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Expliquer la superstition: la doctrine du conatus de Spinoza et son évolution entre 1661 et 1670

The doctrine of *conatus* is unanimously viewed as one of the most important features of Spinoza's philosophy. Although scholars debated both the arguments Spinoza employed for grounding this doctrine and its possible sources, they rarely discussed whether this doctrine is a constant element of his philosophy or typical of Spinoza's mature thought only. Contrary to the standard view, this paper supports this second position and tries to explain when and why Spinoza introduced the *conatus* doctrine with the meaning it received in the *Ethics*. Firstly, I present what are the main elements that constitute this doctrine. I will argue that *if and only if* all those elements are linked together we are allowed to take the reference to *conatus* in its peculiar Spinozian sense. Specifically, I suggest that the *conatus* doctrine implies (at least) the metaphysical link between *conatus* and God's power, taken as God's essence; the definition of affects in terms of *variation* of *conatus*; and the distinction between actions and passions, supported by the concept of "adequate cause".

Secondly, I provide evidence that between 1661 and 1665 Spinoza never linked together those elements and thus we cannot project the kind of reasoning we find in the *Ethics* on his early works. Indeed, in the *Short Treatise*, passions are never described in terms of variation of *conatus* and the claim according to which God's essence is God's power is never worked out. Moreover, at this stage it seems problematic to conceive of how finite things can be properly "active". The way in which Spinoza discusses with van Blijenbergh some tenants of the *first draft* of his *Ethics*, suggests that his view at that juncture remains close to a kind of "intellectualism", where human affects are conceived of merely in terms of adequate vs. inadequate knowledge.

Thirdly, I show that only in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* Spinoza provides the first instance for his *conatus* doctrine. I suggest that this happens not by chance. Indeed, one of the major problems discussed in TTP is the relationship between *natural reason* and *superstition*, that is, between the power of imagination and that of intellect. I argue that the position Spinoza's holds between 1661 and 1665 does not provide a satisfactory solution of this problem. Therefore, I suggest that the need to explain the strength of *superstition* leads Spinoza to work out his *conatus* doctrine in TTP. Accordingly, Spinoza introduces some fundamental concepts such as those of "fortune", "internal vs. external helps of God", "power" and "law". All these concepts are related to the *conatus* doctrine and play a fundamental role in explaining the superstitious side of religious beliefs.

Fourthly, however, I stress that the position reached in TTP opened a new kind of problem, namely, how is it possible for rational knowledge to acquire a power upon imaginative passions. I would like to show that this problem remains at the core of the *Ethics*. Indeed, the mechanism of imagination results to have its proper *conatus*, which can lead to a kind of delirium. The more the human mind strives to *imagine* its power, the more it builds up an imaginative world, detached from reality. Religious beliefs, once again, offer a good instance of such an attitude. Spinoza emphasizes the dangers of this attitude and attempts to scientifically reconstruct its causes. I would underline that his solution ascribes to *passive* and *negative* affects an important role to play. Indeed, it is only by exploiting these kinds of affects that the mind can produce the right *aptitudes* to act under the guidance of reason. Even if Spinoza's *Ethics* is usually viewed as

focused on the concepts of *power* and *activity*, I will stress that *fortune* and *passions* remain fundamental conditions to develop such activity and power.
