
External Conditions, Internal Rationality: Spinoza on the Rationality of Suicide

Ian MacLean-Evans*

Abstract

I argue alongside some other scholars that there is a plausible reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide which holds both of the following tenets: first, that suicides occur because of external conditions, and second, that there are at least some suicides which are rational. These two tenets require special attention because they seem to be the source of significant tension. For Spinoza, if one's cognitions are to be the most adequate, they must be "disposed internally" (E2p29s/G II 114), or determined more from one's own mental nature than from "fortuitous encounters" with other things (E2p29s/G II 114). It may seem there is a conflict, then, in saying both that there are rational suicides in the Spinozist framework, and that suicides must always be a result of external conditions: it seems a suicide simply cannot be *rational* if it is the result of *external* conditions. But this tension, it will be shown, can be dissolved. Once this tension is dealt with, I offer some brief closing arguments. I explain how this reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide can satisfy a call for new suicide research which avoids forms of over-individualism and epistemic injustice, and which encourages us to abolish oppressive conditions that lead to rational suicides.

Keywords: Spinoza, Suicide, Freedom, Rationality, Suicidology

Introduction

There is a modest literature on Spinoza's scattered comments on suicide.¹ I here discuss this literature and offer my own contributions to it, as well as point towards some contemporary uses of Spinoza's

1 A version of this paper was first written as a chapter of my Master's thesis, which was funded in-part by a *SSHRC CGS M* scholarship. I am thus indebted to SSHRC for funding this research. I am also indebted to my Master's

* York University (Canada); ianme@yorku.ca; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1323-1348>

philosophy of suicide. In doing so, I argue alongside some other scholars that there is a plausible reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide that holds both of the following tenets: first, that suicides occur because of external conditions, and second, that there are at least some suicides which are rational. These two tenets require special attention because they seem to be the source of significant tension. For Spinoza, if one's cognitions are to be the most adequate, they must be "disposed internally" (E2p29s/G II 114), or determined more from one's own mental nature than from "fortuitous encounters" with other things (E2p29s/G II 114). It may seem odd, then, that there are rational suicides in the Spinozist framework, given that for Spinoza suicides must be a result of external conditions. But this tension can, I argue, be dissolved.

This paper proceeds as follows. In §1, I contextualise and describe each of Spinoza's comments on suicide. In §2, I explain what it means for something to be "rational" in the Spinozist sense, so that we can understand what I am claiming when I say that Spinoza allows for instances of rational suicide. In §3, I discuss some of the debates in the literature concerning one example of suicide that Spinoza gives (the *Seneca case*) as a potentially rational suicide. I also offer a solution to a problem posed by Grey for Nadler's view that Spinoza allows for rational suicide, and a response to a problem posed by Bennett for Spinoza's view that suicide is externally caused.² Grey's problem has not, to my knowledge, been solved by any scholar working on Spinoza's philosophy of suicide, and I aim in this section to address Grey's critique and defend Nadler's view. In §4, I turn towards explaining and relaxing the possible tension between external causation and rational suicide in the Spinozist framework. Here I will point to a passage from the TTP which helps relax the tension, as well as address a potential objection. Finally, in §5, I conclude the paper by discussing how Spinoza's philosophy of suicide could fruitfully be applied to contemporary issues in suicide studies. I argue that we can take Spinoza to be encouraging an approach to studying suicide and addressing its social causes that avoids some issues which scholars in suicide studies have found to be present in many contemporary instances of suicide research, including over-individualism and some pernicious forms of ableist epistemic injustice. The approach also encourages us to abolish the kinds of conditions in which suicide becomes a rational course of action.

1. Spinoza's Mentions of Suicide

To start any discussion of Spinoza's views on suicide, one must at least make passing mention of Spinoza's view that self-destruction is metaphysically impossible. Spinoza explicitly denies the possibility of anything being the cause of its own destruction at E3p4 (G II 145): "[n]o thing can be destroyed except through an external cause." This doctrine is of great importance to the development of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide. Bennett, for example, reads Spinoza's most important comments

supervisors Melissa Frankel and Christine Koggel for their comments and conversations surrounding this piece, as well as to my cohort peers for their comments on this piece during our research seminar at Carleton University.

2 John Grey, "Reply to Nadler: Spinoza and the Metaphysics of Suicide," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (2017), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2016.1230539>; Steven Nadler, "Spinoza on Lying and Suicide," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2016): 380–388, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2015.1084491>; and Steven Nadler, *Think Least of Death: Spinoza on How to Live and How to Die* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

on suicide as an attempt “to reconcile E3p4 with the fact of suicide,”³ and Matson reads Spinoza’s view that suicides are externally caused as being “a consequence of the principle that nothing is self-destructive.”⁴ So, it would be apt to keep the supposed impossibility of self-destruction in mind as we move to discussions of Spinoza’s philosophy of suicide, even if I must avoid a deep discussion of it, in light of this paper’s scope.⁵

As for discussions of suicide specifically, per Barbone and Rice, Spinoza mentions suicide four important times in his corpus: three times in his magnum opus the *Ethics*, and another in one of his letters.⁶ I will examine each of these four texts in this section, but will spend most of the article discussing the Seneca case, which will be the paradigmatic example of Spinozist rational suicide.

The first mention of suicide comes in the second part of the *Ethics*, when Spinoza challenges a hypothetical critique of his view that human behaviour is wholly determined. On Spinoza’s view, a human’s actions are entirely determined by the internal constitution of their body (and the mind representing that body), as well as the external conditions in which the human being finds themselves, rather than through some sort of totally undetermined free-will. One might ostensibly raise a sort of Buridan’s ass dilemma to this view. One could say that on Spinoza’s account, someone placed equidistantly from water and food, and who is equally thirsty and hungry, will waste away and die of hunger or thirst; since they are equally determined towards both food and water, they are unable to actually get to either. In such a situation, one’s desire for food is equally matched by one’s desire for water, and so one is unable to approach either. In response to this hypothetical objection, Spinoza bites the bullet and says the following:

Finally, as far as the fourth objection is concerned, I say that I grant entirely that a man placed in such an equilibrium [...] will perish of hunger and thirst. If they ask me whether such a man should not be thought an ass, rather than a man, I say that I do not know—*just as I also do not know how highly we should esteem one who hangs himself*, or children, fools, and madmen, etc. (E2p49s/G II 135, emphasis my own)

I will set aside the issue of whether Spinoza is right to bite the bullet, instead focusing on what, if anything, we can discern about Spinoza’s philosophy of suicide from this passage.

3 Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 23.

4 Wallace Matson, “Death and Destruction in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 20, no. 1–4 (1977): 410.

5 Examples of problems raised against the inferences in Spinoza’s argument against self-destruction can be found at Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, 235; and Michael Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Psychology,” in Don Garrett, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 202–203. A fairly complete discussion of these “inference problems”, and solutions to them, can be found in Jason Waller, “Spinoza on the Incoherence of Self-Destruction,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17, no. 3 (2009), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608780902986615>. Supposed counterexamples to the denial of self-destruction can be found in Wallace Matson, “Death and Destruction in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 20, no. 1–4 (1977): 407–408, and solutions to these counterexamples can be found in Steven Barbone and Lee Rice, “Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1994): 239–240, <https://dx.doi.org/10.5840/ipq199434211>.

6 Barbone and Rice, “Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide,” 229.

Commentators are divided about whether there is much to consider on suicide from the passage. Matson, for example, thinks the inclusion of suicidal people here is largely “incidental,” since the inclusion of “children, fools, and madmen” reflects a Talmudic idiom, and the inclusion of “one who hangs himself” just sort of adds on to that idiom.⁷ Barbone and Rice, though, think the mention of suicide might be important: it appears at a part of the *Ethics* where Spinoza moves to an elaboration of deterministic human behaviour in contrast to uncaused free-willing, and Spinoza will later describe suicide as the result of external conditions rather than as the result of some uncaused free-will.⁸ They think that this passage, where humans are described as subject to deterministic necessity, foreshadows Spinoza’s later description of suicide as resulting from external forces.

I agree with Matson that this must be a throwaway comment. In this passage, Spinoza notes that he “does not know” how we should view suicidal people. Yet, as we will see, Spinoza has clearly thought quite a lot about suicidality and those who pursue suicide. Hence, he cannot sincerely mean he has *no* idea of how we should view those who pursue suicide. He is, it seems, likely to just be responding sarcastically to his hypothetical objector. This is in character too: he was not one to shy away from glib remarks in response to interlocutors. At E1App (G II 81), for example, while mocking those who believe that everything happens according to some final cause chosen by God, Spinoza says to such people that they “will not stop asking for the causes of causes until you take refuge in the will of God, i.e., *the sanctuary of ignorance*” (emphasis my own). I am willing to mostly disregard this passage as a sarcastic turn of phrase, likening Buridan’s ass to some incomprehensible nonsense in association with a nonchalant idiom, rather than a significant statement about Spinoza’s philosophy of suicide.

I turn now to the only mention of suicide not contained in the *Ethics*. This appearance is in a letter to the amateur theologian Willem van Blijenbergh, who had reached out to Spinoza with questions concerning one of Spinoza’s early works and its implications for God’s role in the creation and preservation of evil. At one point in the correspondence, Spinoza took van Blijenbergh to be asking the following question: “If there was a mind to whose singular nature the pursuit of sensual pleasure and knavery was not contrary, is there a reason for virtue which should move it to do good and omit evil?” (Ep 23, Spinoza to van Blijenbergh, 13 March 1665/G IV 149).

This question does not make sense to Spinoza. What it means to be a “knave,” or to behave unvirtuously, is to behave contrary to your nature (E4Pref/G II 208). So, if a person’s nature disposes them to what we call “knavery,” it would be virtuous for them to pursue “knavery” and so would not be “knavery” at all. As Spinoza puts it,

Finally, your third question presupposes a contradiction. It is as if someone were to ask: if it agreed better with the nature of someone to hang himself, would there be reasons why he should not hang himself? But suppose it were possible that there should be such a nature. Then I say (whether I grant free will or not) that if anyone sees that he can live better on the gallows than at his table, he would act very foolishly if he did not go hang himself. One who saw clearly that in fact he would enjoy a better and more perfect life or essence by being a knave than by following virtue would also be a fool if he were

7 Matson, “Death and Destruction in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” 409.

8 Barbone and Rice, “Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide,” 230.

not a knave. For acts of knavery would be virtue in relation to such a perverted human nature. (Ep 23, Spinoza to van Blijenbergh, 13 March 1665/G IV 152)

Two points can be gleaned from this passage. First, from this passage, we learn that if suicide somehow *did* follow from someone's nature, it would make sense for that person to opt for suicide. We will return to discuss this point later in the article. Second, we see that on Spinoza's account, it cannot be the case that anyone's nature includes or encourages suicide (at least considered only *in itself*), since to think of suicide as part of someone's nature (in itself) would be to "presuppose a contradiction." Presumably, this is because of Spinoza's rejection of self-destruction. We will see later on that while suicide cannot follow from a human's nature when they are considered *in themselves*, it can follow from someone's nature insofar as they are in a given set of circumstances, and so not considered solely *in themselves*.

In the next discussion of suicide, at E4p18s, we see a discussion of how suicides occur. Because "virtue," or "power" (E4def8/G II 210), is the capacity to act in accordance with our *conatus*, and the *conatus* is "[t]he striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being" (E3p7/G II 146), Spinoza holds "that those who kill themselves are weak-minded [*animo esse impotentes*] and completely conquered by external causes contrary to their nature" (E4p18s/G II 222). Those who die by suicide are, through a lack of power, conquered by external conditions that are "contrary to their nature." If one's nature is to "persevere" in being, that which is generally contrary to one's persevering in being, namely death, cannot be purely a result of one's nature. Even if, as I will argue, our *conatus* is not principally concerned with living as long as possible, it is better for us to continue to live so that we may maximise our powers, other things being equal (E4p21/G II 225).⁹ Hence, suicide must be the result of external conditions, not of our own natures.

This passage may seem unsympathetic to suicidal people, given its use of "weak-minded." But proper consideration of the role of the words "weak-minded" here removes the polemical tone. If "power" is just the capacity to act on things, in accordance with our natural striving to "persevere" in our being, then "weakness," as a lack of power, need only be read as something like "incapacity to act to persevere in one's own being." This, then, removes the polemical tone of Spinoza saying that the suicidal are "weak," and makes the claim trivial. If someone dies by suicide, they are obviously rendered incapable of acting to further persevere in their being, and so are "weak" in only a trivial sense. Indeed, the Latin that is translated as "weak-minded" is *animo esse impotentes*. Literally understood, all this means is that the mind is "impotent" or "without power," or thus "lacking the power" or "lacking the capacity." In English, "weak-minded" can imply personal failures, but in this stretch of text, "weak-minded" is a statement free of moralisation: humans, when overcome by external forces such that suicide occurs, are simply "lacking the capacity" to continue to pursue their perseverance in being.

9 As will be seen in §2, the *conatus* cannot principally be concerned with living through a longer period of time. We must thus read E4p21 as akin to something like the following, with my italicised qualification amended to the end: "no one can desire to be blessed, to act well and to live well, unless at the same time they desire to be, to act, and to live, i.e., to actually exist, *insofar as doing so allows them to continue (or go on) to be blessed or act and live well.*"

The most complete set of comments on suicide appears at E4p20s. Here, Spinoza lists three types of suicide (though we have no reason to think he considers this list exhaustive):

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, which can happen in many ways. 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; or because he is forced by the command of a Tyrant (as Seneca was) to open his veins, i.e., he desires to avoid a greater evil by [submitting to] a lesser; or finally because hidden external causes so dispose his imagination, and so affect his Body, that it takes on another nature, contrary to the former, a nature of which there cannot be an idea in the Mind (by E3p10). But that a man should, from the necessity of his own nature, strive not to exist, or to be changed into another form, is as impossible as that something should come from nothing. Anyone who gives this a little thought will see it. (E4p20s/G II 224–225)

The first kind of suicide appears more like a murder than a suicide; the second occurs when one wishes to pursue the least evil option available, like Spinoza says Seneca did; the third occurs when one is so radically changed by external conditions that they no longer are the same thing as they were before their change. Since one of my purposes in this article is to show how only *one* of these kinds of suicide may be considered rational, we can largely ignore the first and third kinds of suicide.

Importantly, the second kind of suicide, the one which Seneca pursued, has been deemed by some Spinoza scholars a *rational* suicide, since Seneca “desires to avoid a greater evil by [submitting to] a lesser” (E4p20s/G II 224) and elsewhere Spinoza claims that “[f]rom the guidance of reason, we shall follow the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils” (E4p65/G II 259). It is precisely the case of Seneca’s death that provides evidence that there can be rational suicides in the Spinozist system. But, before getting into this complicated matter, I must make a significant digression concerning Spinozist rationality in general. Determining whether Seneca’s death constitutes a rational suicide demands an understanding of what it means for an act to be rational in general.

2. Freedom, Rationality, and *Conatus*

It is reason that guarantees our capacity to arrive at complete knowledge, or to arrive at “adequate ideas.” It is reason which lets us derive “adequate ideas” from other “adequate ideas” (E2p40/G II 120), and “adequate ideas” let us fully know things. This requires some explanation.

All objects in the world will have commonalities with others. All bodies, for example, have in common that they are extended, or that they move at varying speeds (E2p1312/G II 98). Those things which are common to all bodies will be perceived *adequately* by all perceivers who encounter another body which shares those commonalities (E2p38/G II 118, E2p39/G II 119–120). Since the two things in the world will share some quality P, they are able to have adequate conceptions of the thing P that they share in common as it exists in the other thing. In such a case, the idea of that which is common to both things, or the *common notion*, cannot fail to be correct. This is an adequate idea, which contrasts with inadequate ideas that result from interacting with properties of things that are not common to both of the interacting things. Adequate ideas result from either common notions,

or discursive or step-based reasoning concerning those common notions,¹⁰ or a sort of well-informed immediate intuitional grasp¹¹—in light of one’s already held knowledge of common notions or what is derived from them (E2p40s2/G II 122).¹²

Further, being rational, and behaving in ways that generate adequate ideas, is equivalent to our being free. Spinoza tells us that someone who “is led by reason” is who he calls “a free man” (E4p66s/G II 260): a “free man, *i.e.*, *one who lives according to the dictate of reason alone*” (E4p67d/G II 261, emphasis my own). So, understanding what it is to be a rational person, or for an act to be rational, amounts to understanding what it is for a person or act to be free in the Spinozist sense. Yet understanding Spinozist freedom and rationality requires also understanding more completely a basic Spinozist concept: the *conatus* doctrine.

Each thing in the universe, by its respective nature, is engaged in a striving to “persevere” in its being (E3p7/G II 146). However, the *conatus*, or this striving, is not aimed merely at persisting through a longer amount of time (E3p8/G II 147). As Della Rocca notes, for Spinoza, “from x’s essence alone it cannot be determined how long x will exist.”¹³ Spinoza makes the relative unimportance of durational existence clear in his description of a thing’s being perfect:

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 (E4Pref/G II 209, emphasis my own).

Now, one’s *conatus* is one’s power of acting on other things, and the strength of this power is equivalent to one’s degree of virtue (E4d8/G II 210).¹⁴ Naturally, we strive to increase this power, to be more virtuous. Everything, from humans, to rocks, to tables, is constantly striving to increase their powers to act on other things.¹⁵ Because we all naturally strive for the expansion of our powers, we most properly call those things “good” which lead to the expansion of our powers to produce effects on other things, or which lead to the perfection of our natures. E4d1 (G II 209) states that “By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful to us,” where “useful” means “what

10 What Spinoza calls the “second kind of knowledge” (E2p40s2/G II 122).

11 What Spinoza calls the “third kind” of knowledge (E2p40s2/G II 122).

12 I henceforth consider us as “rational,” or using “reason,” when we behave in any of these ways that produce adequate ideas, although in this section on adequate ideas Spinoza only calls the second kind of knowledge “reason” (E2p40s2/G II 122).

13 Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Psychology,” 203.

14 Youpa emphasises “Spinoza’s identification of an individual’s *conatus* with adequate causal power” and notes that “[t]he best way of life is that which follows from our actual essence,” which includes pursuing joys, since they are symptomatic of increases in our power and thus indicate that we are acting towards our natural pursuit of power. See: Andrew Youpa, *The Ethics of Joy: Spinoza on the Empowered Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 4. For Youpa’s complete analysis and argument for this reading, see Ch 1-3.

15 Della Rocca, for example, suggests that the *conatus* doctrine posits that “each thing not only strives to persist in existence, but also strives to prevent any decrease in what Spinoza calls power of acting (*agendi potentia*) and indeed strives to do whatever will increase its power of acting.” Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Psychology,” 210.

increases... our power of acting” (E4p8d/G II 215). As Youpa puts it, “An increase in an individual’s power as a whole is a genuine enhancement of his nature.”¹⁶

I will now return to the Spinozist sense of freedom. Something “is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone” (E1Def7/G II 46). We are free when we act as a result of our own nature, and, by the *conatus* doctrine, our nature encourages us to increase our powers of activity. When we act in accordance with our *conatus*, we are free. The free person is juxtaposed to someone who acts not from their own nature, but rather from the influence of things external to them. We are unfree when we are determined to act not from our own natural rationality (since freedom and rationality, as mentioned, are interchangeable), but from external compulsion. When we are unfree, we are pushed around in the universe like billiard balls. When we are free, we are pushed about by ourselves, by our own natures. When we are free or when we behave rationally, we act to know things from the necessity of our own instantiated being and to increase our power.

Different behaviours or thoughts, though, will be free and rational when situated in different contexts. One especially fruitful reading of Spinozist rationality and freedom that articulates this point comes from Hasana Sharp.¹⁷ On Sharp’s reading, since Spinozist reason or freedom is a mind’s arriving at adequate ideas more from its own *actual* nature than from external natures, “reason [...] is not necessarily universal in content [...] (rather) Reason is the power of a particular mind to generate ideas from its idiosyncratic, singular nature.”¹⁸ This reading is corroborated by Spinoza’s view that essences are instantiated in a world that provides different opportunities for power expansion for different singular people, and limits different people’s powers in different, often unexpected ways: “it is clear that we are driven about in many ways by external causes, and that, like waves on the sea, driven by contrary winds, we toss about, not knowing our outcome and fate” (E3p59s/G II 189). So, while we may agree or pursue the same things by reason insofar as we are human, we disagree by reason insofar as we are differently situated and so we must often pursue different things. For this reason, Sharp suggests that “[w]e can reasonably disagree... since what supports my nature, what enables me to continue to be, is not necessarily what supports your being.”¹⁹

Yet Spinoza claims, for example, that when we are rational we will agree with each other (E4p35/G II 232). Sharp reads these kinds of passages as suggesting that, though we are differently situated, reason compels us generally to find similarities with others and work together for our own advantage. While it might be rational for me to do something and irrational for you to do the same thing, it is rational for us to understand and agree why that thing may be rational for one person and not for another, and it will also be rational for us to work towards those things which are good for each of us by way of what we do have in common, namely our *conatus*. Sharp notes:

16 Youpa, *The Ethics of Joy*, 28.

17 An alternative account that gets at something similar, where freedom comes in degrees depending on one’s relational position with the world, can be found in Caroline Williams, “Revisiting Spinoza’s Concept of Conatus: Degrees of Autonomy,” in Aurelia Armstrong, Keith Green, and Andrea Sangiacomo, eds., *Spinoza and Relational Autonomy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). On Williams’ reading of Spinoza, “the relational autonomy of bodies of all kinds will be constituted by and through degrees of power,” Williams, “Revisiting Spinoza’s Concept of Conatus,” 123.

18 Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 95.

19 Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, 96.

When Spinoza exclaims that ‘men who are governed by reason—that is, men who, from the guidance of reason, seek their own advantage—want nothing for themselves which they do not desire for other men’ (E4p18s), recall that what rational men want is simply greater power to think (know God, or nature) and act. Rational desires might involve general precepts, such as to cultivate our capacities as modes of thought and extension through self-diversification, but what contributes to self-enhancement and the content of self-knowledge is not identical for each and every human being.²⁰

We have here a reading which allows that it is rational for everyone to pursue what is best for their *conatus*, and for everyone to understand this universal pursuit. What is actually involved in that pursuit will, though, differ depending on our respective situations. This reading manages to make sense, too, of some of Spinoza’s other maxims. For example, Spinoza notes that, contrary to common reasoning, things are not good or bad purely in themselves, but rather have value only in relation to other things which strive in accordance with their respective *conatus*:

As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves [...]. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For example, Music is good for one who is Melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf. (E4Pref/G II 208)

Spinoza does not explain why exactly music is supposedly good for the melancholic, bad for the mourning, and neither good nor bad for the deaf, but this is enough to see that differently situated people should value different things.

Another preliminary note should here be made. Because Spinoza explicitly tells us that “[i]t is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause” (E4p4/G II 212), we must grant that we cannot ever be absolutely free. No matter what, because we are situated in a universe full of things that impact us, we cannot always and only act from our own natures. We may only do our best to be as free as possible. We must thus accept that we are always only free to different degrees, and hence only rational to differing degrees.²¹ Some passages hint at this explicitly. For example, Spinoza writes that “[i]n life, therefore, it is especially useful to perfect, as far as we can, our intellect, *or* reason” (emphasis in original) (E4App4/G II 267). The “as far as we can” (*quantum possumus*) here is telling; we should always be striving to be as free as possible, even if we cannot be absolutely free.²²

20 Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, 99.

21 Again, see Williams, “Revisiting Spinoza’s Concept of Conatus,” for an alternate reading of Spinoza that gets to this same point. Youpa also shares the view that, for Spinoza, humans are free *in degrees*, but holds the interesting position that we can still be said to be “genuinely free,” even if not “in the absolute sense” (Youpa, *The Ethics of Joy*, 138–139).

22 This is to ignore the complicated issues posed by Part V of the *Ethics*, which is concerned with the mind’s freedom or, ultimately, “blessedness” (E5pref/G II 277). It turns out that some version of freedom must be found in the intellectual love of God (E5p36s/G II 303). All this despite Spinoza’s own admission that, when it comes to externally

With Spinozist freedom and rationality briefly explained, it should be clear why I say that there is a *prima facie* tension between there being rational suicides, which are thus freely and internally caused, and the Spinozist view that suicides are always “externally” caused. Before resolving this tension, let’s consider Seneca’s death and why Spinoza thinks it constitutes a *rational* suicide.

3. The Seneca Case

In book 15 of Tacitus’ *The Annals*, we learn of Seneca’s death. The Roman tyrant Nero had uncovered a plot to overthrow him, and had, using threat of torture against one of the plotters, concluded that the statesman and Stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca was involved in the plot. It is unclear whether Seneca was actually culpable: Tacitus writes that the plotter who implicated Seneca did so “either as having been a messenger between him and Piso (another plotter), or to win the favour of Nero, who hated Seneca and sought every means for his ruin.”²³ In any case, as consequence for his alleged involvement in the plot, Nero ordered Seneca’s death by suicide. Seneca then, on the command of Nero, opted to die by suicide, and on Spinoza’s reading avoids “a greater evil by [submitting to] a lesser” (E4p20s/G II 224). Opting for suicide rather than disobeying Nero makes some intuitive sense, given that Nero was wont to ruthless vengeance. Tacitus writes that another plotter “was dragged off to a place set apart for the execution of slaves, and butchered by the hand of the tribune Statius.”²⁴ Evidence thus indicated that Seneca’s available options were limited either to a death at his own hands, an option that enabled him to first speak with his wife and other companions and then choose his method of death, or to face the consequences of Nero’s wrath, an option that could mean a horrible public execution or grueling torture. Seneca, on Spinoza’s reading, is thus “forced by the command of the tyrant” (Nero) to die by suicide, in light of its being the least evil of the available options.

The Seneca case is a difficult one. Some commentators insist that, on the Spinozist view, we must count Seneca’s suicide as rational, or at least hold that Seneca’s suicide “was to some extent virtuous,”²⁵ while others read Spinoza as intending to strictly prohibit rational or virtuous suicides. Among the former camp are Nadler and LeBuffe, and among the latter are Grey and Matson.²⁶ To keep the discussion focused, I will concentrate on Nadler and Grey’s discussions of the issue and call this debate the Nadler-Grey debate. While Nadler offers a compelling argument for reading Seneca’s suicide as rational, I do not think Nadler has adequately addressed Grey’s important

caused affects, the power of the mind “does not have an absolute dominion over them” (E5pref/G II 277). This portion of the *Ethics* is famously hard to interpret. In a well-known passage, Bennett calls the later portions of Part V “an unmitigated and seemingly unmotivated disaster” (Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, 357).

23 Tacitus, “The Annals, Book 15” trans. Alfred John Church and Jackson Brodribb (1876), [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Annals_\(Tacitus\)/Book_15](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Annals_(Tacitus)/Book_15), §56.

24 Tacitus, “The Annals, Book 15,” §60.

25 Michael LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 192.

26 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, Ch 9; Nadler, “Spinoza on Lying and Suicide”; Lebuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom*, 192; Grey, “Reply to Nadler”; Matson, “Death and Destruction in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” 410.

challenge to this reading.²⁷ In what follows, I will offer my own response to Grey's objection to help establish that Spinoza does, indeed, allow for rational suicide.

Some, like Bennett, have argued also that the whole Spinozist account of Seneca's suicide as the result of external causes is untenable, while others, like Barbone and Rice, have, I contend, solved the putative problems in a satisfying way.²⁸ I will call this second debate the Bennett-BR (for Barbone and Rice) debate.

The two debates are, of course, related. The Nadler-Grey debate deals with Seneca's rationality, which, as we saw in §2 of this article, is interchangeable with Seneca's freedom. The Bennett-BR debate deals with whether or not Seneca's suicide was self-caused, which, as we saw in §2 of this paper, is also a question concerning Spinozist freedom and rationality. I deal with each of these debates separately but note the importance of their convergence. What these debates end up clarifying are, respectively, the ways that Seneca's suicide is both "free" and also "externally caused." Let us deal first with the Nadler-Grey debate.

3.1. The Nadler-Grey Debate

The Nadler-Grey debate concerns whether Spinoza admits the metaphysical possibility of rational suicides. The Seneca case is especially important to those, like Nadler, who hold that Spinoza allows for rational suicide; Seneca's death is thought to be the paradigmatic example of such a suicide. But for others, like Grey, different aspects of Spinoza's thought rule out any instance of rational suicide. We will look at both views, and I will offer a reply to Grey's critique of Nadler.

Nadler reiterates that our *conatus*, our striving to persevere in our being, is not merely about temporal duration. The *conatus* has the rational person strive for "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."²⁹ Other passages from the *Ethics* suggest as much, too. Consider that Spinoza generally prohibits lying, noting that "[a] free man always acts honestly, not deceptively" (E4p72/G II 264), and this general prohibition on lying stands even in cases where we could save our lives by lying (E4p72s/G II 264). So, what the "free" or "rational" person must be pursuing in accordance with their *conatus* must be something besides simple, durational existence, or else they could lie to save themselves whenever needed. So, purely in terms of the *conatus*, rationality does not *always* exclude dying, or the pursuit of death.

If we want to be "rational" to as great a degree as we can, and hence act in accordance with our *conatus*, we must be more concerned with our capacities to have effects on other things than with our capacity to extend our existence through a longer duration. As discussed in §2, the "free" or "rational" person must pursue a greater power of activity. Since Spinoza also holds that "[j]oy is a man's passage from a lesser to a greater perfection" (E3def aff2/G II 191) and that "[s]adness is

27 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 223, note 6, quickly provides a train of thought against Grey's critique by mentioning that some passages of the *Ethics* suggest that the free person is aware of their mortality. But, it is not enough that the free person is aware of their mortality (i.e. can have adequate ideas of things after their death); rather, on Grey's reading, the free person specifically needs to adequately consider the *quality* of a situation when they perish vs. when they do not.

28 Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, §56; Barbone and Rice, "Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide."

29 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 163.

a man's passage from a greater to a lesser perfection" (E3def aff3/G II 191), we can allow that (1) when we pass to a state with some degree more joy we experience an increase of our powers, and so, *ceteris paribus*, we should pursue joy; and (2) when we pass to a state with some degree more sadness we experience a decrease of our powers, and so, *ceteris paribus*, we should avoid sad states.

These notes give us the necessary preliminary information for Nadler's view of the Seneca example. Nadler points out that Spinoza claims that Seneca aims "to avoid a greater evil by [submitting to] a lesser" (E4p20s/G II 224), and that Spinoza elsewhere explicitly says that "[f]rom the guidance of reason, we shall follow the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils" (E4p65/G II 259). As such, it seems that Seneca would be acting "from the guidance of reason" in his pursuit of suicide. A death by suicide is also, presumably, more joyful or less sad than a death at the hands of Nero. In preserving his power of activity, and his most joyful possible state, Seneca elects to die by suicide, and so suffers the lesser evil in comparison to a constricted and much more painful or humiliating death at the hands of Nero.³⁰ Seneca represents, it seems, the paradigmatic case of rational suicide. As we saw in Sharp's reading of Spinozist rationality, freedom comes in degrees, and in exercising his rationality, Seneca exercises whatever degree of freedom is available to him in this tragically restrictive situation.

Nadler anticipates some objections. First, an objector could note that for Spinoza, one who is born free and remains free never experiences sadness since they never hold any thoughts of the bad (E4p68/G II 261), but suicide is sad, and so suicide is never thought of and thus pursued by the free or rational person. But, Nadler replies, Spinoza also explicitly notes that it is impossible to actually be born free (E4p4/G II 212). Such a state is purely hypothetical. The freest actual person, the *actual* person with the greatest degree of freedom, could still be affected by sadness in some cases, and still be acting based on rational deliberation and not primarily as a result of a sad passion.³¹

Next, and similarly, an objector might suggest that, since Spinoza insists that rational behaviour is always joyful behaviour, and suicide is not joyful, suicide cannot be rational. Indeed, as we have seen, what is good leads to perfection, and so must be joyful, but Spinoza notes that "[b]y a Desire arising from reason, we directly follow the good" (E4p63c/G II 258), and presumably we do not find suicide joyful. But, again, Nadler points out that Spinoza notes that the lesser of two evils is properly regarded as a good (E4p65c/G II 259–260), at least to some degree, and so will not be properly seen as "sad" (in the Spinozist sense) as the objector suggests.³²

So, Nadler thinks he has defended an account of Spinoza that allows the possibility of rational suicides. Interestingly, Nadler writes in one of his endnotes that Grey has replied to his position,³³ and only offers minimal discussion as reply.³⁴ Here I describe Grey's reply to Nadler's view, and then show how Nadler could avoid the difficulty Grey presents.

On Grey's reading, Spinoza explicitly holds it impossible that we can have an adequate idea of something which excludes our own existence (E3p10/G II 148), and Grey thinks that for a suicide to be rational, we would need an adequate idea of the situation that includes our own death to compare

30 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 169–170.

31 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 165.

32 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 167.

33 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 222, note 18.

34 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 223, note 6.

it against the situation where we continue to exist. Obviously, our own death excludes our existence, and so it would not seem that Spinoza allows for us to have an adequate idea of such a situation. Grey writes:

In order for his (Seneca's) suicide to be a free and rational action, he would also have needed an adequate knowledge of his own death and its relative goodness or badness for him. Yet, as I have argued, Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine entails that nobody can have such knowledge.³⁵

The solution to Grey's critique is like so: for the Spinozist, we need not have an adequate idea of anything which happens after our death in our rational considerations of suicide, and so we need not have an adequate idea which excludes our existence.

Consider the following: Seneca knows that in the scenario where he does not pursue suicide, he will experience tremendous misery and sadness at the hand of Nero. However, in the scenario where he pursues suicide, up until he pursues the suicide, his high degree of joy (only relative to the situation in which he does not pursue suicide) is unaffected. What happens after he dies is irrelevant for Seneca's purposes, since he will no longer exist.³⁶ It does not matter for the sake of Seneca's decision that he consider his death, properly speaking, but only the amount of joy or sadness, and thus his levels of perfection, up until his death, including the process of dying, in either situation. Given his knowledge of the expected amount of joy or misery in the time leading up to his death (including the process of dying) in both situations, Seneca is still able to exercise what degree of freedom he has access to, and make a rational decision about which scenario is superior. There is, then, still the possibility for rational suicide on Spinozist grounds, despite Grey's objection.

One might raise issues here by pointing out that, for Spinoza, at least some parts of our souls or minds persist after death (E5p23/G II 295), so Seneca would actually have reason to consider what happens after his death, insofar as the wellbeing of the immortal parts of his soul is concerned. But this issue can also be avoided. What makes Seneca *Seneca* is also his body, given that his mind, properly speaking, is just the idea of his body (E2p11–13/G II 94–96). So, whatever bits of Seneca which persist after his body dies are no longer enough to properly constitute *Seneca*, since his mind, being the same thing as his body but considered under a different attribute, cannot be what it was when it was *Seneca*. As such, whatever bits of Seneca that persist after his death are irrelevant in considering whether suicide is rational for *Seneca*.

One further complication to this solution may lay in the fact that there remains, eternally, an idea which expresses the body (E5p22/G II 295). If this is the case, it seems that Seneca proper may stick around after death, so to speak, more than I am claiming he does. But it seems clear that Spinoza's claim here does not mean Seneca proper continues existing as he did when alive, since after death it is explicit that the eternal mind, even when expressing the eternal body, can no longer

³⁵ Grey, "Reply to Nadler," 387.

³⁶ At most, Seneca basing his ideas or actions on what happens after his death would contribute a degree of rationality to his decision. If this *were* the case, and was indeed impossible given Grey's view that we cannot have adequate ideas of what happens after our death, it would still only represent a *degree* of rationality which is trumped by the degree to which we are empowered or restricted by decisions *during* our life. See also my footnote 44.

remember or imagine things (E5p21/G II 294). The thing which persists after Seneca's death as eternal mind (and as idea of the eternal body) is sufficiently changed to no longer be Seneca proper.^{37, 38}

One might also raise the following objection: surely the rationality of an action depends at least somewhat on its potential *outcomes*, and so, when Seneca is pursuing suicide, he must think of its outcomes to determine its rationality. However, for Seneca to do this properly, he requires having an adequate idea of what would happen after his suicide, which, as we saw Grey argues, Seneca cannot have. Indeed, the objector may point to Spinoza's own life to make this point: Spinoza's *Ethics* was not publicly published while he was alive. It was only after Spinoza's death that the *Ethics* became the unusually influential text which it has since become, even if while alive word had gotten around about Spinoza's views and some of the contents of the *Ethics*. Still, despite the writing of the *Ethics* not having maximal impact on Spinoza during his life, writing the *Ethics* was rational: its positive outcome, beyond Spinoza's death, shows this.³⁹

To this, I offer the following. Of course, the outcomes of an action are important for one to determine its rationality, but *only* when one will continue to exist after that action is taken and thus be impacted by its outcomes. Recall: an action's rationality is determined by how much it aids one's striving to persevere in being, and so an act is always rational *in relation to a conative perspective*. When I am thirsty and drink a glass of water, acting towards my replenishment makes the act rational *for me*. With my thirst quenched, I will be more able to act in accordance with the demands of my *conatus*, and so it is rational *for me* to drink a glass of water. This act is totally arational (neither rational nor irrational) for others, it simply has no bearing on their striving and so it simply makes no sense to talk of its rationality for them; to think otherwise would be to make a category error. This is not to say that nothing anyone else ever does matters for us, Spinoza is quite clear that having

37 An alternative reply to this objection may be developed following LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom*, Ch 12, wherein it is argued that when Spinoza speaks of the mind existing after the destruction of the body, he is really just considering the goods of the mind *separately* from the body: "Part of what (Spinoza thinks) is false about traditional (religious) views, however, and what Spinoza will replace, is the view that mind endures after the body's death. The second half of Part 5 [of the *Ethics*] should be understood, rather, as an account of the human good considered, not after the body, but without relation to the body" (LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom*, 210).

38 My argument here could be problematized by the array of authors who think Spinoza holds in Part V of the *Ethics* that the eternal mind constitutes personal immortality. If this is indeed the case, then Seneca will have to consider the impacts his actions would have on him after his mortal death. However, many contemporary commentators do not think Spinoza allows for personal immortality. Authors who seem to support Spinozist personal immortality include: Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1934), vol. 2, 318; Harry M. Tiebout, "Deus, Sive Natura..." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 16, no. 4 (1956): 512–521; Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (New York: Harvester, 1988), 198–200 (his discussion of Hannibal); Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 375; Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 259. Authors who agree with me and oppose such a personal reading include: Clare Carlisle, "Spinoza On Eternal Life," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2015), <https://dx.doi.org/10.5840/acpq201412842>; Mogens Lærke, "Spinoza on the Eternity of the Mind," *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review / Revue Canadienne de Philosophie* 55, no. 2 (2016): 269, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0012217316000445>; Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 183; Dan Taylor, *Spinoza and the Politics of Freedom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 76.

39 This line of objection, and the example of Spinoza's writing the *Ethics*, comes from a reviewer report on my initial submission to the *Journal of Spinoza Studies*. I am indebted to the reviewer for pointing it out and thus prompting me to address it.

capable, rational, and kind friends and community members is a good (E4p35–E4p37s1/G II 232–237), but just that what is rational is ultimately so in relation to a given conative perspective.⁴⁰

Now, for Seneca, if suicide does indeed end his life, then nothing after his death can possibly have any impact on his suicide's rationality. Again, after his death, rationality simply doesn't enter the question. After Seneca's death, there will be no more Seneca whose *conatus* can be strengthened or harmed, and so nothing after his death can play a role in determining his suicide's rationality. The same is true, I suppose, for Spinoza's writing the *Ethics*. While it would have been nice for him to have seen how much his work has held influence (or stirred up controversy) historically, the popularity of the *Ethics* in the time since Spinoza's death has no impact on Spinoza's *conatus* (indeed, his *conatus* is long gone), and so does not bear on the rationality of his writing the *Ethics* during his life. While writing the *Ethics* and discussing it with his inner-circle no doubt was rational for Spinoza insofar as it improved his thinking and led him to develop what he took to be adequate ideas (and also imparted those ideas in his peers), its rationality for him is not impacted by its popularity of influence after his death. Even if we wanted to say that somehow Spinoza's eternal mind enjoyed the benefits of writing the *Ethics* after his death (which would be controversial, see footnote 41), once Spinoza died the eternal portion of his mind would be unaffected by worldly matters. It would no longer change, since it would no longer have an extended body which was affected by the world after his death (E5p21d/G II 294-295), and so it would only enjoy those benefits which it enjoyed during the process of working out the *Ethics*, as opposed to any benefits created by its influence.⁴¹

Similarly, in considering the rationality of his suicide, Seneca need only consider the outcomes up until the point of his death. Afterwards, there will simply be no *conatus* for rationality to be relevant to. So, again, he need not have an adequate idea of what happens after his death.

It should be clear now that Nadler's view that Seneca's death constitutes a rational suicide, insofar as it exercises what degree of freedom Seneca maintains, is apt. Rational suicides are thus possible in the Spinozist view. This view survives Grey's attack. Seneca may need an adequate idea of the long-term outcomes of his actions for considering whether most acts are rational, but if he intends to die he need only consider the outcomes up until his death, as afterwards there will be no relevant *conatus* for things to strengthen or harm.⁴²

40 I think also that the rationality of, say, Spinoza's posthumous publication of the *Ethics* can be considered from the conative perspective of e.g., the philosophical community or of Spinoza's peers and thus could be rational or irrational in those lights, though it would be arational for Spinoza considered in himself.

41 "The Mind neither expresses the actual existence of its Body, nor conceives the Body's affections as actual, except while the Body endures" (E5p21d/G II 294). So, the eternal mind is unaffected by external events after the body's death, since the only way the mind is impacted externally is by affects, and Spinoza defines all affects as necessarily occurring through the body, even if they are paralleled by mental affections (ideas of the bodily affections): "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" (E3d3/G II 139). I must thank Kristin Primus for pointing out during the editorial process that I could here mention the eternal mind's (plausible) immutability.

42 I should note that the objector could potentially continue to argue with me here that e.g., doing something which aids others after death must be rational since "all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all" (E4p18s/G II 223). But even if this counts as providing a *degree* of rationality, or follows from adequate ideas or good reasoning *to a degree*, one must prioritise their own power maximisation, since that is fundamentally the priority of our striving. Concerning oneself with the least evil option, which may in tragic circumstances be suicide,

3.2 The Bennett-BR Debate

Bennett is not convinced that Spinoza's view is coherent at all, and he thinks that to speak of Nero as "forcing" Seneca to die by suicide is absurd. Bennett has us consider the following: suppose you prefer eating apples to eating oranges. Now suppose we have an apple and some oranges in our possession. I then eat the only apple. Have I thus "forced" you to eat an orange? Bennett's answer is a firm "no." If you eat an orange after I have eaten the apples, that was of your own volition. Bennett treats this case as analogous to the Seneca case. Seneca presumably prefers to go on living his normal life rather than die, but Nero takes away his option to go on living his normal life, and so Nero supposedly forces Seneca to die. But, per Bennett, the apple-orange example supposedly shows that this is not how we should see the situation. On Bennett's view, just as I have not forced you to eat the orange, Nero has not forced Seneca to die by suicide; that was Seneca's own doing.⁴³

Bennett anticipates a reply to the apple-orange example: he warns us *not* to say the difference in the two scenarios is one of a sort of "Strong" vs. "Weak" influence. That is, we cannot think Nero's influence is of a "Strong" kind and my influence in the apple-orange example is of a "Weak" kind. Bennett suggests that in both cases the influence is *decisive*, a course of action becomes inevitable given the situation. The strong/weak distinction is not relevant. Supposedly, since I do not force you to eat the orange by eating an apple (and thus render your eating the orange inevitable), Nero does not force Seneca to die by suicide.⁴⁴

Barbone and Rice start us on a reply to the apple-orange objection. The Seneca case and the apple-orange case are not similarly decisive. In the Seneca case, the available options to Seneca are, for all intents and purposes, exhaustive. Either Seneca will die by suicide, or he will be taken by Nero's forces and suffer a worse fate. In the apple-orange case, as Bennett gives it, if I eat the only apple and there are now only oranges, you can still leave my company, pop over to Walmart, and procure a nice honey crisp. The option-set of eating an apple or an orange is not exhaustive in the same way as the Seneca case is, so the influence that I have on you when I eat the apple is not decisive in the same sense as Nero's influence on Seneca is. To make the situations more alike, Barbone and Rice suggest the following revised version:

Suppose that the conditions are such that you must and will eat a piece of fruit, and that all that is available is an apple, an orange, and a banana. Furthermore, suppose that you are so built that you prefer an apple to an orange, and an orange to everything else. If I eat our only apple, have I forced you to select an orange? Yes. And so likewise Nero has forced Seneca to kill himself.⁴⁵

When one shows the exhaustivity of the option-set, by including the qualifiers that you must and will eat a fruit, my own intuition is the same as Barbone and Rice's: just as Nero forced Seneca to die, I forced you to eat an orange. In light of this, those who share this intuition can say that the

has a higher degree of adequacy. Again, I must thank Kristin Primus for prompting me to mention degrees of adequacy in this section.

43 Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 237.

44 Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 237.

45 Barbone and Rice, "Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide," 232–233.

apple-orange issue is resolved. Bennett's analogical argument fails because the analogy is not sufficiently similar to the Seneca case, and so Bennett fails to raise doubt that Seneca's death was externally forced by Nero.

Of course, the apple-orange scenario does get at *something* about the Seneca case, especially the revised, more accurate version provided by Barbone and Rice: Seneca is forced into a situation where his only options are to die by suicide or refuse and suffer a worse fate. That is, like the revised apple-orange scenario, he is forced to pick one of the available options, and which options those are is forced upon him. However, as we saw in the discussion of the Nadler-Grey debate, it is rational to pick the lesser evil. So, for Seneca, pursuing suicide is free, since it is rational, even if Nero forces it to occur. You may be forced to choose a fruit, but you may still freely choose the greater one, insofar as doing so is more rational. In this sense, Seneca still exercises his available degree of freedom, even if he is forced by Nero to do so.

Bennett raises another issue as well: it seems like Seneca's death must have followed from his own nature. Bennett poses a problem, where no matter how we read "essence" with regards to Seneca's essence, it will be untenable to consider Seneca's death a suicide. On Bennett's view, if Spinoza means that Seneca is killed by forces external to his instantiated nature at the time of his death, then Spinoza is simply wrong, since clearly Seneca's actual instantiated body at the time of his death (i.e., some subset of all the instantiated things pertaining to "Seneca" that allow him to act on the world) supplied the force necessary for his death. Just as Seneca's body acts on the world, it acted on himself in pursuing suicide. On the other hand, if Spinoza means here that Seneca's death was caused by forces external to his essence insofar as it constitutes only those things that *essentially* compose Seneca, then Seneca would have been killed by some "accidental" property of his (it would have to be some property of Seneca to be a suicide). But, if this were the case, then Spinoza would be committed to banning self-destruction only in some weak sense, where a thing's necessary properties may never be the cause of self-destruction, but a thing's *accidental* properties could cause it to self-destruct. Yet, Spinoza makes it clear that "[n]o thing can be destroyed except through an external cause" (emphasis my own) (E3p4/G II 145), and so it should not be the case that even accidental properties may be the cause of self-destruction, since "no thing" at all can self-destruct. In either case, Bennett thinks, Spinoza cannot account for the fact that Seneca's death must have been caused by some amount of force in Seneca's body.⁴⁶

Again, though, this problem can be dealt with, and I here offer my own solution. What was Seneca's own doing was the pursuit of a lesser evil, which in this case was forced by Nero to be suicide. Again, what is rational and thus follows from Seneca's nature, in either way that Bennett reads Seneca's essence, is his pursuit of the best possible outcome. But the options available, and thus what that best possible outcome actually is, is the result of Nero's actions. In this sense, the suicide was forced by Nero, and not by Seneca's capacities. Insofar as Nero forced the option-set to include only suicide and options worse than suicide, Nero forced Seneca to die by suicide. In our discussion of Bennett, we must recall the following from §2: insofar as humans are differently situated, different options are better for them. That is, different options are more rational or indicate more freedom than other options in different situations. But, insofar as we all partake in humanity, the same things are true for all of us. All humans "require continuous and varied food" (E4App27/

46 Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 238.

G II 274), but if I am starving, and must eat as soon as possible, and am actually situated in a diner, and you are similarly starving and actually situated in a coffee shop (and we both have enough money and the kinds of dietary and religious/moral views that allow us to eat the relevant foods), then the actual foods most available to fill our requirements will be different. Similarly, as we have already seen, we should all pursue the least available evil or the greatest available good (E4p65/G II 259), and so we exhibit freedom when doing so. But what those goods or evils actually are is often determined by external circumstances. Seneca is forced to die by suicide by Nero, even if he may pursue the least available evil by virtue of his own nature. This circumvents the problem posed by Bennett: what is external is Seneca's surrounding context, or the tyranny of Nero, which forced Seneca's options to be so limited. While Seneca's opting for the least available evil, or his use of rational judgement, counts as internal rationality, his death is still externally caused by Nero's influence.

4. Squaring External Causes and Internal Rationality

Spinoza thus holds both that all suicides are externally caused, and also that there are rational suicides. But this is a potential source of great tension: how can Spinoza hold that a suicide can be both rational and externally caused, if what it means for an action to be "rational" is that it results from our own internal natures? I here describe Nadler's way of relieving this tension, then give my own solution by turning to a particular passage of Spinoza's TTP that I think to be especially enlightening.

Nadler, again, rightly points out that Spinoza holds that humans are caught up in a world full of external causes which unavoidably act on them.⁴⁷ Spinoza makes this quite clear: "It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause" (E4p4/G II 212). So, when we ask that someone be "rational," we cannot ask that they act in an entirely self-caused and thus rational manner. This is beyond the realm of possibility. We can ask only that people be as rational as possible, so exercising a maximal degree of freedom, given their circumstances. Nadler has us dissolve the tension by holding that, in the case of rational suicides, external causes force suicide to be the least of the available evils to someone, and yet internally motivated rationality forces someone to pursue the lesser of the available evils, i.e., suicide. They thus act rationally insofar as they act "as rationally as possible":

one can be trapped, even "defeated," by one's circumstances, and an action can be "compelled by external causes [*causis externis coactus*]" in the sense that one must choose only among certain available options, and yet the outcome can still be a free and rational act: there may simply be no better alternatives and so one chooses what seems best, from the perspective of reason.⁴⁸

47 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 168.

48 Nadler, *Think Least of Death*, 169.

In my view, this is a perfectly fine way of dissolving the tension, and is also mirrored by others like LeBuffe, who writes in a very short discussion of the Seneca case that:

Spinoza’s discussion of the case at 4p20s suggests that Seneca’s action was right, given the alternative, but also—what perhaps philosophers like Seneca who endorse suicide with less qualification do not acknowledge readily enough—that any circumstances in which suicide is the right thing to do are also circumstances in which a person’s freedom has been tragically reduced.⁴⁹

LeBuffe thus holds that Seneca is rational to pursue the least available evil, but also that his “freedom” has been “tragically reduced” by Nero’s tyrannical ways. Seneca is acting to as rational a degree as possible, but Nero still, as an external condition, forces suicide to be the most rational option.

Still, there is more to be said, given an interesting comment in the TTP. Spinoza tells us quite explicitly that it is never possible for someone to surrender all their freedom, even in the most brutal cases of tyranny, cases much like Seneca’s. People always maintain some degree of freedom. Indeed, “it must be granted that each person reserves to himself many things of which he remains the master, things which therefore depend on no one’s decision but his own” (TTP 17/G III 201–202). Whenever one does something without being physically forced to, they are, to at least some small degree, doing it of their own “judgement”:

For whatever reason a man resolves to carry out the commands of the supreme ‘power, whether because he fears punishment, or because he hopes for something from it, or because he loves his Country, or *because he has been impelled by any other affect whatever*, he still forms his resolution according to his own judgment, notwithstanding that he acts in accordance with the command of the supreme power. (emphasis my own) (TTP 17/G III 201–202)

So, in cases where we are “impelled” by *any affective motivation* (by “any other affect whatever”), we still maintain some important role in our resultant actions. But, even with this being the case, as Spinoza’s following comments indicate, we still must be able to understand people’s actions as results of external conditions. Even though we always remain the “master” of our “judgement,” and so always maintain some capacity to be rational, we are still subjected to conditions which direct our actions as a result of our socio-political environments:

still hearts are to some extent under the control of the supreme power, which can bring it about in many ways that most men believe, love, and hate whatever it wants them to. Even if these things don’t happen by the direct command of the supreme power, still experience abundantly testifies that they often happen by the authority of its power and by its guidance. (TTP 17/G III 202)

⁴⁹ LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom*, 192.

Even though we always maintain some capacity for rationality and freedom, we are still subjected to the “supreme power.” Our socio-political environments can determine, even if indirectly, how our lives proceed. This is the exact kind of situation which Seneca is thrown into, and indeed given the political nature of Seneca’s situation we should not be surprised to find some relevant comments in Spinoza’s more political TTP. Seneca is, as a result of the relevant “supreme power” Nero, put in a situation where suicide is the least available evil, yet he still rationally pursues suicide. Freedom comes in degrees, and Seneca retains a degree of freedom in pursuing the least available evil, but suffers a loss of a degree of freedom insofar as Nero forces suicide to be the least available evil. Since these occur only in degrees, they merely together read off a sort of calculative degree of freedom that Seneca retains, which sits somewhere between 0 (absolutely no freedom) and 1 (absolute freedom); they do not stand as a straight contradiction. Seneca’s suicide is coherently both externally caused and rational, insofar as both impact his calculative degree of freedom.⁵⁰

One might pose another objection here: in Seneca’s situation, it seems that we can easily discern external conditions (Nero) and internally, conatively motivated rationality (opting for the least available evil), but in some situations the line may be blurred between external and internal causes. Consider, an objector may say, a case where one has an awful, terminal, “internal” medical condition, which, when conjoined with an unaccommodating social situation, forces suicide to be appealing. Further, suppose the medical condition intuitively seems to be externally contracted, yet remains internally motivational (insofar as it is a part of oneself that supposedly reduces one’s options for good living). In a case like this, where the distinction between a medical condition’s being external or internal is blurred, and someone opts for suicide, we may think my reading is in trouble. If this medical condition is best considered as external, it cannot also be what internally allows for approaching suicide rationally, since to act rationally is to act based on one’s internal striving to perpetuate one’s actual essence. For Seneca, what forced suicide to be rational was Nero, but what allowed Seneca to approach suicide rationally was his own conative nature. Further, if this medical condition is internal, then it cannot be the sole cause of the suicide, since for the Spinozist suicides must be, at least in significant part, externally caused.⁵¹

I am not convinced that this poses an irreconcilable problem. If the medical condition is best understood as an external condition, then the Spinozist may hold that the suicide is either an irrational suicide (without internal rationality) forced upon them (like the first or third kind of suicide discussed in §1) or, the Spinozist may hold that the person with the medical condition, like Seneca, opts for the lesser evil: they would rather die by suicide than continue to live with a condition that the current environment does not make joy-affirming, based purely on their *conatus* leading them to opt for the least available evil. Indeed, it would represent a failure of the society in which the ill person resides insofar as it does not produce an environment in which living with that condition is viable.

50 Tangentially, while these extracts from the TTP help with my and Nadler’s readings of the Seneca case, they can be illustrative of more from this paper as well. As we have seen in §2, Spinoza explicitly denies the possibility of anyone being absolutely free: no one is born free or acts totally freely, no one is divorced entirely from the influence of external conditions (E4p4/G II 212). What this passage of the TTP shows us is this tenet from the *Ethics* applied politically: in political contexts, even while we maintain a degree of freedom, or “judgement,” while still being influenced by our external socio-political environments.

51 The possibility of this kind of objection was also raised by a reviewer, and I am again indebted to them for prompting me to respond to it.

Further, if the medical condition is best considered to be an internal condition, and a suicide occurs, then the Spinozist may also say that being in an environment where the medical condition was untreatable, or where living comfortably with that condition was made impossible, is the external condition(s) that forced suicide to be appealing. Had the person with the medical condition been in an environment where their condition was treatable or an environment which provided the necessary conditions for them to live sufficiently joyfully, the suicide would not have become rational. The environment here fails to provide the necessary conditions to make living joyfully possible. The person's environment hence becomes the external cause of their suicide.

Finally, if the medical condition is best considered *both* external and internal, then Spinoza may say its *externality* is responsible *to a degree*, and its *internality* is responsible *to a degree*, since we have already made use of such language of degrees with regards to Seneca's death. So, even though the status of the medical condition as internal or external is blurry, there is a functioning Spinozist interpretation of a resulting suicide which makes sense of all cases. As such, a situation like the one mentioned can be described as both externally caused and internally rational, regardless of whether the medical condition is best read as external or internal, or both.

Besides, we need not evaluate the rationality of *all* suicides, which would of course include situations where the internality/externality of a condition which caused suicide is unclear. On the Spinozist framework, it is enough to say that though all suicides are externally caused, *some* may be rational in light of our internal *conatus*, and so Spinoza allows for some rational suicides. Seneca's specific case, being so clear cut, is enough to show that Spinoza coherently allows for some such cases of rational suicide.

5. Conclusion: Spinozist Horizons in Socially Just Suicide Research

In this article, I have tried to show that Spinoza develops a coherent philosophy of suicide on which (1) all suicides are externally caused, yet (2) rational suicides are possible. I have also tried to show how objections to this sort of reading that have been made by Bennett and Grey can be resolved.

If we accept my reading of Spinoza, we can employ it to help with a few issues in contemporary suicide studies. Some have argued that many dominant forms of understanding or studying suicide are too individualistic, and they do not focus enough on how suicidal individuals develop as part of a larger world, which includes social factors, and which acts on them from the outside.⁵² Because this reading of the Spinozist philosophy of suicide that I defend holds by metaphysical necessity that suicides are the result of external conditions, suicide research done perfectly via, or inspired by, such a Spinozist framework would necessarily demand a focus on the external conditions that lead to suicides. Thus, if practiced perfectly, it would necessarily avoid the individualistic pitfalls that some have described.

52 See for e.g., Ian Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 71–72; Vikki Reynolds, "Hate Kills: A Social Justice Response to 'Suicide,'" in Jennifer White et al., eds. *Critical Suicidology: Transforming Suicide Research and Prevention for the 21st Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 170–171; and Jennifer White, "What Can Critical Suicidology Do?," *Death Studies* 41, no. 8 (2017): 474 <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2017.1332901>.

Scholars have also discussed how, in much of dominant suicide research, the testimony and intelligence of suicidal people, at least regarding their suicidality, has not been taken seriously. This is because suicidal people, and suicide itself, has often been understood as irrational and incoherent. Sometimes these prejudices against the mentally ill are considered as forms of epistemic injustice that extend from ableism.⁵³ These ableist forms of epistemic injustice might also lead to suicidal people refusing to talk about their experiences with others: they may fear that they will invariably be labeled by stigmatising terms like “crazy” for having their respective experiences. Such compelled silence is potentially stigmatising and counter-productive to lowering suicide rates.

The reading of Spinoza I advocate here ameliorates this problem. Since my reading of Spinoza holds that suicides can be rational in some cases, depending on the conditions one is thrown into, any research done via, or inspired by, such a Spinozist framework must take seriously the testimony of suicidal people about suicidality; it must treat them as potentially rational agents, and so by necessity not fall prey to the ableist forms of epistemic injustice that much of suicide research, according to some scholars, falls prey to.

What is more, the Spinozist position is not at all defeatist. The fact that suicides can be rational does not mean that we can simply shrug our shoulders and say “so let the suicidal die, if they do so rationally.” While we must respect the epistemic and agentive capacities of suicidal people by noting that some suicides can be rational, we also must recognise that the only situations where suicide is forced to be rational are those which, as we saw, LeBuffe aptly calls “circumstances in which a person’s freedom has been tragically reduced.”⁵⁴ Indeed, Seneca’s suicide only becomes rational because of Nero’s vile tyranny. Further, as Youpa has put it, “insofar as we empower ourselves, we will seek to empower others.”⁵⁵ To make others more powerful, in the end, allows us to join forces with them in mutually power-maximising ways, since as humans our *conatus* pushes us towards some of the same things, and encourages us to work together towards mutually beneficial goals. This is why, for Spinoza, “man is a God to man” (E4p35s/G II 234). So, we must strive to abolish any external conditions which force suicide to be rational, whether for ourselves or for others. These conditions may be inaccessible or otherwise oppressive and exploitative social conditions we strive to abolish, or, like in Seneca’s case, direct political repression which restricts an agent’s powers, or so on. In any case, we must aim to do away with those external conditions which force suicide to be rational.

In these ways, the reading of Spinoza’s philosophy of suicide which I advocate can help rectify lingering issues in suicide research. If we take seriously Spinoza’s arguments about the metaphysical impossibility of self-destruction, and also that some suicides may be rational, we may come upon a framework for studying and approaching suicide which by necessity avoids some of the pitfalls that are present in dominant forms of suicide research. What is more, we may be encouraged to act together to eradicate power-restricting external conditions which force suicides to be rational. Exactly

53 See, for e.g., Alexandre Baril, “‘Fix Society. Please.’ Suicidalité trans et modèles d’interprétation du suicide: repenser le suicide à partir des voix des personnes suicidaires,” *Frontières* 31, no. 2 (July 6, 2020); and Alexandre Baril, “Suicidism: A New Theoretical Framework to Conceptualize Suicide from an Anti-Oppressive Perspective,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (September 10, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070339ar>.

54 LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom*, 192.

55 Youpa, *The Ethics of Joy*, 178.

what these endeavours would look like, in the end, requires further reflections on Spinozist applications.

References

- Barbone, Steven, and Lee Rice. "Spinoza and the Problem of Suicide." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1994): 229–241, <https://dx.doi.org/10.5840/ipq199434211>.
- Baril, Alexandre. "'Fix Society. Please.' Suicidalité trans et modèles d'interprétation du suicide : repenser le suicide à partir des voix des personnes suicidaires." *Frontières* 31, no. 2 (2020a), <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070339ar>.
- Baril, Alexandre. "Suicidism: A New Theoretical Framework to Conceptualize Suicide From an Anti-Oppressive Perspective." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2020b).
- Bennett, Jonathan. *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1999 (originally 1984).
- Carlisle, Clare. "Spinoza On Eternal Life." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2015): 69–96, <https://dx.doi.org/10.5840/acpq201412842>.
- Della Rocca, Michael. "Spinoza's Metaphysical Psychology." In *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, edited by Don Garrett, 192–266. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Della Rocca, Michael. *Spinoza*. London; New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Donagan, Alan. *Spinoza*. New York: Harvester, 1988.
- Garrett, Don. "Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind That Is Eternal." In *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, edited by Olli Koistinen, 284–302. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Grey, John. "Reply to Nadler: Spinoza and the Metaphysics of Suicide." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (2016): 380–388, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2016.1230539>.
- Lærke, Mogens. "Spinoza on the Eternity of the Mind." *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review / Revue Canadienne de Philosophie* 55, no. 2 (June 2016): 265–286, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0012217316000445>.
- LeBuffe, Michael. *From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Marsh, Ian. *Suicide: Foucault, History and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Matson, Wallace. "Death and Destruction in Spinoza's *Ethics*." *Inquiry* 20, no. 1–4 (1977): 403–417.
- Nadler, Steven. "Spinoza on Lying and Suicide." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2015): 257–278, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2015.1084491>.
- Nadler, Steven. *Think Least of Death: Spinoza on How to Live and How to Die*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.
- Reynolds, Vikki. "Hate Kills: A Social Justice Response to 'Suicide.'" In *Critical Suicidology: Transforming Suicide Research and Prevention for the 21st Century*, edited by Jennifer Hume White, Ian Marsh, Michael J. Kral, and Jonathan Morris. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016.
- Sharp, Hasana. *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Tacitus. "The Annals, Book 15" Translated by Alfred John Church and Jackson Brodribb, 1876, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Annals_\(Tacitus\)/Book_15](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Annals_(Tacitus)/Book_15).
- Taylor, Dan. *Spinoza and the Politics of Freedom*. Spinoza Studies. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021.
- Tiebout, Harry M. "Deus, Sive Natura..." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 16, no. 4 (1956): 512–521.
- Waller, Jason. "Spinoza on the Incoherence of Self-Destruction." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17, no. 3 (2009): 487–503, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608780902986615>.
- White, Jennifer. "What Can Critical Suicidology Do?" *Death Studies* 41, no. 8 (2017): 472–480, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2017.1332901>.

- Williams, Caroline. "Revisiting Spinoza's Concept of Conatus: Degrees of Autonomy." In *Spinoza and Relational Autonomy: Being with Others*, edited by Aurelia Armstrong, Keith Green, and Andrea Sangiacomo, 115–131. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019.
- Wolfson, Harry Austryn. *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning*. Cambridge; Mass: Harvard University Press, 1934.
- Youpa, Andrew. *The Ethics of Joy: Spinoza on the Empowered Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.