

Chapter 2

Recovering Spinoza's Theory of Akrasia

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Akrasia is one of moral philosophy's oldest problems. In examining it, philosophers hope to answer the question, "why do people do things they know they shouldn't do?" or, in other words, "can people act against their better judgment?" In Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates offers the first systematic examination of this issue, and famously concludes that "no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad" (358d).

Since the time of Plato's Socrates, nearly every major philosopher from Aristotle to Donald Davidson has offered a detailed account of whether and how *akrasia* is possible.¹ Indeed, this issue continues to be the subject of a surprisingly lively debate within contemporary philosophy, particularly in the sub-discipline of the philosophy of action. Following Davidson's (1970) transformative account in "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?," authors including Michael Bratman (1979), Alasdair MacIntyre (1990), and Richard Holton (1999) have brought forward internalist and externalist accounts of *akrasia*, and argued for *akrasia* as both a rational and irrational behavior.² Dozens of articles and books continue to come out on the topic, with the latest volume, Alfred Mele's *Backsliding: Understanding Weakness of Will*, published as recently as April 2012.³

It could be fair to say that we continue to return to the problem of *akrasia* at least in part because of its long and distinguished pedigree, with its historical relevance generating renewed, contemporary interest in the issue. But *akrasia* is also an intrinsically interesting philosophical problem. From the perspective of moral psychology, *akrasia* is a kind of puzzle or stumbling block that any comprehensive account of human judgment and motivation must be able to explain. On the one hand, it is a feature of our everyday lives; on the other, it is genuinely counter-intuitive, and seems to defy many of our common-sense assumptions regarding rational human activity. Accordingly, most

comprehensive theories of moral psychology have taken up the challenge of accounting for the precise nature and underlying causes of akrasia.⁴

In this paper, I will show how Spinoza, in keeping with this philosophical tradition, outlines, tests, and defends his own innovative, causal psychological theory by explaining akrasia or, as he calls it, “the causes of man’s lack of power and inconstancy” (EIVP18Sch; C, 555). I will argue, though, that for Spinoza, the issue takes on an added significance, because he is the first philosopher to explain akrasia without resorting to a concept of free will.⁵ For Spinoza, the opening propositions of *Ethics* Part IV P1–P18 establish that his psychological theory can account for even this most perplexing of human behaviors, akrasia, and that it can do so not “in spite of” but precisely *because* of his rejection of a notion of a radically free will. In doing so, Spinoza not only adopts akrasia as a test case of his psychological theory, but uses it to magnify and explain his general understanding of the relative powers of knowledge and the emotions.

Since, in order to understand what is new about Spinoza’s discussion of akrasia, it is necessary to have some sense of what came before it, in section 1 of this paper, I provide a brief sketch of the historical development of theories of akrasia, paying particular attention to the medieval accounts that immediately preceded Spinoza’s discussion in the *Ethics*. In section 2, I show how Spinoza can explain akrasia without relying on a concept of free will, the major resource in traditional discussions of akrasia, and suggest that he presents a theory consisting in two sequential branches of argument: first, a “core” argument that explains the fundamental relationship between the relative power of knowledge and the emotions; and a second (or secondary) argument that explains how this relationship between knowledge and the emotions is further modulated by the factors of time and logical modality. Based on my analysis, in section 3, I briefly examine and challenge three contemporary discussions of Spinoza’s theory, as put forward by Jonathan Bennett (1984), Michael Della Rocca (1996b), and Martin Lin (2006). Finally, I conclude by briefly suggesting that Della Rocca and Lin may be too strongly influenced by Davidson’s theory to recognize the fundamentally dissimilar features of Spinoza’s causal account of akrasia.

1. HISTORICAL SKETCH

In order to understand what is new about Spinoza’s theory of akrasia, it is helpful to have some sense of how philosophers conceived of the issue leading up to Spinoza’s own discussion of it, particularly since these historical models continue to influence our contemporary philosophical accounts. Broadly, philosophical theories of akrasia underwent two key periods of

interpretation, first in ancient and early medieval philosophy and, second, in the later medieval period. The first model interprets akrasia in terms of some form of conflict between the mental faculties of belief and desire. The second, later medieval model introduces the faculty of the will, and holds that akrasia is directly produced by the choices of this autonomous and sovereign faculty. Spinoza rejects both of these accounts.

1.1. Belief and Desire

In ancient philosophy, *akrasia* is broadly understood in terms of beliefs and desires. Most famously, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that the practical syllogism explains how universal and particular knowledge is combined to generate action. For example, if an individual knows that helping a fellow human being is good, and giving this man some bread would help him, then giving this man some bread would be a good thing to do (*Nicomachean Ethics* 7.1-10). In most cases, on Aristotle's account, the conclusion is either equivalent to or is immediately followed by a corresponding action.⁶ In keeping with this model, akrasia then occurs when the workings of the practical syllogism are corrupted by the individual's desires. Effectively, desires act as a kind of wrench in the machinery of the practical syllogism, and corrupt the proper synthesis of the universal and particular propositions that typically generate sound practical action. For example, the individual contemplating whether or not to give away some bread could experience a desire to eat the bread herself, and thus fail to give the bread to the man, even though she knows that this would be the best thing to do.

Interestingly, the use of beliefs and desires as the dual explanatory basis for akrasia continues well into the medieval period. For example, Augustine still conceives of inconstancy or akrasia as the product of inner mental turmoil brought about by competing desires.⁷ Along even more traditional lines, Aquinas has renewed access to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*,⁸ and consequently follows Aristotle to argue that akrasia is caused by desires corrupting the practical syllogism. Aquinas defends this in both his commentary on Aristotle's work as well as in his own *Summa Theologica* and in *De Malo*.⁹

In this way, the framework for interpreting akrasia as a conflict between one's beliefs and desires continued well into the thirteenth century, and thus spanned an interpretive period of nearly seventeen centuries.

1.2. Autonomous Will

By contrast, the second interpretive period for theories of akrasia was brought about quite abruptly. In the late thirteenth century, the Paris Condemnation of

March 1277 forced theologians and philosophers to adopt strongly voluntarist principles.¹⁰ As a consequence, the traditional model of the mental faculties came to include the will, where this new faculty was understood to have absolute freedom and authority in determining human action. As one possible author of the Condemnation, Walter of Bruges, formulated it, this new relationship between the mental faculties was to be understood in the following way: “the intellect moves the will as a counselor moves the pope . . .—not as an efficient cause, not as a great power that impels or necessitates, but by persuasion, by presenting the good” (cited in Kent 1995, 119–20).

Naturally, in keeping with these principles, philosophers were also compelled to revise the “belief and desire” model of akrasia. As we see in the writings of Henry of Ghent, Walter of Bruges, and to a lesser extent, John Buridan, akrasia was no longer understood as the product of a conflict between beliefs and desires, but was rather thought to be caused by the autonomous movement of the will. For example, revising Aquinas’ account, Walter of Bruges substituted desires with a free and sovereign will, so that it was now the will which deliberately frustrated the workings of the practical syllogism (Saarinen 2011, 32).

In many respects, this new understanding of the mental faculties made the problem of akrasia relatively easy to resolve, since only a sinful will was needed to explain it. And indeed, philosophers and theologians continued to embrace the will-based model of akrasia throughout the later medieval period. Less than thirty years before Spinoza’s *Ethics*, we see that Descartes struggled to clarify his understanding of the relationship between a free will and akratic action, and ultimately interpreted the latter phenomenon in terms of the former.¹¹

2. SPINOZA’S THEORY

Of course, Spinoza rejects the voluntarist theories of akrasia brought forward by the later medieval philosophers. Yet he also turns away from the classic “belief and desire” model that had dominated early discussions of akrasia. Instead, Spinoza draws on his conceptions of knowledge and the emotions to articulate a deterministic theory of akrasia, which I suggest can be developed in two parts. I emphasize the sectional nature of his theory because I will use this aspect of his account to defend Spinoza against a charge brought forward by Jonathan Bennett, suggesting that Spinoza’s theory is not adequately grounded in its demonstrations.

In his *Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, Bennett (1984, 282–6) identifies an apparent flaw in Spinoza’s examination of akrasia. He suggests that the account does not follow from the propositions Spinoza cites in his demonstration

of the issue. Specifically, he argues that Proposition IVP9, which uses the concept of “intensity,” mistakenly relies on Proposition IIP17, which does not rely on this concept. Proposition IVP9 states: “An affect whose cause we imagine to be with us in the present is *stronger* than if we did not imagine it to be with us,” (C, 551) with the emphasis here placed on the term “strength.” But Proposition IIP17, which Proposition IVP9 refers back to, only states, “If the Human body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human Mind will regard that same external body as actually existing, or as present to it” (C, 463–4). In other words, it makes no mention of strength at all. This leads Bennett to conclude that Spinoza's theory of akrasia, which he holds is grounded in IVP9, is inadequately substantiated. I will return to this claim below.

Bennett's view of the inconsistency is subsequently taken up by Michael Della Rocca, who argues that “Spinoza's account of irrationality [or akrasia] turns on his account of anticipation,” that is, on Spinoza's understanding of how the mind imagines future states of affairs, that is, as though they are currently present (1996b, 242; EIIP18). Della Rocca further echoes Bennett when he suggests that the account is such that “a key element of Spinoza's theory of irrational action [or akrasia] is without adequate grounding in his system” (Della Rocca 1996b, 242). In his article “Spinoza's Account of Akrasia,” Martin Lin (2006, 398) departs from Bennett and Della Rocca to demonstrate that Spinoza does indeed “have the resources internal to his philosophy of mind to get IVP9.” Nevertheless, he agrees with Bennett and Della Rocca insofar as he believes that IVP9 is essential to Spinoza's theory of akrasia, and suggests that Spinoza's “principal claims” about akrasia are made in propositions IVP10, IVP15, and IVP16, or the later propositions, which emphasize the effects of temporal discounting on rational reasoning and motivation. Based on my own analysis of the issue, however, I will show how these discussions focus on what is only the secondary branch of Spinoza's argument, and so, in the case of Bennett and Della Rocca, can be defused or at least contained without affecting Spinoza's core understanding of akrasia.

2.1. Rejecting the Faculty of the Will

Spinoza frames his discussion of akrasia with an extended critique of the later medieval and Cartesian distinction between the intellect and the will. He denies that there is any distinction between the two faculties of the intellect and the will (EIIP49Cor), and he further rejects any interpretations of akrasia which would suggest that it is the product of a conflict between them. He explicitly challenges these interpretations of akrasia in his Preface to Part III, and writes that most “attribute the cause of human impotence, not

to the power of nature, but to I know not what vice of human nature, which they therefore bewail, or laugh at, or disdain, or (as usually happens) curse,” (C, 491) (and both here and in Part IV, he uses the terms “*impotentiae et inconstantiae*” to refer to akrasia). Since Spinoza’s discussions of the will and free will have been the subject of several careful and systematic treatments, including those of Cottingham (1988) and Lloyd (1990), which I adopt here, I will turn directly to the implications of Spinoza’s rejection of the will as separate from the intellect for his theory of akrasia, which relies on an understanding of the relative forces of knowledge and the emotions.

Spinoza draws on the concepts of imaginings and adequate ideas, passivity and activity, and the respective passive and active emotions to provide a core causal mechanism for the phenomenon of akrasia. In general terms, he argues that our limited situation in nature means that the force of our externally-caused emotions is powerful enough to overcome our self-caused true knowledge and the related active emotions, and he explains how and why this is the case in Part IV of the *Ethics*, where he presents both branches of his theory of akrasia.

The “core” component of Spinoza’s argument centers on Propositions EIVP1, P7, P8, P14, and P15, and demonstrates the asymmetrical relationship between knowledge and the passive emotions (see Figure 2.1).

Spinoza develops this first branch in three stages: first, by discussing the relative power of inadequate and adequate ideas in shaping our imaginings (or affections); second, by determining the relative motivational force of different emotions; and finally, combining the above, by demonstrating the asymmetrical balance of power between knowledge and the emotions.

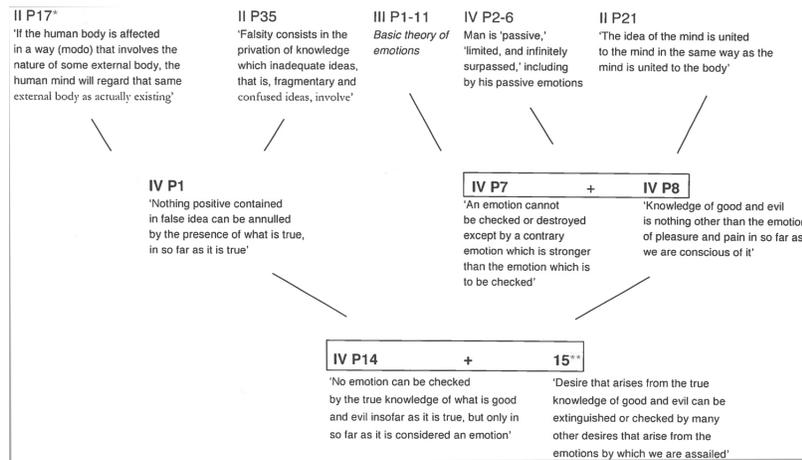


Figure 2.1 The Core of Spinoza’s Theory: “Knowledge” and the Emotions.

2.2. The Relative Power of Inadequate and Adequate Ideas

Spinoza discusses the relative powers of inadequate and adequate knowledge in EIVP1, where he states that “nothing positive which a false idea has is removed by the presence of the true insofar as it is true” (C, 547). This means that if we have inadequate knowledge of something, it is not just a matter of gaining adequate knowledge of it before the confused experience of it is removed. On the contrary, in this proposition, Spinoza demonstrates that inadequate knowledge can frequently impact and motivate us more strongly than adequate knowledge can.

To illustrate this relationship, Spinoza describes the experience of looking at the sun. At first glance, the sun appears to be relatively close to the earth, and until we know otherwise, for example, as young children, we tend to think of the sun as being quite small. But the question is, “What happens when we come to know the truth about the distance and size of the sun?” Interestingly, Spinoza argues that even when we know how far the sun is from the earth, “we shall nevertheless imagine it as near us” (EIVP1Sch; C, 548). This is because our new-found knowledge replaces the *factual* error, but it cannot remove what Spinoza calls the “imagining” [*imaginatio*], that is, the sensory effect that the sun has on our body and, by the principle of parallelism, on our mind. According to EIIP17, these confused sensory imaginings can only be removed when they are replaced by other imaginings. So, in the balance of power, adequate knowledge fares less well than the concept superficially imply[ies], and adequate knowledge can and frequently is overpowered by inadequate knowledge or, in other words, by confused ideas.¹²

2.3. The Relative Motivational Force of Different Emotions

In Propositions EIVP2-P7, Spinoza then outlines principles regarding the relative power of different emotions. He argues that the power of an emotion is determined not just by the power of the conatus of the individual experiencing the emotion, but also primarily by the power of the external causes that produce that emotion in the individual. Since human beings are infinitely limited in proportion to the forces of nature (EIVA1), we are very rarely the adequate causes of our actions, and the vast majority of our emotions are produced at least in part by external forces and frequently overpower us. In addition, Spinoza further demonstrates that an emotion can only be checked or destroyed by an opposite and more powerful emotion. He proves this by turning back to the principles of relative *physical* forces in Part II. Accordingly, just as an affection of the body can only be checked or destroyed by an opposite and stronger corporeal cause, by the principle of parallelism, an emotion can only be checked or destroyed by an opposite and stronger emotion.

But Spinoza wants to show the interplay of power between knowledge and the emotions. That is how Spinoza will conceive of human inconstancy or *akrasia*, and he establishes how this mechanism works in Propositions EIVP8, P14, and P15.

2.4. The Asymmetrical Balance of Power between Knowledge and the Emotions

In a moment of *akrasia*, the knowledge involved consists in true knowledge regarding what is good and bad. Since Spinoza defines “good” as something which we know to be useful to us, and “bad” as something which we know to be the opposite, knowledge of good and bad simply corresponds to the idea or the consciousness that we have of a certain pleasure or pain (EIVD1-D2, P8). By extension, *true* knowledge of good and evil corresponds to adequate ideas about what is useful and what is harmful to us. It is this knowledge which is overcome in a moment of *akrasia* because, despite being adequate, even this true knowledge can be overcome by an emotion. This is due not to the relative adequacy of the knowledge and emotions involved, but rather due to their relative motivational force or *power*. Specifically, Spinoza’s understanding of power necessitates that adequate knowledge can only be as powerful as the limited, finite essence that produces it.

Spinoza’s argument turns on the fact that, as knowledge of good and evil, this knowledge nevertheless remains “nothing but an affect of Joy or Sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it” (EIVP8; C, 550). Specifically, in the Demonstration of Proposition IVP8, he explains that the relevant knowledge or idea is “united to the affect [of joy and sadness] in the same way as the mind is united to the body,” (C, 551) that is, that it is different “only conceptually.” As a result, according to EIID1, as an emotion, this knowledge also produces a desire proportional to its force in the mind. The problem is that, since the individual is the sole and adequate cause of her true knowledge, only her specific, limited, and individual essence produces that desire and, as a result, defines, that is limits its relative power (EIVP5). By contrast, the bulk of our emotions consist in passive experiences, which are generated by powerful external causes, and thus considerably surpass us in force (EIVP3). As a consequence, our passive emotions can and frequently do overpower even our true knowledge (EIVP14). And so, even if an individual possesses true knowledge regarding what would be a beneficial or detrimental course of action to pursue, her passive emotions may very well still generate more motivational force than the desire produced by her knowledge can generate.

For the individual who aims to pursue the right course of action, the only hope is that one’s true knowledge can generate a sufficiently strong desire

that will be forceful enough to counter the power of the passive emotions (EIVP14). But even here, Spinoza cautions that “a Desire which arises from a true knowledge of good and evil can be extinguished or restrained by many other Desires” (EIVP15; C, 553) if the former desire is not sufficiently proportionate in strength. And it is this fundamentally disproportionate relationship between the desire generated from adequate ideas of good or evil and the passive emotions arising from inadequate ideas that forms the core of Spinoza's theory of akrasia—and not, as Della Rocca will suggest, “anticipation” (1996b, 238). It is on the basis of this *core* relationship between knowledge and the emotions that Spinoza concludes, “I believe I have shown the cause why men are moved more by opinion than by true reason, and why the true knowledge of good and evil arouses disturbances of the mind, and often yields to lust of every kind,” adding, “hence that verse of the poet, [Ovid's description of Medea], ‘I see and approve the better, but follow the worse’. Ecclesiastes also seems to have had the same thing in mind when he said: ‘He who increases knowledge increases sorrow’” (EIVP17Sch; C, 554; Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, VII, 20; *Ecclesiastes*, 1:18). In this way, Spinoza thinks he has explained the relative power of inadequate knowledge over adequate knowledge, *and* the power of the emotions over true knowledge. Moreover, he has shown how akrasia is not the wrench of human behavior or the exception in need of explanation but rather the most common way of human life although we can find the rather difficult ways to overcome it. It is this explanation of akrasia as the normal outcome of the power dynamics of our passive and active emotions being inadequate and adequate ideas, that is the backbone of Spinoza's approach to akrasia. He does provide though an additional theory specifying the particulars of the various power relations of our emotions and ideas.

2.5. The Secondary Component of Spinoza's Theory

Della Rocca's emphasis on “anticipation” and the factors of possibility, contingency and necessity make up what I identify as the second branch of Spinoza's argument, which is derived from the first, and consists in Propositions EIVP9-P13, P16, and P17 (see Figure 2.2). These later propositions serve to *modulate* the general interplay between knowledge and the emotions, and specifically illustrate how the emotions and knowledge are further strengthened and weakened in relation to past and future, and contingent and necessary states. In EIVP9, Spinoza argues that an emotion has more power when its cause is present than when its cause is thought to stem from some point in the past or future. By extension, the further away in time a given cause is—whether in the past or in the future—the less powerfully its associated emotion(s) affect(s) us (EIVP10). In Propositions EIVP11, P12, and

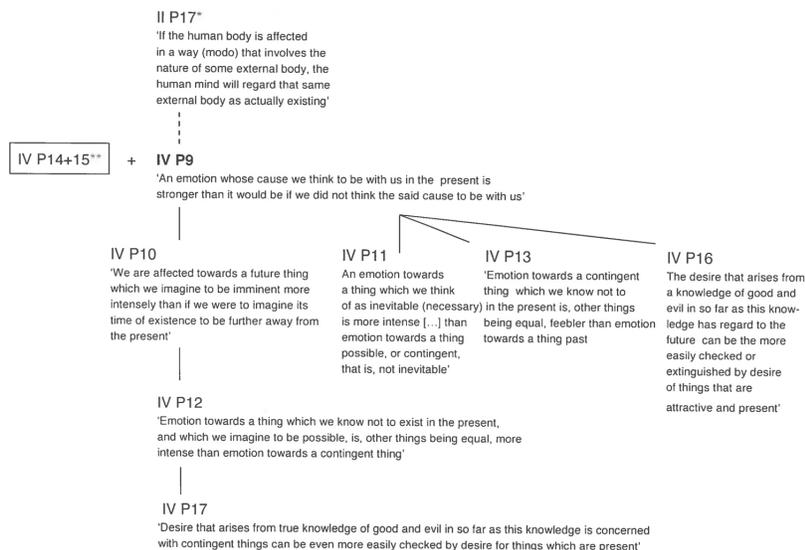


Figure 2.2 The Secondary Component of Spinoza's Theory: Time and Logical Modality.

P13, Spinoza specifies that things or events which are thought to be inevitable (or necessary) affect us with less strong emotions than those which are merely possible, while those which are thought to be possible affect us more strongly than those which we imagine to be contingent, and so on. Finally, in Propositions EIVP16 and P17, Spinoza explains that the relative force of our knowledge is also subject to modulation, so that knowledge of future goods and evils is easily checked by emotions related to causes that exist in the present, and *true* knowledge pertaining to contingent things can be overcome by the force of emotions caused by things that are present. So as Della Rocca puts it, “in his account of irrational action, Spinoza appeals to temporal [and I would add modal] disparities” to explain *akrasia* (1996b, 241). But I argue that this second branch only supplements the core account, and explains how the basic imbalance between adequate ideas with active affects and passive affects is intensified when the relevant knowledge pertains to temporally removed or contingent goods and evils, or is challenged by immediately available objects which create powerful emotions in the individual making a decision.

3. BENNETT, DELLA ROCCA, AND LIN

Based on this sketch of the two “core” and “secondary” branches of Spinoza's argument, I can now briefly make two overarching claims regarding contemporary readings of Spinoza's theory.

3.1. Bennett and Della Rocca

First, understanding Spinoza's theory as having two parts allows me to defend it against Bennett's charge that EIVP 9, which he says anchors Spinoza's entire argument, inadequately relies on IIP17 for support (Bennett 1984, 284). As noted above, according Bennett first refers to EIIP17:¹³

If the human body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human Mind will regard the same external body as actually existing, or as present to it, until the Body is affected by an affect [mode] that excludes the existence or presence of that body. (C, 463–4)

In EIVP9, the Demonstration reads:

An imagination (*imaginatio*) is an idea by which the Mind considers a thing as present (see its definition in IIP17S), which nevertheless indicates the constitution of the human Body more than the nature of the external thing (by IIP16C2). An affect, therefore (by the general Definition of Affects) is an imagination, insofar as [the affect] indicates the constitution of the body. But an imagination (by IIP17) is *more intense* so long as we imagine nothing that excludes the present existence of the external thing. Hence, an affect whose cause we imagine to be with us in the present is more intense, *or* stronger, than if we did not imagine it to be with us, q.e.d. (C, 551; first added emphasis mine, JH).

But, Bennett argues, EIIP17 does not provide any resources for discussing “intensity” as it is then used in EIVP9 and so, he concludes, the bulk of Spinoza's model of akrasia is thought to “inherit this frailty” and be insufficiently demonstrated (1984, 284).

Based on my analysis, however, it becomes clear that the core of Spinoza's theory of akrasia does not rest on EIVP9 at all; rather, it relies on EIVP1, P7, P8, P14, and P15, or the first branch of the argument. And although EIVP1 is also derived from EIIP17, the argument is sound in this case: EIIP17 discusses how an external body appears to exist or be present to a mind for as long as the mind continues to be affected by it, and EIVP1 essentially states the same principle in reverse: “nothing positive [i.e. present] which a false idea has is removed by the presence of the true, insofar as it is true (C, 547).”¹⁴ As a result, the first branch of Spinoza's argument is sufficient to provide a thoroughly non-voluntaristic, that is, mechanistic account of akrasia, and Spinoza's theory holds even *if* Bennett is right and EIVP9 cannot be established. What *is* lost if Bennett is right are only the specific modifications of akrasia according to factors such as time and modality. But Bennett and Della Rocca simply miss Spinoza's core explanation of why akrasia actually occurs, by passing over the propositions that I argue are the foundation of

Spinoza's approach. Instead, they only discuss Spinoza's second theory of akrasia about the particulars of akratic situations, whether problematic or no, from EIVP9 onwards.

3.2. Lin

Bennett and Della Rocca's failure to address the early propositions of Part IV of the *Ethics* brings me to my second and final pair of claims, now in reference to Martin Lin's (2006) article entitled, "Spinoza's Account of Akrasia." In his article, Lin challenges the view held by Bennett and Della Rocca as I've just described it, and goes some distance towards salvaging Spinoza's theory. He examines the early Propositions EIVP3-P8 in some detail, as I have done, and presents a strong account of adequate ideas and the concept of "intensity." He argues that "the power of a rational idea is the power of our conatus *tout court*. Irrational ideas, or passions, on the other hand, are defined by the power of their external causes in combination with our own power" (2006, 403). And he concludes, as I have, that since eternal causes are infinitely more powerful than the power of an individual conatus, emotions can frequently overpower even adequate ideas.

Nevertheless, Lin passes over one key step in Spinoza's argument, namely, the fact that adequate knowledge of good and evil must be understood as an emotion (EIVP8). This step is essential because Spinoza's discussions of (1) the relative powers of knowledge and (2) the relative powers of the emotions actually rely on separate lines of reasoning. The former discussion, regarding knowledge (brought forward in EIVP1), is based on Spinoza's discussion of error: how confused and fragmentary ideas affect and continue to affect the human being, and cause it to regard the relevant external bodies as being present to it (EIIIP17, IIP35). The latter discussion regarding the emotions (EIVP3-P6) is derived from Spinoza's analysis of the relative forces of physical bodies and, via the principle of parallelism, the relative power of external causes as they impact the individual conatus. In this way, I believe Spinoza only succeeds in integrating the relative power of knowledge with respect to the emotions by drawing on the nature of knowledge as simultaneously an emotion in EIVP8.

In addition, it is worth noting that Lin further uses this extended analysis of the early propositions to argue that Spinoza can defend EIVP9 after all; and so Lin disagrees with Bennett and Della Rocca that EIVP9 is unsupported, but he does agree with them that it is essential. On the basis of this, he goes on to suggest that, with a buttressed EIVP9, Spinoza can defend his "principle claims" regarding akrasia as put forward in the following propositions (2006, 396):

1. "We are affected more intensely toward a future thing which we imagine will be quickly present, than if we imagined the time when it will exist to be further from the present." (EIVP10; C, 551)
2. "A Desire which arises from a true knowledge [*cognitione*] of good and evil can be extinguished or restrained by many other Desires which arise from affects by which we are tormented." (EIVP15; C, 553)
3. "A Desire which arises from a [true] knowledge of good and evil, insofar as this knowledge concerns the future, can be quite easily restrained or extinguished by a Desire for the pleasures of the moment." (EIVP16; C, 554)

In this way, Propositions EIVP10 and EIVP16 pertain to the temporal modifications of akrasia. As a result, his account is very different from that of Bennett and Della Rocca, but Lin nevertheless uses his account alone to support what I have identified as Spinoza's secondary theory of akrasia. He thus misses what I see as Spinoza's primary and basic theory of akrasia.

4. CONCLUSION

How is it that what I called the unique and basic approach of Spinoza to akrasia could be so easily overlooked by contemporary philosophers? It seems to be due to the framework of our contemporary discussion on akrasia, especially insofar as it has been informed by the work of Donald Davidson.

It may be said that Davidson's discussion has brought welcome, renewed interest to this perplexing and important issue. Nevertheless, I would like to end by suggesting that the background structure of Davidson's influential account, based on the belief/desire model of interpretation, as outlined in section 1.1, tends to be at odds with several basic insights Spinoza provided with his own distinctive, *causal* account.

Davidson's theory of akrasia essentially reintroduces the Aristotelian model, based on the practical syllogism and the role of beliefs and desires (1980, 21–42). It also emphasizes the nature of akrasia in terms of perfect and imperfect rationality. Since Davidson's account has proven to be highly influential in the contemporary debate, it is perhaps not surprising that there are traces of this influence in both Della Rocca and Lin's discussions of Spinoza. For example, Della Rocca openly frames his discussion of the issue in terms of "irrational action," a classically Davidsonian approach, despite the entirely anachronistic use of this vocabulary (1996b, 237–42). Similarly, Lin draws on equally Davidsonian language when he sets out what he considers to be the main tenets of Spinoza's account in terms of 1) the intensity of our

desires, 2) our rational desires, and 3) “the motivational power of our *rational* desires for future goods” (2006, 396). But as I have tried to show above, both of these approaches obscure some of the core ideas of Spinoza’s entirely alternate account, which is rather based on his understanding of the causal forces of knowledge and the emotions.

Taking a different approach, understanding Spinoza’s theory in terms of its causal mechanisms has allowed me to argue that the first branch of Spinoza’s theory can and does carry the weight of his basic theory of akrasia. In addition, I have further suggested that Spinoza’s theory of the emotions is “successful,” insofar as it can provide a nearly predictive account of akratic behavior. Spinoza himself concludes his account by stating, “with these few words I have explained the causes of man’s lack of power and inconstancy, and why men do not observe the precepts of reason” (EIVP18Sch; C, 555). At the same time, the account of akrasia provides a compelling illustration of his broader theory regarding the power of knowledge and the emotions in determining our everyday actions, emphasizing the power of knowledge as much as its limits compared with the external powers we are acted upon. Spinoza, having rejected the notion of an autonomous faculty of the will, sees human beings as parts of nature who can obtain some degree of freedom, but who will never be absolutely free.

NOTES

1. Throughout this paper, I use the term “akrasia” interchangeably with “weakness of will” (against Audi 1979; Mele 2010). Spinoza did not use either of these terms, instead referring to phenomenon in question as “*impotentiae et inconstantiae*” (EIII, Preface; EIVP18Sch). Lin refers to Spinoza’s treatment of “akrasia” (2006), and I will follow him in this regard. Bennett refers to the propositions pertaining to “affect strength” (1984, 283–4), while Della Rocca uses the concept “irrationality,” adopting a popular designation from contemporary action theory (1996b, 242). The most contemporary trend in the philosophy of action is to identify the phenomenon as “weakness of will,” but given Spinoza’s thoroughgoing rejection of any conception of free will, this would be an inappropriate choice.

2. See also, Hare 1963; Bennett 1974; Watson 1977; Audi 1979; Wiggins 1979; Rorty 1980; Dunn 1987; Gosling 1990.

3. See also, Buss 1997; Tenenbaum 1999; Arpaly 2000; Holton 2003; Smith 2003; Stroud and Tappolet 2003; Thero 2006.

4. See, for instance, Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 7.1-10); Augustine (*Confessions* 8.5); Aquinas (*Summa Theologica* I-II q. 77, art. 1 and 2, II-II q. 156, art. 1); Leibniz (*New Essays on Human Understanding* II, ch. 21, 35).

5. I will qualify and explain this claim in section 2.

6. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Dahl 1984.

7. Augustine (*Confessions* 8.5.11-12); “The Deserts and Remission of Sin” (1955, 187). Augustine is widely held to have introduced the concept of the will into the Western canon. But this is a misconception introduced by Albrecht Dihle (1982). Here, Dihle argued that “the notion of the will, as it is used as a tool of analysis . . . from the early Scholastics to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, was invented by Augustine” (123). However, while acknowledging that Dihle has been highly and rather unfortunately influential, the majority of contemporary scholars of medieval philosophy agree that it is deeply unlikely that Augustine would have understood the will as a separate psychological faculty. Rather, they suggest that he would have conceived of the will as a mixed mental power, much like memory, to which he explicitly compared it in *On Free Choice of the Will* (2.19.51). For a critique of Dihle’s analysis, see Saarinen (1994, 21–2).

8. Aquinas had access to it in the form of Robert Grosseteste’s translation from 1247. Augustine did not have access to the majority of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Saarinen 1994, 43 and 87–94).

9. Of the *Sententia libra Ethicorum*, Saarinen writes that, “in the commentary Thomas often follows Aristotle’s text closely and does not aim at an original contribution (1994, 118),” emphasizing that the more substantial discussion of his views on *akrasia* are presented in the *Summa Theologica* (I-II q. 77, art. 1 and 2, II-II q. 156, art 1) and in *De Malo* (3.9).

10. The Condemnation of March 1277 prohibited the teaching of 219 philosophical and theological theses, many of them Averroist, and included an order to teach a strongly voluntarist conception of free will (Kent 1995, 69).

11. Descartes discusses weakness of will in at least four texts: *Principia* I, 31–43 (Descartes 1991, vol. I, 203–7); *Les passions de l’ame* I, 18 and 44 (1991, vol. I, 344); Descartes to Mesland 5/2/1644 (1991, vol. III, 231–6); Descartes to Mesland 2/9/1645 (1991, vol. III, 244–6). For Descartes’ position, see also Alanen 2003, 220–4; Ong-Van-Cung 2003; Pironet and Tappolet 2003.

12. Spinoza anchors this analysis primarily in his analysis of knowledge in Part II of the *Ethics*, and the analogy of the sun goes as far back as the *TIE*.

13. To avoid confusion I will cite Spinoza according to Curley’s translation although Bennett uses another one. His argument is not affected by the slightly different wording.

14. Interestingly, in IVP1Sch, Spinoza does mention that “imaginationes do not disappear through the presence of the true insofar as it is true, but because there occur others, stronger than them, which exclude the present existence of the thing we imagine, as we showed in IIP17,” (C, 548) essentially repeating the mistake Bennett points out regarding IVP9. But in this case, the phrase does not carry any actual explanatory weight in the proposition.