliefs:

> [A] volition becomes a judgment either because its power of affirmation is unopposed or because it is the victor in a contest between competing ideas […] On the common view, the judgment is whatever my will affirms. The judgment therefore is also a volition. On Spinoza's view, in contrast, all of these forces are volitions, whether they are chosen or not. The deliberation results in a judgment, say, that eating the cake would be good, not because the will rendered a verdict, but rather because this was the strongest volition (Kisner 2021, p. 39).

With this distinction in hand, we can read 3p9s in a way more amenable to ER. Perhaps Spinoza means to say that our full beliefs about the value of things—our value *judgments*—are determined by the relative strength of our desires for those things, even though the desires themselves are determined by representations of value that are only belief-like states, i.e., *affirmations* of value. If this is right, the perceptual version of ER need not conflict with 3p9s. For it can say that joy and sadness are belief-like representations of value, that they determine our desires, and that, finally, our desires determine our value judgments—our overall beliefs about value. We arrive at a value judgment only when one affect overpowers competing affects in a contest of motivational strength. It is our dominant desire that converts a belief-like state value into a full-fledged belief about value.

This is a sophisticated defense of ER. But I do not think it can work for two reasons. The first is that it does not reflect Spinoza's actual view of practical deliberation. For Spinoza, practical deliberation is not a contest between belief-like states about value that yields a consistent set of full-fledged beliefs or value judgments. Rather, it concerns what we should do given what we already *judge* to be good or evil. It is focused on action, not belief. This is especially clear in hard cases. In 3p39s, Spinoza describes the affect of "consternation": "if the desire to avoid a future evil is restrained by Timidity regarding another evil, so that [a man] does not know what he would rather do, then the Fear is called Consternation" (3p39s | G II/171–2, p. 517). Earlier in the same passage, Spinoza calls timidity "fear insofar as a man is disposed by it to avoid an evil he judges to be future by encountering a lesser evil." In consternation, we are unsure whether we should avoid a future evil by suffering a present evil, or avoid a present evil on pain of suffering a future one. This deliberation is not a contest among belief-like states competing to become judgments; rather, it concerns options *we already judge to be evil*. These judgments are part of the contest among conflicting desires, not the outcome of it. So, the claim that we judge something good or evil only once our mind is made up does not reflect Spinoza's account of practical deliberation.[29]

Second, consider nondeliberative contexts. In a hypothetical case where a mind has a *single* idea, we cannot distinguish the affirmation in that idea from a judgment. Recall Spinoza's comment about the winged horse: "what is perceiving a winged horse other than affirming wings of the horse? For if the Mind perceived nothing else except the winged horse, it would regard it as present to itself, and would not have any cause of doubting its existence" (2p49s | G II/134, p. 489). To perceive a winged horse is to affirm it, and to affirm it is to "regard it as present"—to judge that it is real. It is only when one's mind also contains additional ideas that conflict logically with the idea of the winged horse that one can judge that such a fantastical creature does not exist.

Now consider a second case, in which we have a single idea that represents an increase in our power. Here too, the affirmation would be identical with a judgment. To represent an increase in power is to affirm an increase in power, and to affirm an increase in power is to judge or believe that one's power has

29. Indeed, the reasons Spinoza cites for the dependence claim in 3p9s differ substantively from Kisner's. Spinoza does not mention any distinction between affirmation and judgment. Instead, the first part of 3p9s claims that appetite, desire, and will are all expressions of our striving to persevere in being: "When this striving is related only to the Mind, it is called Will; but when it is related to the Mind and Body together, it is called Appetite" (3p9s | G II/147, p. 500), and "*desire* can be defined as *appetite together with consciousness of appetite*" (3p9s | G II/148, p. 500). And it is "[f]rom all this" that Spinoza concludes our desires do not follow from but rather give rise to our value judgments. He does not seem at all interested here in how we form beliefs from competing belief-like states.

increased. From 3p9s, it follows that such a judgment determines a desire for its object. But if all of this is right, Kisner's distinction between affirmations and judgments cannot save ER. For if our idea represents the increase in power *as good*, then we must also form the *overall judgement* that the increase in power is good, and this judgment of value would determine us to desire its object—contrary to the order of explanatory priority established in (i).[30]

I conclude from all this that the perceptual version of ER fails. Like the inferential version, it is inconsistent with the key claim of 3p9s and 3p39s. Absent a new explanation of how Spinoza might understand the dependence of our value judgments on our desires in purely epistemic rather than metaphysical terms, I conclude that ER as a whole fails.

5 Concluding Remarks

I have argued that ER fails to offer an adequate explanation of two important passages in which Spinoza offers an account of the relation between desires and evaluative judgments. The principal claim of these passages is that all judgments of value depend metaphysically on desires, and that no desires depend metaphysically on value judgments. The idea that desires determine value judgments because they offer epistemic justification for them is unconvincing, both in light of Spinoza's theory of the affects and his account of the mind. We should therefore reject it.

This is a significant result, as it leaves the Objectivist Interpretation with no clear way to ward off antirealist readings of these passages. Of course, this is not a dispositive argument against the Objectivist Interpretation, as antirealist readings must still be substantiated in their own right. In particular, they must be reconciled with passages in *Ethics* 4, where Spinoza appears to suggest that not all that we desire is good, and that the highest good lies in the perfection of the intellect. Still, rejecting ER strengthens the antirealist position vis-à-vis the realist one. Despite the passages in *Ethics* 4, we should remember that Spinoza can avail himself of standard antirealist moves that decouple occurrent desires from the good. And even if perfection plays a key role in Spinoza's ethics, it does

30. Of course, a finite being with only one idea—an increase in power—may be impossible for Spinoza. But Spinoza elsewhere shows no qualms with discussing impossible scenarios; for instance, he argues that a person who is born free (by his own admission, an impossibility) would form no notions of good or evil (4p68). Could Spinoza have implicitly restricted 3p9s to beings with many ideas, excluding hypothetical mono-idea creatures? I think not. 3p9s follows from the *conatus* doctrine, which applies to all "singular things" (3p6). And for Spinoza, *every* finite mode—from the simplest to the most complex—is a singular thing (2D7). So, not only does Spinoza fail to mention any restriction of 3p9s to complex beings, but he also derives it from claims that are explicitly *not* so restricted.

not necessarily follow that the good *metaphysically depends* on perfection.[31] It lies beyond the scope of this paper to make a full defense of these claims. But, given the rejection of ER, both point a way forward for antirealist interpretations of Spinoza's theory of value.[32]

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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31. See Moauro 2024 for discussion.

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