

From *Conatus* to Duty Spinoza and Kant on self-preservation and suicide

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ABSTRACT: Spinoza maintained that the *conatus* (striving) for self-preservation is a necessity, so that nothing would freely and willingly kill itself. In this process, reason, by providing adequate ideas, plays a role as guide to *conatus*, however, this weakens Spinoza's opposition against suicide: on the one hand, common people, by lacking the guidance of reason, commit suicide because they have not obtained adequate ideas; on the other hand, people who have adequate ideas under the guidance of reason might kill themselves in order to avoid greater evil. This article argues that Kant changed the role of reason, making it something higher than *conatus*, and at the same time, he turned the command of practical reason (duty) into something that common people could grasp, thereby solving Spinoza's defect: it is a duty for an individual to self-preserve. Kant opposed any kind of suicide in order to avoid greater evil, and this command of reason (duty) can reach all common people. As a result, no one has the excuse to commit suicide. It is Kant, not Spinoza, who made the opposition to suicide a general moral law.

Keywords: *conatus*, duty, self-preservation, suicide, reason

1. Introduction

Self-preservation and suicide were common topics for Spinoza and Kant, and they had the same attitude against suicide. Spinoza is famous for his rationalistic statement of ethics, especially in *Ethics* (IV p18 Schl.). He stated that: "If reason should recommend that, it would recommend it to all men,"¹ which is thought by many scholars to be of the same theoretical interest precedent as Kant's categorical imperative (Gabhart, 1999, 626; Nadler, 2015, 263) because this seems to be the Kantian way of speaking about moral rules, namely universalizability (*Verallgemeinerung*). This seems to say that Spinoza as well as Kant both made the opposition to suicide a general law. However, these scholars did not make their motivations clear; this renders such a comparison superficial. Regretfully, only few works have attempted a comparison on this

¹ All the translations of Spinoza's works are cited from Curley (1985).

topic. Ivic's article is one exception, but he only demonstrated their exterior similarities and ignored their deeper differences (Ivic, 2007). In this article, I will carefully examine how Spinoza and Kant constructed their theories of self-preservation and suicide, concentrating especially on the divergences between the two thinkers. I will maintain that Spinoza's theory cannot prove the opposition to suicide to be a general law, because his theory leaves room for people to kill themselves, while the Kantian Theory has its strength against every kind of suicide. My main argument will be as follows: Spinoza's arguments for his opposition to suicide are far from persuasive as he attempts to understand self-preservation through his fundamental conception of *conatus*, as a striving for being and well-being under the guidance of reason. This approach results in the argument that the lack of the guidance of reason and the resulting lack of adequate ideas is what leads a person to commit suicide. Likewise, it leaves room for the argument that people might, under the guidance of reason, kill themselves in order to avoid a greater evil. Kant, on the other hand treated self-preservation as a duty from practical reason, which the common people could grasp. As a consequence, no one has the excuse to kill himself, neither because of a lack of reason nor to avoid greater evil, so that suicide is firmly rejected. I hope this article would provide an argument to oppose previous superficial comparisons mentioned above.

This article will discuss this proposition under four sections: Firstly, I will explain Spinoza's theory of self-preservation developed within the doctrine of *conatus*. The role which reason plays to *conatus* will be my main focus. (section 1) Secondly, I shall show that Spinoza's theory is unable to rule out arguments for committing suicide. In order to prove this argument, the possibility of rational and free suicide will be discussed. I will analyze different viewpoints among scholars on this possibility. This disputation is intended to illustrate the immanent defect of Spinoza's theory. (section 2) The discussions concerning the defects of Spinoza will lay the foundation for exploring how Kant would criticize Spinoza by calling self-preservation a duty to oneself. (section 3) Finally, I will demonstrate how Kant might overcome the defects of Spinoza's theory, demonstrating that there is no valid defense of suicide. (section 4)

Before entering into our topics, I should give a definition of suicide. Kant

himself differentiated between different types of suicide. In *Lectures on Ethics*, he made it clear that there are three different types of suicide: “Suicide can be considered under various aspects, from the blameworthy, and permissible and even heroic point of view.” (LE, 369)² For the (second) permissible viewpoint of suicide, Kant named Lucretia as an example, who was driven by “a duty to preserve one’s honor, especially for the fair sex” (LE, 370) to end her life. A soldier who defended his fatherland is a hero; he is not committing suicide but has only “lost his life to fate” (LE, 371). These two types of “suicide” are not with fault and are not the actual suicide which will be discussed later. Kant then made another distinction: “the imprudence in which a wish to live is still present” and “the intention to do away with oneself.” (LE, 372) To the first kind of suicide Spinoza gave a similar example: “Someone may kill himself because he is compelled by another, who twists his right hand (which happened to hold a sword) and forces him to direct the sword against his heart.” (IV, p 20, Schol.) This is not the topic of this article. To sum up, the kind of suicide I want to discuss has two characteristics: (1) a person is facing his or her misfortune, (2) he or she has the intention to kill himself or herself.³

2. *Conatus, self-preservation, and reason*

The researchers have already widely and deeply explored Spinoza’s doctrine of *conatus*, (cf. Nadler, 2006, 194-200) repeating and criticizing these studies is certainly not the main purpose of this section and is out of its scope. What I am going to do is simply to demonstrate how Spinoza grounded the theory of self-preservation and his opposition to suicide in the doctrine of *conatus*. I am especially concerned with the role reason plays with regard to *conatus*.

As Nadler pointed out, *conatus* can be translated as “striving”, “tendency” or “endeavor”. (Nadler, 2015, 259) The most important reference to this word consists in III p6: “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being (*in suo esse perserverare conatur*).” For Spinoza everything

² In this paper GMM=*Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals*, MM=*Metaphysics of Morals*, LE=*Lectures on Ethics*, CPR=*Critique of practical reason*, the pages are cited according to *Akademieausgabe*. All the translations come from texts in References.

³ Cf. Witterwer (2001), p. 181: “Es müssen nach Kant also zwei Bedingungen für einen Suizid erfüllt sein: Der Tod muss erstens *absichtlich* herbeigeführt worden sein und zweitens das unmittelbare *Ergebnis einer Tat* der betroffenen Person selbst sein.”

strives to preserve its own essence (III p7), this means, everything does what was defined by its own nature. In I p29, Spinoza makes clear that “all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way”. It follows that nothing will act against the necessity of God or Nature. In a word, *conatus* is an activity in which all things strive to preserve themselves.

From this definition of *conatus*, we could directly draw the conclusion that suicide would be against Nature. But does this mean that suicide is impossible for anything or anyone? Absolutely not. In order to demonstrate this argument in next section, I will discuss more about *conatus* and reason. (1) For Spinoza the *conatus* for self-preservation means not only to live longer, but also to live well. (2) reason plays a role in *conatus*, so that the *conatus* to self-preservation is not only a natural order mechanical process, but is also aided by the help of reason.

(1) Does *conatus* to self-preservation only mean physical duration (being), or does it have more implications? There are many discussions among the scholars regarding this. Bennett explained it simply as “to stay in existence” or longevity (Bennet, 1984, 235), while Sáez maintained that this should be understood as bringing forth “various effects”. (Sáez, 2015, 35) Besides, Nadler gave strong evidence to prove that *conatus* is also “a striving to increase its power” and “thereby improve its condition.” (Nadler, 2015, 259) According to Sáez and Nadler, an individual’s *conatus* is not only an endeavor to gain physical duration, but also a striving to produce value and enhance one’s condition, in a word, to acquire perfection and well-being. I agree with them for the sake that mind (*mens*) plays an important role in the striving to self-preservation, just as Spinoza put it:

Both insofar as the mind has clear and distinct ideas, and insofar as it has confused ideas, it strives, for an indefinite duration, to persevere in its being and it is conscious of this striving it has. (III p9)

In Schol. of III p9 Spinoza defined different strivings of mind: Will, which is related only to mind; Appetite, which is related to mind and body together; and desire, which is Appetite in awareness. Consequently, an individual’s self-preservation is not singly bodily or singly mental striving, instead, it has to do with the cooperation of both body and mind. In III p12 Spinoza made it clear

that “the mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body’s power of acting”. There’s no doubt that the mind would cooperate with the body to strive for self-preservation. Another argument was located in the conception of Perfection in IV Preface: “if someone has decided to make something, and has finished it, then he will call this thing perfect.” Even though we all agreed that Spinoza denied an end (*Telos*) or final cause of Nature, he still maintained that everything has its accomplishment: “What is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, or primary cause, of something” (IV Preface). As we have seen, appetite is a striving of both body and mind, for it would strive for the fulfillment of something. We could conclude that an individual’s *conatus* for self-preservation needs the cooperation of body and mind and strives for perfection. As a result, it is not only a striving for the bodily and physical duration (being), but also enhancement and fulfillment (well-being).

(2) Now I wish to discuss the role of reason with regard to the *conatus* for self-preservation. We should notice that reason (*ratio*) and mind (*mens*) are different because the mind is something which always connected with the body, so that it would have both clear, distinct ideas and confused ideas, (cf. III p9.) while the reason leads always to the knowledge: “from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things. This I shall call reason and the second kind of knowledge.” (II p40 Schl. 2) Besides the mind should follow the guidance of reason, as Beth Lord puts it: “Developing one’s reasoning is the primary goal of the human mind.” (Beth Lord, 2018, 1) reason is a central epistemological conception of Spinoza (cf. Grey, 2015) and it is capable to grasp adequate ideas. reason also has an important influence that cannot be ignored in Spinoza’s moral philosophy. As far as I am concerned, reason is treated as a guide for *conatus* for self-preservation, and this can be inferred from one sentence in IV p18 Schol.:

Since reason demands⁴ nothing contrary to nature, it demands that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage, what is really useful to him, want what will really lead

⁴ Here “demands” is a translation of Latin word “postulat”, “postulo” means “demand”, “claim” and “request”, here it can only be translated as “demand”, because for Spinoza reason and the things contradict to nature are opposite.

man to a greater perfection, and absolutely, that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can.

As I argued previously, *conatus* for self-preservation contains in itself a striving for perfection. For Spinoza, “Perfection and imperfection, therefore, are only modes of thinking” (IV Preface). Now, reason provides ideas of perfection, and consequently, reason acts as a compass to *conatus*. Although reason has its own *conatus*, namely to understand, (IV p26) it can’t make actions contrary to Nature; it could only promote what Nature demands (namely *conatus*). At the same time, Spinoza thought self-preservation is the foundation of virtue (*virtus*), as VI p22 Cor. indicates: “The striving to preserve oneself is the first and only foundation of virtue.” Even this virtue should be under the conduction and guidance of reason (cf. VI p24). All in all, because of the guidance under reason, an individual’s *conatus* for self-perfection (being as well as well-being) could better be fulfilled.

From the discussions in this section follows the conclusion that for Spinoza the *conatus* of all things is striving for self-preservation, which could be understood as physical duration (being) as well as perfection and enhancement (well-being). At the same time, reason plays a role as a guide to this *conatus* and helps to accomplish it. (Of course, for Spinoza reason has other functions, which I cannot discuss here.) These discussions serve as the foundation for the disputations over the possibility of a defense of suicide in the case of Spinoza and also for comparison to Kantian opinions on the same topic.

3. *The possibility of a defense of suicide*

Now I should turn to the discussion on the possibility of a defense suicide. Of course, Spinoza noticed the fact of suicide in history and daily life, and he never denied this phenomenon. Spinoza provided two causes for actual suicide: Firstly, suicide happens because of external effects, as the cited III P4 shows. In IV p20 Schol. he also emphasized: “No one, I say, avoids food or kills himself from the necessity of his own nature. Those who do such things are compelled by external causes.” He chose Seneca as an example of a person who was forced to end his life by Tyrant to avoid a greater evil. Unfortunately, forces from outside are much stronger than influences from the inside (cf. IV p3), and as a

result, suicide becomes an inevitable fact. According to the definition in the *Introduction* of this article, suicide because of external effects is not the case discussed here. Secondly, according to Spinoza suicide is due to the defect of mind: “those who kill themselves are weak-minded⁵ and completely conquered by external causes contrary to their nature.” (IV p18 Schol.) For Spinoza, reason will conduct and guide the *conatus* for self-preservation, and under the guidance of reason, the mind could never lead to self-destruction unless the ideas in the mind are far from correct.

As we noticed, the reason has a strong theoretical orientation for Spinoza, which means that the adequate ideas with regard to perfection may be out of the reach of some people. For him, “perfection and imperfection, therefore, are only modes of thinking” (IV Preface), therefore he could not deny that some people would sometimes lack such a reason, when for example, passion is too strong. More importantly, most of us have to learn a lot before we attain adequate ideas or the idea of perfection, and we have to compare all kinds of things in order to know whether something is perfect or not. For Spinoza, the most adequate idea is the knowledge about God; however, this knowledge could not be present in everyone at every moment. All of these scenarios would lead to absence of the guidance of reason. For this reason, suicide remains possible.

The absence of reason is one of the defects of Spinoza’s theory. Another defect should also be discussed here: even though some people have adequate ideas under the guidance of reason, it is also possible for them to commit suicide, in that they could kill themselves freely and rationally. Now we should clarify this possibility of rational suicide.

Spinoza seemed to deny the possibility that a free agent terminates his or her life. Spinoza gave two reasons as following: “Nothing can be destroyed except through an external cause” (III P4). “Things are of a contrary nature, i.e., cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other” (IV P5). Sanja Ivic called them, respectively, “external cause argument” and “not in the

⁵ Here “weak-minded” is the translation for “amino esse impotentes”. The German translation is “ohnemächtigen Gemüts” (See Brauch de Spinoza, *Ethik in geometrischer Ordnung dargestellt*, neu übersetzt, herausgaben, mit einer Einleitung versehen von Wolfgang Bartuschat, Hambur: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2015, S.411.), while Bartuschat always translates “animus” as “Seele”. This means, both translators maintain that the latin word “aminus” is not strictly used. As far as I know, the word “animus” is seldom used.

same subject' argument" (Ivic, 2007, 133). Spinoza argued that the power of self-destruction comes from outside because it is natural for one thing to strive for its own preservation (cf. Gabhart, 1999).

But is it possible for an individual to terminate his or her life freely or rationally? Almost all scholars deny this possibility (cf. Maston, 1997; Bennet, 1984; Gabhart, 1999; Grey, 2017); this is the classic explanation. However, recently some scholars have insisted that under some circumstances suicide could be a free and rational choice (Lubuffe, 2010, 191-2; Nadler 2015; Sáez, 2015). To simplify, it would be better to concentrate on disputations between Nadler and Grey. The classic view has often treated suicide in Spinoza's understanding as a result of Passion, which overcomes reason; (Grey, 2017, 270) this is where Nadler disagreed.⁶ Nadler claimed that this choice, which someone makes in the face of a miserable future, could be free and rational. In order to demonstrate his viewpoint, he selected IV p 65 ("From the guidance of reason, we shall follow the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils") and p 66 ("From the guidance of reason we want ... a lesser present evil in preference to a greater future one") as his grounds.⁷ In this way, Nadler claimed that according to Spinoza, it is possible for a free man freely and rationally to kill himself. On the other side, Grey didn't oppose Nadler's explanation of *conatus*, namely, striving for perfection, but he disagreed that we could have an adequate and full idea of death.⁸ He insisted that Spinoza's metaphysical psychology did not support an idea of mind without body, and his evidence consisted in III p10: "An idea that excludes the existence of our body cannot be in our mind but is contrary to it." According to Grey, this sentence showed an obstacle for Nadler, who needed an adequate idea of one's own death to

⁶ Nadler's main argument was based on his new understanding of *conatus*: What a free agent strives for is "not mere continued durational existence but the preservation of his perfected nature, his condition of rational virtue, his extraordinary power of thinking and understanding - in short, his joy" (Nadler, 2015, 270).

⁷ According to Nadler, Spinoza's practical syllogism could be read as follows:
Major premise: From the guidance of reason an individual wants a lesser present evil in preference to a greater future one.
Minor premise: he or she grasps fully that the sadness and misfortune in the future will be much more than his present.
Conclusion: He or she will terminate life (lesser present evil).

⁸ He said: "the difficulty is that such understanding is beyond the reach of the mind, according to Spinoza. Evaluating the relative utility of suicide would require one to form an adequate idea of one's own death, an idea that excludes the existence of the body." (Grey, 2017, 6)

support his argument. Grey's whole point was based on this sentence.

After classifying opinions between Nadler and Grey, I want to give my standpoint briefly. I can't agree with Grey's opinion, because on the one hand, what Spinoza in III p10 expressed could only be understood thusly: the mind would cooperate with the body to maintain self-preservation, it could not do anything contrary to Nature, and it will never deny the existence of the body. However, this sentence by Spinoza does not rule out the mind, under the guidance of Reason, attaining an adequate idea about death. Grey didn't differentiate between the two functions of reason: an aid to *conatus* for self-preservation and a faculty for understanding and contemplation. What Grey discussed is only the rational contemplation and understanding of one's own death, which could surely be done by reason and could obtain true understanding or even the idea of God. On the other hand, if we think about the soldiers who risk their lives to defend their fatherland or a mother who sacrifices herself so that her child would successfully be born (Sáez, 2015, 53-67), we could not deny that sometimes "an idea that excludes the existence of the body" actually exists. Consequently, I want to follow the explanation of Nadler. For Spinoza, *conatus* could be understood as a striving for being as well as well-being and perfection, as we discussed in the previous section. Spinoza expressed clearly that perfection could not be identified as durational: "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, having no regard to its duration. For no singular thing can be called more perfect for having persevered in existing for a longer time. Indeed, the duration of things cannot be determined from their essence" (IV Preface). Thus, if an individual strives for perfection, then the duration of that individual's life should be put in the second place. As a result, it is possible for a free man to end his life rationally.

Summarily, we could depict Spinoza's theory on the possibility of suicide in two ways. On the one hand, under normal circumstances, namely when the striving for endurance (being) and perfection (well-being) could possibly coexist, suicide happens as a consequence of the irrational ideas or passions due to the absence of reason. On the other hand, when the striving for endurance (being) and for perfection (well-being) contradict each other, it would be possible for

an individual to terminate his or her life (or to sacrifice his being) under the guidance of reason for the sake of perfection (well-being).

Under this circumstance, however, it seems impossible for Spinoza to prevent suicide: both under the guidance of reason and without the guidance of it, people would commit suicide. It seems hard for reason to prevent suicide, either it is really difficult for the mind to attain adequate ideas under the guidance of reason or reason itself would lead to suicide for the sake of perfection: if less evil is one kind of perfection. These are the defects of Spinoza's theory. In the rest of this article, I will demonstrate that Kant's theory could perfectly cure these defects.

4. *Kantian new understanding of reason*

Regardless of the many similarities one may find between Spinoza and Kant, there are important differences between these two thinkers on the topic mentioned above. I will show that Kant criticized viewpoints like Spinoza's, although regretfully Kant did not respond to the positions of Spinoza directly. For this reason, I am unable to undertake a historical comparison, but have to limit myself to systematic comparisons by inferring Kant's opinions, as expressed in his writings, which in turn might challenge a position such as Spinoza's. In order to make a better comparison, here I want to discuss some words briefly. As we know, *conatus* means striving. Kant's basic idea of *conatus* is natural inclination (Neigung) and instinct (Instinkt). Spinoza has also discussed the relationship between *conatus*, *appetitus* and *voluntas*: "When this striving is related only to the mind (ad mentem), it is called will (*voluntas*); but when it is related to the mind and body together, it is called appetite (*appetitus*)."(III p9 Schol.) These Words could correspond to Kant's terminology. The will (*voluntas*) refers to "Wille", as Kant puts it: "Everything in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the capacity to act *according to the representation of laws*, i.e. according to principles, or a *will*. Since *reason* is required for deriving actions for laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason." (GMS, 412, the italics are in the original text.) Besides the appetite (*appetitus*) means "Begierde" in Kant's moral philosophy.⁹ After this clarification, we should discuss the

⁹ For Example, Kant says: "Begierde (appetitus) ist die Selbstbestimmung der Kraft eines Subjekts durch

possible criticisms of Kant to Spinoza. I think two possible criticisms are important for overcoming Spinoza's tension.

Firstly, reason is in no way just a guide to the *conatus* or striving for one's own preservation, regardless of whether it is in the form of being or well-being; on the contrary, reason sometimes would resist natural inclination or *conatus*, while Spinoza insisted that "reason demands nothing contrary to nature" (IV p18, Schol.).

In *Groundwork* Kant stressed that instinct would be better for an individual in looking for his or her own happiness, i.e., instinct could do better to guide *conatus* to self-preservation than reason. Kant put it clearly:

In a word, Nature would have prevented reason from striking out into *practical use*, and from having the impudence, with its feeble insights, to devise its own plan for happiness and for the means of achieving it. Nature herself would have taken over the choice not only of ends, but also of means, and as a wise precaution would have entrusted them both solely to instinct. (GMM, 395, the italics are in the original text)

For Kant, animals without reason could do better than human beings in preserving their being and at the same time plan for their happiness only with instinct. In Spinoza's terminology, *conatus* without reason is self-sufficient for self-preservation; consequently, the guidance of reason is unnecessary for *conatus*. Kant's quote above, which is commonly supposed to be directed at the eudemonism coming from Aristotle, could also be seen as criticism to Spinoza, who took *reason* for a guide or even means to achieve self-preservation and perfection (being and well-being).

The reason endowed in human beings has its own purpose, as Kant claimed. Briefly speaking, reason guides human beings to achieving a free, moral personhood. Of course, reason for Spinoza likewise plays a role as a guide to becoming a free man, however, this is freedom due to the recognition and obedience to the necessity of Nature or God. However, Kant maintained that our freedom could not be fulfilled in the sensible, empirical world, which is full of necessity, as the third antinomy in *First Critique* indicates. In practice our freedom comes from our obedience to moral laws, rather than natural necessity; on the contrary, moral personhood would sometimes resist natural necessity.

die Vorstellung von etwas Künftigem als einer Wirkung derselben.“ (Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, in *Akademieausgabe*, Bd. IV, S. 183.)

The point here is far from enough, I just want to demonstrate that for Kant, reason is not a guide or means to *conatus* for being and well-being.

Secondly, for Spinoza, reason has strong theoretical meaning with regard to its role. Although Spinoza also maintained that reason is an aid to *conatus* and has a practical function, how it would affect the mind is still unknown. More important is the fact that an adequate idea of reason, which would help individuals resist internal causes to suicide, is really hard to acquire and even out of the reach of ordinary people. In II p40 Schol., he maintained that reason is a faculty for recognizing the true and perfect ideas (cf. Grey, 2015). Then in IV p26, he pointed out that “what we strive for from reason is nothing but understanding”; however, this understanding is not easy and clear for every mind. Among his epistemological objects “the greatest thing the mind can understand is God” (IV p 28 Dem). This true and adequate idea of God is obviously out of the reach of most people.

On the contrary, the conception of reason for Kant has two different kinds of functions, namely, there exists the theoretical and the practical reason, but moral actions have only to do with practical reason or practical knowledge (therefore, theoretical knowledge is no longer the precondition for morality, let alone the knowledge of God).¹⁰ As Kant put it:

and that there is thus no need of science and philosophy to know what one has to do in order to be honest and good, indeed even to be wise and virtuous. It should actually have been possible to presume all along that acquaintance with what it is incumbent upon everyone to do, and hence also to know would be the affair of every human being, even the commonest. (GMM, 404)

This sentence gives us two important pieces of information. On the one hand, Practical reason influences our Will directly and produces good Will, which is for Kant the highest good (cf. the beginning of GMM). This is because the

¹⁰ For example, in the *Critique of Pure reason*, Kant distinguishes between theoretical and theoretical reason: “Insofar as there is to be reason in these sciences, something in them must be cognized a priori, and this cognition can relate to its object in either of two ways, either merely determining the object and its concept (which must be given from elsewhere), or else also making the object actual. The former is theoretical, the latter practical cognition of reason.” (Kant, *Critique of Pure reason*, trans. Paul Guyer & Allen Wood, Cambridge University Press 1998, p.107.) In some places, however, Kant also discusses the unity of theoretical and practical rationality, for example: “...in part I require that the critique of a pure practical reason, if it is to be complete, also be able to present its unity with speculative reason in a common principle; because in the end there can be only one the same reason, which must differ merely in its application.”(GMM, 391.)

rational voice no longer comes from cognition of God or Nature by the theoretical reason, but instead, from the command *a priori* by the practical reason. On the other hand, the correct guidance of reason needs only “common moral rational cognition”, as the title of the first section of *Groundwork* indicates, which means that everyone could have this moral cognition as long as he or she has common practical reason. This means that the guidance of reason “would be the affair of every human being”.

In conclusion, as far as I am concerned, Kant’s understanding of reason differs from Spinoza’s in two aspects: (1) reason does not always play a role as guide to *conatus* for self-preservation as instinct could do a better job in this role; (2) it is practical reason that would affect the Will, and the precondition for this influence is only practical knowledge which could be reached by common people. Instead, Spinoza maintained that the knowledge or adequate ideas from reason are more theoretical and harder to reach.

As we noticed, it seems hard to prevent suicide for Spinoza. Let’s try to explore how Kant’s new understanding could solve Spinoza’s theoretical problem. For Spinoza, on the one hand, the common people, who do not or cannot grasp the true and adequate idea under the guidance of reason, would perhaps commit suicide because of being weak-minded. Kant would criticize the idea that the theoretical knowledge, which would prevent the individual from ending his or her life, lies out of the reach of common people. On the contrary, this knowledge is practical and everyone able to attain it. On the other hand, for Spinoza, the one who acquires an adequate idea might also terminate his or life, as long as he or she knows that suicide (ending duration and being of life) would be a way to fulfill his perfection and well-being. While Kant would strongly claim that reason could not only be a guide or means to being as well as well-being, the command of reason resists any kind of suicide and the *conatus* should act according to reason. Kant’s understanding of reason would lead it always to promote self-preservation, instead of suicide. Now we should delve deeper into Kant’s theory of duty, so as to better understand how Kant’s approach might solve Spinoza’s problem.

5. *Duty, self-preservation, and suicide*

Kant asserted that self-preservation is a duty to oneself. “The first, though not the principal, duty of man to himself as an animal being is to preserve himself in his animal nature” (MM, 421, cf. GMM, 397-8). This means that it is a categorical imperative to maintain one’s life. We should keep this in mind.

With the doctrine of duty, on the one hand, Kant agreed with Spinoza in depicting self-preservation as natural *conatus*: “everything in nature seeks to preserve itself: a damaged tree, a living body, an animal” (LE, 372). But on the other hand, self-preservation is for Kant not an end in itself; the deeper ground for self-preservation lies not in *conatus*. In order to differentiate the natural tendency (*conatus*) and ground for this endeavor, Kant made a conventional distinction: “they preserve their life *in conformity with duty* (*pflichtmäßig*), but not *from duty* (*aus Pflicht*)” (GMM, 398). Here is where Kant and Spinoza disagreed. As we have seen, Spinoza emphasized that “reason demands nothing contrary to nature” (IV, p 18). While this opinion is for Kant partly correct, because an individual, who acts according to natural inclination or *conatus*, acts only in conformity with duty. In this process, there is no room for morality. However, the force of morality arises when *conatus* conflicts (*widersteht*)¹¹ with duty, such as when suicide occurs. In the following, I will argue that only when the ground of self-preservation lies outside of *conatus*, could suicide be prevented.

By making this creative distinction Kant would be able to theoretically oppose suicide more powerfully than Spinoza. Wittwer undertook systematic research into Kantian theory on suicide and listed seven reasons with which Kant objected suicide. (Wittwer, 2001, 182; cf. Harter, 2011). I would not and cannot here discuss all the reasons; consequently, I concentrate on two reasons: (1) Suicide cannot be a universal law of nature (GMM, 422); (2) “Man cannot renounce his personality” as suicide would “root out the existence of morality itself from the world” “and would be the equivalent of an individual treating his personality as a means, and thus “debasing humanity in one’s person (*homo noumenon*)” (MM, 422, cf. GMM, 429; LE, 372-3). Here I am not going to

¹¹ Kant distinguishes between “contradict” (*widersprechen*) and “conflict” (*widerstreiten*), cf. CMM, 422. A suicidal act conflicts the moral law, and the elevation of suicide to a universal law contradicts itself because it is inherently impossible.

explain the two arguments comprehensively, but only to the extent that shows how Kant's approach might solve the theoretical defects of Spinoza's argument.

(1) Kant made clear that in certain cases suicide submits to the principle of self-love: "from self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life if, when protracted any longer, it threatens more ill than it promises agreeableness" (GMM, 422; cf. CPR, 022). However, this principle of self-love could not be a universal law of nature, because the law of nature is to promote life. In this argument, Kant seemed to agree with Spinoza, in that an individual's *conatus* should promote the self-preservation and should be universal to all. However, the argument here manifests the essence of Spinoza's so-called "rational suicide"; it was driven by the principle of self-love, which is too strong so as to contradict natural law; as a result, it was not rational in Kantian sense because it came from the fear of greater evil in the future, as we said previously. This outcome is rooted in Spinoza's understanding of reason as a guide or even means to *conatus*.

(2) The second argument makes the difference between the two thinkers more obvious. According to Spinoza we may commit suicide when we believe that the future holds little in the way of pleasure and that a miserable life awaits us. As Nadler argued, under hopeless conditions, the choice to kill oneself is for Spinoza also a free and rational action. Kant strongly opposed this viewpoint because personality or dignity is more important than being or well-being. The following sentence seems to directly aim at Spinoza:

But this illusion disappears, if freedom can exist only through an immutable condition, which cannot be changed under any circumstances. This condition is that I do not employ my freedom against myself for my own destruction, and that I do not let it be limited by anything external. This is the noble form of freedom. I must not let myself be deterred from living by any fate or misfortune but should go on living so long as I am a man and can live honorably. To complain of fate and misfortune dishonors a man. (LE, 374)

This sentence indicates that the freedom to preserve one's own personality and humanity could not be changed under any circumstances, and to end one's own life in the face of misfortune could only be done involuntarily. Reason is no longer treated as a guide to *conatus* for self-preservation, instead, it promulgates a command to our will to continue striving for self-preservation; the duty of

self-preservation comes from *homo noumenon*, even though *homo phaenoumenon* seeks to end itself, this command could be clearly received. This command or categorical imperative is necessitation (Nötigung): “duty is the necessity of an action from the law” (GMM, 400).

To sum up, for Kant self-preservation is a duty, while Spinoza only expressed that *conatus* for self-preservation is done in conformity with duty. Only when the ground for self-preservation, namely duty, comes from another place than *conatus*, could negation of self-preservation (suicide) be better prevented because the command to prohibit self-destruction is obvious and clear, and perfection or well-being is no longer an excuse to commit suicide; respect towards humanity and personality conquers the fear of misfortune. “Rational suicide” in the sense of Spinoza becomes paradoxical.

Finally, I want to emphasize that every common person has easy access to the duty of self-preservation or the command of objecting suicide. As we argued in section 3, the moral knowledge is inherent for common people who are endowed with practical reason. If everyone can grasp this duty and command (practical knowledge), then theoretically suicide due to misfortune in the future could definitely be prohibited.

6. Conclusion

Scholars, especially those of Spinoza’s moral philosophy, want to draw a superficial conclusion that Kant shared the same theoretical interests as Spinoza because they both wanted their moral principles generalized and because they both trusted reason. However, a careful examination of their understanding of reason would show that reason played an utterly different role in their moral philosophy. In this article I use self-preservation and suicide as an example to illustrate their differences. For Spinoza, *conatus* for self-preservation is fundamental and reason works as a guide to this *conatus*. This threatens his opposition to suicide because the adequate and true idea, which would prevent an individual from suicide, is beyond the reach of most people on the one hand and on the other hand, “rational suicide” for those who could grasp the adequate idea, is still a possibility. Kant understood self-preservation and reason the other way around. His approach leaves us with a way of overcoming the

defects of Spinoza's account. For Kant, reason was no longer a guide to *conatus* for self-preservation, which only carried out the tasks of instinct. Although *conatus* for self-preservation is in conformity with duty, it has its ground in moral law, which had its source in practical reason. Consequently, in the face of misfortune an individual should choose to live on and thus live up to duty and respect his or her personality. This moral law, which prevents an individual from killing himself or herself, remains within the reach of common people. All of this would make "rational suicide" and "irrational suicide" impossible. This article hopes to provide a way to examine the differences between the ethics of Spinoza and Kant, so as to discover the specialty of Kant's moral philosophy.

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