Spinoza and Self-Destruction:
Oppression and Suicide

by

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Dedication

For Ella,

Who gave so much joy to me through her daughter,

and Who was forced through so much evidence

that joyful living was not possible

but Who

in the waning years of her life

was blessed with evidence that it was:

her granddaughter,

"the light of her life"

Abstract

This thesis project argues that Spinozism provides a useful framework for contemporary suicide studies. In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of the project and make some important preliminary notes. In Chapter 2, I develop a reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide which holds both that suicides are externally caused and that suicide may sometimes be rational, based on the very important discussion that Spinoza gives of Seneca's death. In Chapter 3, I explore the Spinozist implications of this view, showing that Spinozism demands that we make it so that suicide is never forced to be rational, and that this demands abolishing oppression. Though Spinoza is certainly not an oppression theorist in the contemporary sense of the concept, his discussion of a particular case of political repression lets us move to a view of oppression (contemporarily understood) as suicide inducing and thus in need of elimination. In Chapter 4, I explain two risks present in the three main models of contemporary suicidology. In Chapter 5, I illustrate the Spinozist framework's viability as an interpretive tool for suicide studies, with reference to three suicide notes, and explain how the Spinozist framework avoids the issues discussed in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5's conclusion, I emphasize on Spinozist grounds the need to abolish oppression and provide evidence to people that good living is possible.

Acknowledgements

I must start with the important acknowledgement that this thesis was produced on unceded Algonquin Anishnaabeg territory, currently occupied by the Canadian state. This occupation has caused and continues to cause inordinate injustices to the Indigenous peoples of this land. May those whose territory is occupied return to sovereignty; may the Land Back, Idle No More, MMIWG, and other Indigenous movements see mounting successes.

There are also many directly personal acknowledgements I must offer. First, I wish to thank my internal examiner Professor Sophie Marcotte-Chénard and my departmental examiner Professor David Matheson for so enthusiastically attending my defense and reading my work.

I must also thank my friends, most of whom I have had for at least 10 years, and some almost 20 years. They have remarkably impacted me on my way to becoming the kind of person for whom graduate studies made sense and to whom philosophy is exciting. To C, R, A, T, T, and my cohort peers, I must give great thanks: "By *Nobility* I understand *the Desire by which each one strives, solely from the dictate of reason, to aid other men and join them to him in friendship*" (E4p59s).

My scholarly mentors must, also, be thanked deeply. They imparted in me the greatest expansion of whatever philosophical capacities I have been able to cultivate. To Mitia Rioux-Beaulne, who helped me as a high school student with my first inquiries about philosophy when I reached out to him, to Annie Larivée, who has been a pedagogical exemplar and a wealth of research advice, and to my brilliant and endlessly caring co-supervisors Melissa Frankel and Christine Koggel, who have helped me so

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations used for Spinoza's works:
E
Ethics (Ethica)

L
The Letters (Epistola)

KV
Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being (Korte Verhandeling)

TIE
Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione)

TTP
Theological-Political Treatise (Tractatus Theologico-Politicus)

TP
Political Treatise (Tractatus Politicus)

References to the Ethics employ the following system of abbreviations:
Number
part

ax
axiom

app
appendix

c
corollary

def
definition

def aff
definition of the affects

d
demonstration

ex
explanation

L

lemma

p
proposition

prol
prolegomenon

post
postulate

pref
preface

s
scholium

For example, (E4p18s) refers to the scholium of the 18th proposition of the 4th book of the *Ethics*.

Notes

All quotations of Spinoza are from the versions found in Curley's *Collected Works of Spinoza*, unless otherwise noted.

References to the *TTP* give the chapter number and then the section numbers as found in the brackets in Curley's *Collected Works of Spinoza*.

References to the *TP* give the chapter number first, and then the section number in Curley's *The Collected Works of Spinoza,* often given at the beginning of a paragraph in the text.

References to the *TIE* give the section number found in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, often given at the beginning of a paragraph in the text, of the *TIE*, and **not** the numbers in the left margin of the text.

References to the *L* give the number of the letter as found in Curley's *Collected Works of Spinoza*.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza's characteristic geometric style demands that he cite earlier parts of his work. In cases where I quote Spinoza, and he makes references to other parts of the *Ethics*, I have modified his citation style to match the one I use. I also modify the citation style of Spinoza scholars to match my own, if they do not employ my style already.

Chapter 1:

Overview:

Spinoza, Substance, and Suicide

> *for this is the most monstrous hypothesis that*
> *could be imagined, the most absurd,*
> *and the most diametrically opposed*
> *to the most evident notions of our mind*
>
> *Pierre Bayle on Spinozism (1697, 296-297)*

> *ce n'est pas assez pour nous de n'être pas malheureux ;*
> *la vie ne vaudrait pas la peine d'être supportée*
> *si l'absence de la douleur était notre seul but ; le néant vaudrait mieux :*
> *car assurément c'est l'état où l'on souffre le moins.*
> *Il faut donc tâcher d'être heureux.[1]*
>
> *Emilie du Châtelet (1746, §44)*

Spinozism has meant a great many things to a great many people and movements. It has been met, at some points, with deep resistance. Works of Spinoza's have been said to be "Forged in hell"[2] (Nadler 2011, 154) and Spinozism has been said to hold an "opposition to the most evident and most universal axioms that we have had up to now" (Bayle 1697, 303). But Spinozism has also been met with great admirers, and has in relative recency been the subject of work on a variety of exciting social or ethical projects: Youpa has written on living joyfully in accordance with Spinozism (2019), Sharp has written on how Spinoza gives us a new political orientation towards human and non-human nature as truly equal parts, all of which need joy and power, especially those placed in positions

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[1] "it is not enough for us to not be unhappy ; life would not be worth the effort of being supported if the absence of pain was our only goal ; nothingness would be better: because surely it is the state where we suffer the least. It is thus necessary to endeavor to be happy" (translation my own).

[2] Nadler is quoting an anonymous pamphlet, which comments on the *TTP*, not offering his own thoughts on Spinoza.

where joy is the hardest to come by (2011), and Strawser has written on Spinoza as demanding that we live loving lifestyles with non-human nature and with other people (2021).

In this thesis project, where I hope to contribute to this complicated and controversial history of Spinoza readership, I aim to show a novel and interesting way that Spinoza can contribute to contemporary issues. There is, following the work of a number of scholars in suicide studies, a call for new approaches to studying suicide, a call for "multiple frameworks, methodologies, epistemologies, and perspectives…to adequately (re) theorize suicide and its prevention" (White et al 2016, 4). Most centrally, I argue in this project that in Spinozism we find one such "framework" and that this framework is relevant for thinking about suicide and suicide research.

To make this case, my thesis is divided into 5 chapters. First, there is this overview chapter, Chapter 1. In this part of the thesis I explain the overall goal of the project, provide a very short summary of Spinoza's metaphysics, and give brief, important notes on my approach to discussions both of Spinoza and of suicide.

Then, in Chapter 2, I identify and defend the presence of two important tenets of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide: first, that suicides are externally caused, and second, that suicides may be rational in light of certain kinds of external conditions. I defend my reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide in conversation with the scattered literature on Spinoza's sparse comments on the matter, and by making use of Hasana Sharp's conception of Spinozist rationality. In Sharp's reading of Spinoza, a belief's rationality depends not on that belief's matching up with, say, the external world, but on its following from a person's nature, or its being the best approximation a person can have

of what aids them in their striving for powerful living. When evidence thus suggests to someone that powerful living will be impossible, suicide becomes rational, and this is shown in Spinoza's discussion of Seneca's suicide. Because suicide is forced by evidence available to people, in some situations, to become a rational option, whether the available evidence is complete or not, those who pursue suicide in such situations cannot be considered at moral or epistemic fault for pursuing it.

Yet, it would be vastly better if these suicides did not occur. In Chapter 3, I explore the implications of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide. I argue that Spinozism demands that we make it so that suicide is never rational. While suicide may become rational in certain situations, Spinozism holds that it is always worse that suicide become rational. I identify oppression as a condition which forces suicide to become rational, and I argue that it does so by forcing the evidence available to many oppressed people concerning the possibility of living powerfully to suggest that powerful living is impossible. I thus argue from a Spinozist position, whether Spinoza would agree or not, that oppression must be abolished, regardless of whose position we are considering, so as to make it such that suicide never becomes rational.

In Chapter 4, I turn to contemporary suicide research, and offer a defense of some critiques that have been offered against mainstream suicide research. To do this, I explain three popular "models" for studying suicide: the medical, biopsychosocial, and social models, respectively. While acknowledging the many and ongoing positives of mainstream suicide research, I also explain arguments which show that mainstream suicidology, regarded under any of these models, runs the risk of failing to consider

sufficiently the role of external conditions in producing suicides and also of committing epistemic injustices against many suicidal people.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I offer the Spinozist philosophy of suicide as a new framework for approaching suicide which avoids some of the issues that I identify in suicidology in Chapter 4. The Spinozist approach demands, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, that we consider suicides as, at least in part, externally caused, and so avoids issues of insufficiently focusing on external conditions. Yet, because suicides *may* be rational on the Spinozist framework, we must respect the epistemic agency of suicidal people. Finally, because the Spinozist recognises that oppression may be so vile as to force rational (in our special sense) suicides, the Spinozist view offers an interpretive tool for grasping some suicides of oppressed people, given their own testimony on the matter, primarily through suicide notes. Further, in the end, Spinozism encourages us to abolish suicide inducing conditions, and thus, since oppression is one of them, oppression. This must be done so that suicide does not become rational in light of oppression. We also are encouraged to make sure that evidence is provided to people that powerful living can indeed be possible.

1: Spinoza

In this section I make two points: one on the historicity of my Spinoza exegesis, i.e., on the nature of my approach to Spinoza interpretation, and another note on my use of Spinoza with regards to contemporary discussions of oppression.

First: in light of the contemporality of the goals of this project, it would not make sense to insist on arguing that Spinoza, the actual, historical man who lived in 17th

century Holland, was correct about suicide. Indeed, I cannot be certain concerning what the historical Spinoza thought about suicide: whether I can interpret his texts so clearly that I can penetrate the exact contents of his intended meanings is up in the air. As Strawser has said, in his considerations on Spinoza's speciesism, "it is always interesting to speculate how a great philosopher would respond to contemporary questions, but often the result is little more than idle speculation" (2021, 120).[3] Besides, for the sake of this project, it does not matter whether the historical Spinoza was right or wrong about suicide, only whether the philosophy which emerges from his texts is helpful in studying and thinking about suicide and suicidality.

As such, in this project, I do not aim at being the kind of "psychobiographer" that Matson (1977, 409) thinks is important for grasping the historical Spinoza's view of suicide.[4] Indeed, I make no reference in any of the following chapters to what has been called the "Da Costa affair" (Matson 1977, 409), when Uriel Da Costa, a Jewish man excommunicated from his community, like the historical Spinoza, took his own life as a result of that excommunication (Barbone and Rice 1994, 230), and I neglect this point despite the historical Spinoza's being aware of this event, and of Matson's thinking it important to the psychobiographical reading of Spinoza's views of suicide.[5] I aim to avoid as much as possible in this particular project interpreting "Spinoza" in terms of what happened in his life, because in this project I am more concerned with how

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[3] This despite Strawser's going onto explain how the historical Spinoza is better than other philosophers for considering contemporary issues than, say, Descartes, who "we continually strive to overcome", or Leibniz, who "usually provides a good laugh" (2021, 120).
[4] Barbone and Rice (1994, 230, fn5) also reject a psychobiographical approach.
[5] Matson thinks that the apt psychobiographer will supposedly "inquire into the repercussions of the Uriel da Costa affair" (1977, 409), in their efforts to show that Spinoza's discussion of suicide forms part of a larger "remarkable thanatopsis" (1977, 403), or meditation on death.

Spinozism may help with contemporary issues, not whether the historical Spinoza thought this or that about suicide. I am thus concerned only with how the writings in Spinoza's texts may be helpful with contemporary suicide studies.

Second: Spinoza was certainly not a theorist of oppression in our current sense of the word. At the end Chapter 3, I begin my discussion of oppression in a contemporary context and of making use of Spinoza with regards to such a discussion, and I do so by using Iris Marion Young's account of oppression (as formulated in her "Five Faces of Oppression", Chapter 2 of Young (1990)). While other accounts of oppression may be useful as well, it is Young's account that I will be employing throughout.[6]

Young explicitly differentiates the use of oppression in the case of intentional political tyranny versus oppression as something systematically built into everyday lives in contemporary contexts (1990, 40-41). That is, while people sometimes think of oppression in terms of a brutal tyrant intentionally repressing disagreeable subjects with the explicit aim of preserving or expanding their tyranny, Young elucidates an understanding of oppression as "systematic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant" (41), where groups are defined socially as "a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or ways of life", and whose members "have a specific affinity with one another because of their similar experience or way of life" (43). So, borrowing from Young, oppression in our contemporary understanding occurs when constraints are placed on a

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[6] This classic description remains quite relevant in contemporary discussions of oppression: For example, despite their insistence that there can be no "essentialist" definition of oppression, Liao and Huebner note that "we (Liao and Huebner) think Iris Marion Young is right to say that 'in the most general sense, all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings'" (Liao and Huebner 2021, 97).

socially defined group (a group which exists as *differentiated* in our social context from another) in their "capacities" and their abilities to "express their needs, thoughts, and feelings" (40). Of course, many groups may exist without such constraints, and they do not count as oppressed on our Young-informed reading of oppression.

In our contemporary understandings and in our North American context, groups such as Black people, Indigenous people, Queer people, disabled people, women, Jewish people, and so on are oppressed: their capacities to act and to express their needs are constrained by the way that our society is structured in white-supremacist, colonialist, queer-phobic, ableist, patriarchal, and antisemitic ways, respectively. Individuals who belong to more than one oppressed group may be subjected to unique, intersectional kinds of oppression, and different groups may experience oppression differently, but what all oppressed groups share is their being constrained by systems and structures in their socio-political contexts. Young, too, recognises these intersectional overlaps and the differences in oppression between groups, noting both that "group differences cut across individual lives in a multiplicity of ways that can entail privilege and oppression for the same person in different respects" (42) and also that different groups "are not oppressed to the same extent or in the same ways" (40).

This, of course, is not what we find in Spinoza. There are moments when Spinoza seems to approach the topic in strikingly complex ways. At one point, for example, he notes that "peace does not consist in the privation of war, but in a union or harmony of minds" (TP 6, 4), hinting that even if no direct intentional violence (like war) is aimed at someone, they may still be suffering injustice. However, he never quite approaches what

we find in Young. Nowhere, to my knowledge, is there mention of groups subjected to injustice regardless of institutional intent.

What we do find in Spinoza, however, is an example of direct political repression by a tyrant, one in which a tyrant intentionally constrains the powers of an individual so drastically that suicide is forced to be rational. As we will see in the next two chapters, this is the story Spinoza provides of Seneca's death, with Seneca suffering the evils of Nero's rule. Since Young's account of oppression is one where groups see their capacities (powers) constrained, we can read Spinoza's account of Seneca's suicide as relevant to discussions of oppression. Whereas Nero forces Seneca's suicide by direct political repression, we will see (in Chapters 4 and 5) that oppression may on some occasions force similar suicides in members of oppressed groups. With regards to such cases, Spinoza affords an enlightening way to interpret and speak about contemporary forms of oppression and understand the suicidalities of some oppressed suicidal people. This is true despite the fact that he would not, of course, have thought of it this way himself. Humans, be they Seneca or members of oppressed groups, are always, as we will see, tied up in their external conditions, and their behaviors and the value of their options must be considered in light of those external conditions.

2: Substance

I here offer some brief explanatory notes on Spinoza's metaphysics, which are required for fully grasping Chapter 2 of this thesis. Hopefully, the notes I offer remain uncontroversial, as the goal is only to offer enough such that the reader may grasp the arguments provided in the following chapters. Remaining uncontroversial may prove

impossible given the enormous body of literature that has been produced in an effort to grasp Spinoza's metaphysics as coherently as possible, but I herein do my best.

Whenever we speak of any particular thing, we are speaking of a way that substance, which is interchangeable with "God" (see (E1p11) or "nature" (see (E4p4dem), where Spinoza equivocates God and nature with his iconic phrase "*Deus sive natura*"), has been determined. All things, that is, are parts, or "modes", of substance, or what is the same, God or nature. For my purposes, we need to start with an understanding of what a human is within a Spinozist metaphysics. Each human is, like all other particular things, a "mode" of "substance". What this means is that we are an "affection" of a substance (E1d5): we are all particular ways that a bit of a substance is "affected", or changed. All other things in the Spinozist universe are also, like us, modes of substance (E1p25s). Tables, for example, are modes: some bits of substance that we call "wood" are put together in certain ways so as to "affect" substance in such a way that a bit of it becomes what we call a "table". Similarly, when the right bits of substance are affected in the right way, we call their product a "human". Importantly, Spinoza holds that there is only one substance (E1p14), and since every mode exists as an affection of a substance, the entirety of the universe is in the substance. That is, the entire universe is God, nature, or substance, and each particular thing is within that universe.

Now, modes can be conceived of in essentially different ways. Indeed, whether we speak of humans, or rocks, or tables, or what have you, "Particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way" (E1p25c). The different ways that we conceive of modes are thus tied up in different ways that we find attributes of substance "expressed". Now,

attributes are how the "intellect" perceives or conceives of substance *essentially*: "By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence" (E1d4). So, these are then *essentially* different ways of "perceiving" substance. They are fundamentally different ways by which substance is considered. While substance consists of "infinite" attributes, given its being absolutely infinite, humans are finite particular modes, and so only "perceive" substance in a limited way. For Spinoza, humans have access to conceiving of substance through two attributes: thought and extension. This view can be worked out through a reading of a number of the views expressed in part two of the *Ethics*,[7] but for our purposes it is enough to point to a passage in one of Spinoza's letters: "the essence of the [human] Mind consists only in this, that it is the idea of an actually existing Body…. But this idea of the Body neither involves nor expresses any other attributes of God than Extension and Thought" (L64). So, when we as humans consider anything in the universe, we consider it either through the attribute of thought or the attribute of extension. A table may be considered either through "extension", as something extended through space, or as a more sort of "mental" thing, as the "idea of the table". The same applies to humans. Each human may be considered through extension, and when this happens we are conceiving of the body, and each human may be considered through thought, and when this happens, we are conceiving of the mind. This is why Spinoza says in the quotation above that the mind is merely the idea of the body: the body and the mind are the exact same bit of substance, just conceived under two fundamentally different attributes.

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[7] See (Shein 2018, §1.7) for a very quick version of this.

However, because attributes are *essentially* different, by definition, we properly cannot consider modes of those attributes as crossing over causally. The "idea" of the table or the human has no capacity to rationally be considered as impacting anything extended, and the "extended" table or human has no capacity to rationally be considered as impacting anything in "thought", despite the idea of table or human and the extended table or human being the same bit of substance. Yet, everything which happens to a mode in extension will "correspond" to a something happening in thought, since they are occurrences pertaining to the same mode of substance, just conceived differently. In this sense Spinozist metaphysics is a "parallelism", the causal history of what happens to modes in extension "parallels" the causal history of what happens to modes in thought, despite their not crossing over causally: "whether we conceive nature under the attribute of Extension, or under the attribute of Thought, or under any other attribute, we shall find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes, i.e., that the same things follow one another" (E2p7s). So, if we say event P happens to Q in extension, we can say that a corresponding event P* happens to a corresponding thing Q* in thought, despite P and P*, and Q and Q*, being expressions of the same bit of substance.

Now, returning to the human, we have seen that, on the Spinozist view, people are just bits of the universe put together in a particular way. Their bodies are just those bits of substance conceived under extension, and their minds are just those bits of substance conceived under thought. However, because humans are just bits of substance like any other mode, we are not any more "free", in a metaphysically libertarian sense, than are, say, tables. The nature of substance, its sort of natural "rules", so to speak, cause modes to be determined to act in particular ways: "all things have been determined from the

necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way" (E1p29).

There is no unconstrained, uncaused "free will" in the Spinozist cosmos. It is this which

allows Spinoza to consider humans in terms of "lines, planes, and bodies" (E3Pref), like

anything else in the universe. But, in important ways, humans can still be free if they

behave according to the "nature" entailed by their particular kind of affection, by the

particular way that they, as bits of substance, *are*. The details on this will become clear as

I discuss Spinozist freedom and rationality in Chapter 2. For now, let this much be

remembered about Spinozist metaphysics as we go forward: first, God, substance, nature,

and the universe are all identical, and second, humans and other particulars are just

modes of substance, which may be conceived of through thought (and so as "minds") or

through extension (and so as "bodies"), not fundamentally different from any other

particular thing in the universe.

3: Suicide

With notes on Spinoza and Spinozism accomplished, I turn here to some comments on

suicide. In Chapter 4, I offer some critiques of mainstream suicide research. I should

here, then, make two preliminary notes. First, I should note that, while I offer some

critiques of mainstream suicide research, I do not suggest scraping it entirely: many

methods of suicide research that have been developed by mainstream suicide research are

fruitful for helping many suicidal people. As the World Health Organization (who will be

discussed in Chapter 4) has noted, knowledge about suicide and achievements in suicide

prevention resources have increased over time (WHO 2014, 48). All I offer in my

critiques is some pointing out of looming limitations in suicide research.

Second, I should offer a note about the limitations of my proposing a Spinozist framework for suicide research, and which applies to all other proposed frameworks. That is, there is no single correct approach to thinking about and studying suicide, which solves *every* case or issue of suicidality. As it has sometimes been put, insisting on one unique, universal approach to suicide may privilege that one approach against others which are more appropriate for specific cultural, historical, and geographical milieus (White et al 2016, 3). Indeed, our notion of "suicide" seems to be deeply historically mediated, in terms of scientific, ethical, and political themes baked into it given the development of suicidology since at least the early modern period (see all of Marsh (2010)). While there is some "universality" to the Spinozist approach to suicide, insofar as it sees suicide as *always* situated in a context beyond just the suicidal individual (developed in Chapter 2), and insofar as Spinoza holds that we should *always* strive to make it such that suicide is never rational for anyone (developed in Chapter 3), it will be increasingly clear that what those contexts are, and the correct approaches to them, will depend on people's specific cultural, social, historical, and geographical situations. A core point about the views I develop is that the suicides I discuss are sufficiently similar to the Spinozist reading of one particular historical suicide, that of the Roman philosopher Seneca (a discussion of this takes up much of Chapter 2), to be relevant to the framework I discuss. Suicides which are not sufficiently similar to how Spinoza reads Seneca's suicide, then, are beyond the scope of this work. All I am offering is one of the called for "multiple frameworks" (White et al 2016, 4), and an attempt to "imagine and explore (one of the) possibilities other than those the present seems to impose on us" (Marsh 2016, 28) in studying suicide. While the Spinozist sees suicide as *always*

engulfed in one's contexts, it is precisely this focus on these different contexts that allows for a non-universal approach to suicide: the Spinozist approach is thus universally non-universal.

I intend, in this vein, to offer an interpretive tool for more compassionately understanding the testimony of some suicidal people, primarily through suicide notes, given that they are plausibly written at the most intense moments of suicidality (a more complete discussion of the legitimacy of suicide notes as information providing is offered in Chapter 5). I do not here pretend that the framework I find in Spinozism is the only possible and only correct one, but I do contend that it fulfills what is called for by an apt set of critiques of contemporary suicidology. Hopefully, in the end, the Spinozist framework is only one of many new approaches to better understanding suicide and its prevention.

4: Conclusion

With the overview of this thesis provided, the necessary background information explained, and with the aims and scope of providing the Spinozist framework for understanding suicide laid out, we can turn now to the main body of the text. I turn now to two chapters on interpreting and exploring Spinoza's scattered comments on suicide, and the philosophy of suicide which they provide.

Chapter 2:

External Conditions, Internal Rationality:

Spinoza on Seneca's Suicide

> *like waves on the sea, driven by contrary winds,*
> *we toss about, not knowing our outcome and fate*
>
> *(E3p59s)*

In this chapter I articulate and defend a reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide which holds the following tenets: first, that suicides occur as a result of external conditions, and second, that there are at least some suicides which are rational. These two tenets are going to be fundamental in the following chapters. The first tenet will show later that the explanation for occurrences of suicide must be sought not purely in suicidal individuals but more forcefully in the context in which they are placed.[8] The second tenet will, eventually, allow that external sources of oppression *force* suicide to appear rational to many oppressed people, regardless of whether Spinoza would think of things this way himself.[9] So, we must deal carefully with these two tenets here. Indeed, they require special attention because they seem to be the source of significant tension in the Spinozist framework. For Spinoza, to understand things "clearly and distinctly", and so to be most rational in our understandings, our understandings must be "disposed internally" (E2p29s). That is, our ideas must be determined more from our own natures than from "fortuitous encounters with things" external to them (E2p29s). It may seem odd, then, that there are rational suicides in the Spinozist framework, given that for Spinoza suicides

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[8] More on this in Chapter 3.
[9] More on this in Chapters 3 and 5.

must be a result of external conditions. But this tension, it will be shown, can be relaxed and dissolved.

This chapter will proceed thusly: in §1, I explain what it means for something to be "rational" in the Spinozist sense. In §2, I explain and defend Spinoza's view that nothing can be the cause of its own destruction, since it is fundamental to his views on suicide. In §3, I contextualise and describe each of Spinoza's comments on suicide. In §4, I discuss some of the back-and-forths in the literature concerning the status of one particular example of suicide that Spinoza gives (the *Seneca case*) as a potentially rational suicide. Finally, in §5 I turn towards relaxing the possible tension between external causation and rational suicide. Throughout, I defend my reading either by appealing to defences already given by others or developing my own. By §6, the conclusion of this chapter, I will have shown that both of the tenets I pull out from Spinoza can be held without contradiction.

1: Freedom, Rationality, and Conatus

To grasp that Spinoza allows for at least some rational suicides, we must know what it means for a person or action to be rational on a Spinozist view. To begin this discussion, note from the start that it is "reason" that guarantees our capacity to arrive at knowledge, or to arrive at "adequate ideas". It is reason which lets us derive "adequate ideas" (true beliefs) from other "adequate ideas" (E2p40), and "adequate ideas" let us know things about God, or, as was discussed in Chapter 1, the universe. Now, we must also note that for Spinoza our being "rational" is essentially the same as our being free. Spinoza tells us that someone who "is led by reason" is who he calls "a free man" (E4p66s). Freedom and

rationality are directly interchangeable: "A free man, *i.e., one who lives according to the dictate of reason alone…*" (emphasis my own) (E4p67d). So, in order to understand what it is to be a rational person, or for an act to be rational, we may make an effort to understand what it is for a person or act to be free in the Spinozist sense.

The Spinozist understanding of freedom is concerned with internal vs external causes for our actions. An action is free when it is primarily a product of *internal* causes, and is "unfree" when it is primarily a product of *external* causes. As was mentioned in Chapter 1, Spinoza does not allow for some sort of totally libertarian freedom in the sense of uncaused action, so we need not worry about such things: he writes that "there is nothing contingent" but rather that "all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way" (E1p29). On Spinoza's account, actions are all determined by some aspect(s) of the "divine nature" (which, as was shown in the Chapter 1, we may read as "universe"). Again, humans are so subject to necessity that we can even be studied in the same mathematical manner as "lines, planes, and bodies" (E3Pref). So, our actions are always produced by some cause, and the method of determining whether an action is free or not is to examine whether it follows from internal or external causes.

Before explaining this further, I must briefly explain some key Spinozist concepts. I will start with Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine. Each thing in the universe, by their respective natures, is engaged in a striving to expand its powers to act on other things, and so "persevere" in their being (E3p7). That is, everything, from humans, to rocks, to trucks, to any other particular thing, is constantly striving to increase their powers, insofar as a human acts, rocks act, trucks act, and other things act on other things, respectively.

This striving is the *conatus*. That for which we should strive in light of our natures is the increasing of our capacity to act on other things in accordance with our "essence". This does not mean that we should *just* aim to persist through a longer amount of time, but that we should expand our powers to produce effects that follow from our own natures. Indeed, the conatus is our very nature, it is our *essence*, and yet, as Della Rocca notes, "from x's essence alone it cannot be determined how long x will exist" (1996, 203). As such, it should make sense when Spinoza says that "The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being involves no finite time, but an indefinite time" (E3p8). By virtue, then, of duration having nothing to do with our essence, and the importance of our essence, or our *conatus,* to the Spinozist system, we can grasp why duration is not of primary importance to Spinozism. Spinoza further makes the primacy of our pursuit of the expansion of power, rather than our pursuing 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. (emphasis my own) (E4Pref).

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, or which lead to the "perfection" of our natures. This concept is deeply important, as will be seen, to the rest of this thesis project, and indeed is central to any discussion of Spinozist ethical, social, or psychological philosophy.

Next, we should note that, on many readings, there are two ways that Spinoza discusses a particular thing's "nature" or "essence". This is important because the conatus, our striving to increase our powers, is our very "nature", and we must be aware of what this means. In the literature, scholars often hold that Spinoza uses two senses of the word "essence". Something's "nature" or "essence" sometimes refers to all the facts about a particular thing at a particular instantiated moment of its existence, insofar as it has the capacity or power to impact other things, i.e. its "actual essence" (see for e.g. Lord (2014)), and sometimes refers to a thing's "formal essence", which is the sort of abstract definitional version of essence that, for example, all humans share as being members of "humanity" (again, see for e.g. Lord (2014)).[10] So, my *actual* essence as "Ian MacLean-Evans" is composed of all the facts or properties about myself as a particular, specific thing instantiated in the universe, that allow me to impact other things in the universe, and it also serves to differentiate me from other particular instantiated things. I engage in the *formal* essence of humanity in that I share with other humans all the things which makes us members of the class of "humans". Spinoza's conatus doctrine, though, deals with *actual* essence: "The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the *actual* essence of the thing" (emphasis my own) (E3p7). So, the striving that I engage in to increase my powers to act and "persevere" in being, insofar as I am an instantiated particular human, with all my unique traits in addition to those traits I share with others with whom I share a *formal* essence, is the "nature" which is relevant to the *conatus* doctrine.

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[10] Spinoza does not necessarily mean here to accept the existence of abstract universals. On one reading, for example, he merely thinks our universals are confused ideas which we use because we cannot imagine all particulars of a class at once. See, again, (Lord 2014) for some comments on this.

Here I can now return to what "freedom" means, in the Spinozist sense. Something "is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone" (E1Def7). So, we are free when we act as a result of *our own* nature*,* and, by the conatus doctrine, our nature is our striving to increase our powers of activity in accordance with our actual essence. When we act in accordance with our conative striving, we are free. The free person is juxtaposed to someone who acts not from their own natures, 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, so to speak, pushed around in the universe like billiard balls on a table. When we are free, though, we are pushed about by ourselves, by our own natures. Further, when we are free we act to know things from the necessity of our own instantiated being, since, again, freedom and rationality are interchangeable, and (as we saw) "rationality" is what assures us of knowledge.

I hold also that Spinozism allows also for different actions to be rational or free for different people in different situations. One especially fruitful reading of Spinozist rationality and freedom that articulates this point comes from Hasana Sharp. Sharp's 2011 book *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* defends the view that Spinozism encourages a sort of "renaturalized" politics, where we are forced to look at humans, societies, and human relations to the rest of the world as not at all either special *or* inferior in comparison to the rest of the so-called "natural" world. That is, humans are exactly as natural as the rest of the world, and are subject to the same determination as non-human nature, and so we must be considered along the same lines as everything else.

As such, humans are to be considered as subject to causal laws and as explainable in terms of necessary relationships with other modes of substance. Humans are neither in a kingdom of our own, as humanists might insist, nor somehow inferior to non-human nature, as romantics might insist. This unity of nature harkens back to what we saw in Chapter 1: humans are no different, in terms of causal determinedness, than any other mode of substance.

As part of this project, Sharp discusses what Spinoza's "renaturalized" view of rationality or reason entails. On Sharp's readings, since Spinozist reason or freedom is a being's arriving at adequate ideas (or "complete understandings of something(s)" in more contemporary parlance) more from its own *actual* nature than from external natures, "reason renaturalized is not necessarily universal in content… (rather) Reason is the power of a particular mind to generate ideas from its idiosyncratic, singular nature" (95). This, I think, is corroborated by the fact that each thing, or each person, is placed into different external circumstances. Our actual essences are instantiated in a world that provides different opportunities for power expansion for different people, and limits different people's powers in different ways. As Spinoza notes: "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). So, while we may agree or pursue the same things by reason *insofar as we are human and have a conatus*, or insofar as we share the same *formal essence*, we will disagree by reason insofar as we are *actually* differently situated, or insofar as our *actual essence* is different, and so we must pursue different things for the sake of our conatus. For this reason, Sharp suggests that "We can reasonably disagree, to use more contemporary parlance, since

what supports my nature, what enables me to continue to be, is not necessarily what supports your being" (96).

Sharp must deal, though, with problematic passages for her reading. Spinoza claims, for example, that when we are rational we will agree with each other (E4p35). 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. So, 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:

> 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. (99)

So, we have here a reading which allows that it is rational for *everything* and *everyone* to pursue what is best for their conatus, and for everything and everyone to understand this universal pursuit of that which is demanded by the conatus. What is actually involved in that pursuit will, though, differ depending on our respective

situations, and what those situations seem to make possible for us. 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. (E1App)

Spinoza does not explain why exactly music is good for the melancholic, bad for the mourning, or neither for the deaf, but we can come up with something for the sake of explanation: it is rational for the melancholic to pursue music, perhaps to increase their pleasure and power of activity in fighting their melancholy, but it is irrational for the mourning person, since it may, I suppose, bring to mind the passed loved one who loved music and thus cause more sorrow which restricts one's powers, and it is neutral for the deaf person whom it does not affect (as far as Spinoza knows). In any case, we see here that what is rationally to be pursued or avoided depends on our circumstances.

One final note must also here be made. Because Spinoza explicitly tells us that "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), 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 accept that we are always only free to different degrees. This will be very important for §5 of this chapter. Some passages hint at freedom as only coming in degrees fairly obviously. For example, Spinoza writes that "In life, therefore, it is especially useful to perfect, as far as we can, our intellect, *or* reason" (emphasis in original) (E4App4). The "as far as we can" here is telling; we should always be striving to be *as free as possible*, even if we cannot be absolutely free.[11] Our freedom, our power, must be maximised to whatever degree possible.

    With all this said concerning freedom and rationality, it should hopefully be clear why I (and Nadler, as will be seen later) anticipate a tension between there being rational suicides and the Spinozist view that suicides are always "externally" caused. For a suicide to be both rational and externally caused seems odd, if what it means to be rational, for Spinoza, is to act according to your *internal* nature. This tension will be resolved near the end of this chapter, once we have worked out a theory of Spinozist rational suicide, since the example that Spinoza gives will be illuminating in our solution to the problem.

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[11] Youpa shares the view that 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": "A human being can be the adequate cause of greater or fewer effects, but no person can be an infinitely powerful cause (E4p4d). As a result, no human being can be free in the absolute sense that God-or-Nature is free. Yet every human being can be genuinely free. Indeed, every existing thing is genuinely free in virtue of being an adequate cause of an effect or an adequate cause of multiple effects" (2020, 138-139).

2: The Impossibility of Self-Destruction

Before turning to rational suicides, though, we must touch on Spinoza's view that self-destruction is metaphysically impossible. Spinoza explicitly denies the possibility of anything being the cause of its own destruction. He writes: "No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause" (E3p4). This doctrine is of great importance to Spinoza's philosophy of suicide. Bennett, for example, reads Spinoza's most important comments on suicide as an attempt "to reconcile E3p4 with the fact of suicide" (1984, 237), and Matson reads Spinoza's view that suicides are externally caused as being "a consequence of the principle that nothing is self-destructive" (1977, 410). As such, I have the task here of defending Spinoza's denial of the possibility of self-destruction. Luckily this has mostly already been accomplished by others.

Spinoza's demonstration of the impossibility of self-destruction is quite straightforward. If you consider a thing in itself, and thereby consider only its essence, you can only conceive of properties which coincide with that thing's existence. Indeed, something's essence posits only properties that are involved in that thing's being. As such, there can be nothing in a thing's essence which can be said to be contrary to that thing's existence. When considering a thing in itself only, then, we cannot find any property which could cause that thing's destruction. Therefore, when a thing is destroyed, it can be destroyed only through things besides itself (E3p4d).

This demonstration has come under attack for a couple of different reasons. Some find problems with the inferences made in the demonstration, and so offer what will be called "Inference Problems". Others think the doctrine to be falsified by

counterexamples. Both of these kinds of critiques of E3p4 can be successfully refuted. I will start with the so-called inference problems, and then deal with the counterexamples.

2.1: The Inference Problems

The first "Inference Problem" (2009), as Waller calls them, is given clear form by Bennett. Bennett notes that even if the essence of something P cannot contain something *incompatible* with that something P's existence, Spinoza makes the unjustified inference that nothing in P's essence can *cause* its own destruction. A thing P may be incapable of causing its own destruction at time T_1 because none of P's essential qualities are incompatible with P's existence, but some qualities of P at T_1 may *cause* P to self-destruct at T_2. There may be some essential property of P which sets off a chain of events that leads to P's destruction, even if the property itself is not incompatible with P's existence. Bennett accepts that, while at T_1, if there were a property of P that excluded the existence of P, that would mean that P's set of essential properties would be contradictory, and so it cannot be possible. But, as Bennett says, "time differences turn lethal contradictions into harmless changes", and so P's properties at T_1 may lead to P's own destruction at T_2 without any contradiction (1984, 235). This kind of case would allow for p to cause its own destruction, and thus self-destroy. In such a case, self-destruction would therefore be possible.

The second inference problem is quite nicely put by Della Rocca (1996). Spinoza notes that nothing's *essence* can contain within it the cause of its own destruction, but what of something's *accidental* properties in some actual state? It is fine to say that a subset of P's properties which contained all of and only P's *essential* properties could not

be the cause of P's destruction, but it is presumably possible that the *full* set of P's

properties, which would include accidental properties (something's "being, say, ten years

old", for example),[12] could contain within it something which causes P to self-destroy

(1996, 202-203).

Waller I think, deals with both of these problems. To do so, he identifies two

other principles in the Spinozist framework, which when added to Spinoza's argument

against self-destruction dissolve the inference problems. First, through E2p17 and

E3p13d, Waller identifies the *Resultant-Body Thesis*. This states that when something P

is destroyed it changes into something(s) else that excludes the existence of P. To get this

thesis, Waller points to Spinoza's claims "that some mode x (either under the attribute of

extension or thought) 'excludes the existence' of some other mode y (under the same

attribute) when x's 'presence or existence' prevents the 'presence or existence' of y"

(2009, 492). So, if P "excludes the existence" of Q, which is the case when P destroys Q,

given that a state of P has forced Q to not exist, then Q must become something R which

excludes Q's existence. One should note here that Q *must* become something else R,

rather than simply be "annihilated", so to speak. As Waller points out, Spinoza explicitly

notes that "if one part of matter were annihilated, the whole of Extension would also

vanish at the same time" (L4), so we see that nothing is ever actually "annihilated" in any

meaningful sense.

Waller's clarificatory example is the following: suppose I have a piece of clay

sculpted in the shape of Athena. I then use my hands to mold this piece of clay into a

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[12] Again, as we saw in §1, Della Rocca astutely provides evidence that, in the Spinozist view, the property of one's durational existence is absolutely *not* essential, and is merely *accidental*.

sculpture of Zeus. My hands have destroyed that particular sculpture of Athena, and made it into a sculpture of Zeus, and the Zeus sculpture excludes the existence of the particular Athena statue which used to exist, because the particular bit of clay cannot at the same time be both statues (2009, 492-493).

Next, Waller identifies the *Conceptual-Involvement Thesis*. This states that, if P causes Q, then the idea of Q includes the idea of P as existing in the same moment that Q was caused. Waller develops this thesis by taking a stand concerning the details of Spinoza's assertion of conceptual-involvement at E1a4, which reads: "The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause". Waller notes that elsewhere, at E3p17d, Spinoza holds that *as long as* the body is affected by external things, the mind (which, as you will recall from Chapter 1, is the same as the body but considered under a different attribute) will hold an idea of the external thing. So, as long as something is being affected, or changed, or is subjected to some other thing's *causal* power (its being *affected* must be an effect), the idea of the cause must be posited at the *same* moment as the causation takes place (Waller 2009, 494-495). Hence, Spinoza holds the Conceptual-Involvement Thesis in the way that Waller gives it.

So, with these two extra theses laid out, the inference problems should dissolve. Suppose that P self-destroys. Then P is the cause of P's destruction. Now, by the resultant-body thesis, at the moment of P's destruction, P would have to change to some other thing Q which *excludes* P's existence. As such, when P is destroyed, our current state of things must imply ~P. But, by the conceptual-involvement thesis, the idea of P must be affirmed at *the same moment* as P's destruction. So, we would have to allow for,

at the same moment, positing the idea of ~P and P. Obviously, this is absurd. Thus, there can be no self-destruction.

The first inference problem cannot impact this argument: a thing's causing itself to be destroyed at a time T_2 will still have to be posited as existing and not existing at the same time, since by Waller's two theses it must be posited as both existing and not existing at the very moment of its destruction. The same goes for the second inference problem: a thing being destroyed by accidental properties of its own will still have to be posited as existing and not existing at the same time, since if it self-destructs it must be the cause of its own destruction. Neither inference problem, it turns out, refutes Spinoza's denial of self-destruction.

2.2: Self-Destructive Counterexamples

I must also deal with some counterexamples that have been given to show that things, contrary to Spinozist doctrine, can in fact self-destruct. Matson's 1977 paper seems to be the main source of these, and the counterexamples contained therein do not seem to have been challenged until Barbone and Rice's 1994 paper. Scholars as important as Bennett seem to have been influenced deeply by Matson's examples. Indeed, Bennett provides no counterexample of his own to so nonchalantly proclaim that Spinoza's conclusion is false (1984, 234), and I can thus only assume he considers Matson's counterexamples to be decisive. As such, I here turn to them.[13]

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[13] Bennett does not actually quote or cite Matson here, but he gives no examples of his own. He may have his own counterexamples in mind, but he does not give them in his text, so I here suggest he is thinking of Matson's counterexamples, which in any case could be quite compelling to the critic of Spinoza.

The two most important counterexamples that Matson provides are those of the sun and of burning candles. In either case, Matson thinks, it is the essence of the sun and of the flame of a candle to burn themselves out. They have self-destruction baked into their very essence. There is no way that Spinoza can exclude them, Matson thinks, save by "sheer stipulation" (1977, 407). Indeed, Spinoza even claims explicitly of candles that they do not self-destroy. He notes that if "the mind directs itself toward the sole contemplation of the candle, considered in itself alone… if there were no surrounding bodies, this candle, and its flame, would remain immutable" (TIE 57). But Matson chalks this up to an outdated understanding of science. Spinoza did not know of more correct understandings of combustion, and so thought of flame as merely a type of physical movement. In Spinoza's world, movement follows the law of inertia, and so, absent other bodies, nothing could impede the flame's ongoing movement. But, Matson thinks, had Spinoza lived after Lavoisier's work on combustion, he would not make this error, and he would know that burning candles are counterexamples to the prohibition on self-destruction (1977, 407-408). Contra Spinoza and in light of more sophisticated understandings of combustion, supposedly, we should view the sun and the burning candle as having the essential nature of burning out, because it is in their nature that if no fuel is around (i.e., if they are considered apart from externals) their flames will extinguish.

I do not here pretend to grasp in any sophisticated way how combustion works, but Barbone and Rice give a good start to dealing with the sun and the candle examples. It is the essence of the sun *to burn*, and the essence of the candle *to burn*, and not in either case *to burn out* or *to burn later* (1994, 239). This seems fine; it seems clear that, if we

imagine a sun in itself, we imagine a burning entity. If we imagine a sun which has burnt

out, there is really no sun there anymore; all the gases which made up such a sun have

ceased to be present, having been burnt away. The same is true of a burning candle. The

candle essentially burns. If it has burnt out, it is no longer in existence. In either case, it is

the *burning* which is essential, not the *burning out*. Even if these things tend to burn out

when in their actual position as parts of a complex causally linked universe, what is

essential to their being what they are is their *burning*. As we have seen, the *actual*

essence of a burning candle or of the sun is what is contained in its *instantiated* existence.

The essence of the *burning* candle is that it *burns now*, or else it would not be *burning*,

the essence of the sun is similarly instantiated as an *actually* burning thing.

One might raise an objection here by appealing to Waller's conceptual-

involvement thesis, as I gave it before. If suns *always* burn out, then surely the idea of the

burnt out sun is posited alongside the idea of the *burning* sun, since the cause (the

burning sun) must be posited alongside the effect (the burnt out sun). That is, they are

conceptually-involved. As such, their essences must be intimately linked, so much so that

the cause posits the (eventual) effect. So, the essence of the *burning* sun (or candle flame)

posits the eventual burnt-out sun (or burnt-out flame). Even if one grants that the essence

of the sun is to *burn*, one must posit that it will burn itself out, and so the essence of the

sun posits its eventual self-destruction, thus serving as a counterexample to Spinoza's

denial of such.

But this is a no-go on the Spinozist view. The burnt-out sun only makes sense

when considered in relation to other things. The sun, when burning, burns as far as it *can*,

as Barbone and Rice point out (240). If it ceases to have access to fuel which allows it to

burn, that is a result of the world external to its powers not providing enough accessible

fuel for it to burn. Even if the burnt-out sun must be understood as following temporally

from the burning sun, its burning out is a result of external conditions, not of its own

essence. The same is true of the candle flame. Lacking external fuel sources, the flame

dies, given its incapacity to persist in being, in light of its external conditions. Just as

humans, by nature, "require continuous and varied food so that the whole Body may be

equally capable of doing everything which can follow from its nature" (E4App17), the

sun or the candle flame are in need of fuel to be capable of doing what follows from their

nature, i.e., burning. Just as when living we are constantly consuming nutrients, and

without replenishment will die, the candle or the sun constantly combusts, and without

fuel will burn out. It would be quite odd to say that humans "self-destruct" when they die

of starvation, and I think it just as odd to say that the sun "self-destructs" when it no

longer has access to fuel. Contra Matson, conceiving the sun or the candle flame in-itself

entails conceiving it as burning, since that is its essence. Only in a world which deprives

a flame of fuel does a flame burn out.

Perhaps, though, this is the kind of "sheer stipulation" which Matson anticipates.

After all, if one does not share my opinion here that Barbone's and Rice's view of the

essence of the sun and of the candle dissolves their role as counterexamples, then there is

little more to be said to them. It may be that the status of my solution turns on which

belief you have axiomatically about the essence of the sun or the burning candle. But my

project demands a working out of what can be drawn from Spinozist philosophy, and

since my view of the essence of the sun and of candles seems to be more compatible with

Spinozist views than is one which lets the sun and candles be counterexamples, then Spinozist philosophy is more amenable to this view.

Spinoza's denial of self-destruction has now been defended from both the inference problems and from counterexamples. I move now to the Spinozist philosophy of suicide which is its consequent.

3: Spinoza's Mentions of Suicide

Per Barbone and Rice (1994, 229), Spinoza explicitly mentions suicide four times in his corpus: three times in his magnum opus the *Ethics*, and another in one of his letters. I will take a look at each of these, but pay special attention to only one of them, which contains our most important extract: the Seneca case.

The first mention of suicide comes in the second book of the *Ethics*, when Spinoza is dealing with a potential critique of his view that human behaviour functions deterministically. As explained, on Spinoza's view, humans function in response to and as result of the conditions in which we are placed, internal or external, rather than through some sort of totally undetermined free-will. One might ostensibly raise a sort of Buridan's ass[14] dilemma to this view. One could say against Spinoza that, on his 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 deterministically

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[14] For those who might not know: For accounts of human freedom where we accept that the will is pulled to whatever it judges best, Buridan's ass has been raised as a problem (named after 14th century French philosopher Jean Buridan). If a donkey were placed equidistantly from food and water, and was equally hungry and thirsty, it would be unable to move to either the food or water (being pulled equally in both directions), and so stay unmoving until it died of hunger or thirst. As this is supposedly absurd, Buridan's ass supposedly shows the inadequacy of such accounts of the will.

pushed by their conatus equally towards food and water, and so unable to actually get to 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.... (Emphasis my own) (E2p49s)

What is of interest here is not whether Spinoza is right to bite the bullet, but what we can pull out, if anything, about Spinoza's philosophy of suicide from this passage. Commentators are divided about whether there is anything much to be gleaned on this matter from the passage. Matson, for example, thinks the inclusion of the suicidal 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 (1977, 409). Barbone and Rice, though, think it might be important, given that it appears at a part of the *Ethics* where Spinoza moves to an elaboration of deterministic human behaviour in contrast to a sort of libertarian free-willing, and also given that later (as we will see) he describes suicide as the result of external conditions rather than as result of some unconstrained free-will (1994, 230). They think that this passage, where humans are described as subject to deterministic necessity, is a foreshadow of Spinoza's later comments on suicide as result of external forces.

It seems, though, that this must be a throwaway comment, as Matson's camp would claim. In this passage, Spinoza notes that he "does not know" whether a suicidal person should be thought a human or an ass. Yet, as we will see, Spinoza has clearly thought quite a lot about suicidality, and certainly counts at least some suicidal people as not "asses" (as we will see with his comments on Seneca).[15] So 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. He was not one to shy away from glib remarks in response to interlocutors. For just one example, at E1App, in describing the way that those who believe that everything happens according to some final cause chosen by God, Spinoza says that his opponents "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) (E1app). As such, I am willing to mostly disregard this passage as a sarcastic turn of phrase, likening Burridan's ass to some incomprehensible nonsense in association with a nonchalant idiom, rather than as significant to Spinoza's philosophy of suicide as we move forward.

Here I move to another appearance of suicide in Spinoza's work. This is the only mention 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. The correspondence between Spinoza and Blijenbergh

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[15] As an aside, this comment of Spinoza's may be useful for those working on Spinozism's approach to non-human animals. It tells us that, in Spinoza's mind, there is some significant difference between humans and animals, despite the potential contradictions this produces in his system (see for e.g., Chapter 4 of Strawser (2021) for a discussion of these contradictions).

then went on for several letters, and, at one point, Spinoza took Blijenbergh to be asking the following question:[16] "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?" (L23)

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), and so, if one'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. Spinoza articulates the point thusly:

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 not a knave. For acts of knavery would be virtue in relation to such a perverted human nature. (L23)

Two points can be gleamed from this passage. The first point hints at discussions we will have further along in this chapter: from this passage, we learn that if suicide somehow *did* follow from someone's nature, it would be virtuous for that person to opt for suicide. The second more important point we get is that, on Spinoza's account, it

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[16] Blijenbergh's relevant letter is catalogued as "Letter 22" in (Spinoza 2016). For our purposes, it does not matter how accurately Spinoza reads Blijenbergh, just what Spinoza has to say about suicide in light of his reading of Blijenbergh.

cannot *actually* 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 metaphysical denial of self-destruction. We will see later on in this chapter that, when people are actually in positions shaped by external conditions, and so not considered *only in themselves*, they may be *forced* to see suicide as *following from their nature*. In such situations, both of the above points may make appearance. The paradigmatic example of such an instance is discussed in detail in §4 and §5 of this chapter.

In the next passage, at E4p18s, we get more comments on how suicides occur. Because "virtue" or "power", which are the same in the Spinozist view (E4def8), is the capacity to act in accordance with our *conatus*, and the *conatus* is "The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being" (E3p7), Spinoza holds "that those who kill themselves are weak-minded (*animo esse impotentes*) and completely conquered by external causes contrary to their nature." (Original Latin addition my own)[17] (E4p18s). So, those who die by suicide, for Spinoza, are through 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 contrary to our persevering in our being, namely death, cannot be purely a result of our nature. Even if 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 out powers, other things being equal.[18] Hence, suicide must be the result of external conditions, not of our own natures.

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[17] The reason for this inclusion becomes clear in the following paragraphs.
[18] More on this in Chapter 3.

Now, this passage, first and foremost, may strike us as especially unsympathetic to suicidal individuals, going so far as to call them "weak-minded". But a good understanding of what the role of the words "weak-minded" is here should remove the polemical tone of this passage.

Given that "power" is just the capacity to act on things, in accordance with our natural striving to "persevere" in our being, then "weakness", being 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 sense which elicits a response of "yes, but only tautologically". This is the reason I included the original Latin when I quoted Spinoza above. What 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 Latin, *potens* often indicates a being-able to do something, and so *impotens* need merely indicate a lack of being-able to do something. It is not literally understood as "weak-minded", which in English seems to imply personal failures, but is instead a statement free of pejorative sentiment. Humans, when overcome by external forces such that suicide occurs, are obviously "lacking the capacity", or "impotent" in their endeavors to continue to pursue the conatus.

Now that we see that Spinoza thinks suicide must always be a result of external conditions, we get our most complete set of comments on the matter at E4p20s. Here, Spinoza lists three types of suicide, though we have no reason to think he considers this

list exhaustive, since he notes only that suicide "can happen in many ways" before giving his list:

> 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)[19]

So, Spinoza describes three kinds of suicide. The first 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 was doing, and the third occurs when one is so radically changed by external conditions that they no longer are even the same thing as they were before their change. Since the purpose of this thesis is to show how considerations of only *one* of these kinds of suicide may helpfully impact contemporary suicide research, we can largely ignore the first and third kinds of suicide. Indeed, the Seneca case is subject to enough controversy on its own to be the topic of its own work in

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[19] Everything in brackets was in the original excerpt, I have added nothing here.

the history of philosophy, to say nothing of the other two types, and so there are practical reasons to narrow our scope as well.[20]

4: The Seneca Case

In book 15 of Tacitus' *The Annals*, we learn of Seneca's death. The Roman tyrant Nero had just uncovered a plot to overthrow his rule, and had, using the threat of torture, come to the view that the statesman and stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca was involved in the plot. It is unclear, though, 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" (Tacitus). In any case, as a 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). This should make immediate sense, given that Nero was not one to shy away from ruthless vengeance. Tacitus tells us 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". Seneca's available options were thus limited either to a death at his own hands where he could first speak with his wife and other companions and then choose his method of death, or to face the consequences of Nero's wrath,

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[20] Tangentially and perhaps interestingly: We will see that Nero's tyranny is in a significant capacity responsible for Seneca's death. So, though Spinoza somehow differentiates between the 1st and 2nd kinds of suicide, it may seem that Seneca's death constitutes a "murder" by Nero, akin to the first kind of suicide. But, as will also be seen, Seneca opts for suicide in light of his own power of judgement, whereas one whose sword-arm is turned by force against themselves retains no such power of judgement with regards to their death.

perhaps involving horrible public execution or grueling torture, or other great evils. Seneca, on Spinoza's reading, is thus forced by 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" (Lebuffe 2009, 192), while others view Spinoza as intending to strictly deny the possibility of rational or virtuous suicides. Among the former camp are Lebuffe and Nadler, and among the latter are Matson and Grey. This first debate I deem the Nadler-Grey debate, since they are the representatives I think most important for it.

Some have argued also that the whole Spinozist account of Seneca's suicide as result of external causes is untenable, while others have, I think, satisfyingly solved those problems, and I will go on to explain why as we continue. In this debate, Bennett is of the former view, and Barbone and Rice are those whom I think to have solved the issues. This second debate I deem the Bennett-BR (for Barbone and Rice) debate, with them being the most important representatives of the two sides of their debate.

The two debates are, of course, closely related. The Nadler-Grey debate deals with Seneca's rationality, which as we saw in section 1 of this chapter 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 §1 of this chapter, is also a question concerning Spinozist freedom and rationality. However, I deal with each of them separately. What they end up indicating are, respectively, the ways that Seneca's suicide is both free and also externally caused. These points, of course, are the ones that must be

made compatible, and I do so, finally, in §5. Let us deal first with the Nadler-Grey debate.

4.1: The Nadler-Grey Debate

The Nadler-Grey debate concerns whether Spinoza allows for *rational* suicides in some cases. The Seneca case is especially important to those, like Nadler, who hold that there are some instances of rational suicide in Spinoza, and Seneca is thought to be the paradigmatic example of such a suicide. But for others, like Grey, different aspects of Spinoza's thought deny 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 what has been said: our *conatus*, that 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" (Nadler 2020, 163). Again, Spinoza explicitly holds that human perfection, in accordance with the conatus, is not concerned with temporal duration. Other passages from the *Ethics* suggest as much, too. For example, Spinoza generally prohibits lying, noting that "A free man always acts honestly, not deceptively" (E4p72), and this general prohibition on lying stands even in cases where we could save our lives by lying (E4p72s).[21] So, what the free or rational person must be pursuing in accordance

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[21] There is some discussion about whether Spinoza allows lying in particular situations. See (Nadler 2016) for some arguments that, in fact, Spinoza allows for occasional lying. Regardless, the fact that Spinoza does not allow prolonging survival to motivate lying (even if there are other motivations) is enough to show that the conatus is not merely concerned with durational existence.

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 ultimate aims of the conatus, rationality does not *always* exclude dying, or the pursuit of death.

Evidently, then, if we want to be rational to as great a degree as we can, and hence live according to the ends of our conatus, we must be more concerned with our capacities to have effects on other things, in accordance with our essence, than with our capacity to extend our existence through a longer duration. So, we can see that the free or rational person must pursue a greater power of activity. Since, also, Spinoza holds that "Joy is a man's passage from a lesser to a greater perfection" (E3def aff2) and that "Sadness is a man's passage from a greater to a lesser perfection" (E3def aff3) we can allow that, 1, when we pass to a state with some degree of more joy we experience an increase of our powers, and so, *ceteris peribus*, we should pursue joy, and 2, when we pass to a state with some degree of more sadness we experience a decrease of our powers, and so, *ceteris peribus*, we should avoid sad states.

With these preliminary notes settled, I move to Nadler's view of the Seneca example. What is most important for us is that Spinoza explicitly claims that Seneca aims "to avoid a greater evil by [submitting to] a lesser" (E4p20s). Spinoza elsewhere explicitly says that "From the guidance of reason, we shall follow the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils" (E4p65). As such, it seems that Seneca would be acting "from the guidance of reason" in his pursuit of suicide. This makes plenty of sense in Seneca's situation as well: either he will opt for a death in a state of relative freedom, or he will suffer a worse death at the hands of Nero. In Seneca's situation, a death by suicide is, presumably, more joyful or less sad than a death at the hands of Nero. So, 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 (Nadler 2020, 169-170). This should sound quite plausible given our discussion of Sharp's view of Spinozist rationality: what is rational is always dependent on our contexts, and what a lesser evil is depends on the options presented to us by our circumstances. Seneca is, it seems, the paradigmatic case of rational suicide. As we also saw before, freedom comes in degrees, and in exercising his rationality, Seneca exercises whatever degree of freedom is available to him in this 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 evil (E4p68). Next, they could note that suicide is sad, and so (on a Spinozist view) a passage to a lesser state of perfection. So, suicide counts as evil. As such, 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). Such a state is purely hypothetical, and so 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 an irrational sad passion (Nadler 2020, 165).

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 "By a Desire arising from reason, we directly follow the good"

(E4p63c), 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)*,* at least to some degree, and so will not be properly seen as "Sad" (in the Spinozist sense of it being a passage to a lower state of perfection) as the objector suggests.

So, Nadler thinks he has given and defended an account of Spinoza's writings on the Seneca case which allows for a case of rational suicide. Interestingly, Nadler writes in one of his endnotes that Grey has replied to his position, but he does not seem anywhere to offer a direct reply to Grey (Nadler 2020, note 18). Here I describe Grey's reply to Nadler's view, and then solve the difficulty that Grey presents.

Grey's criticism is simple. On Grey's reading, Spinoza explicitly holds it impossible that we can have an adequate idea of something which excludes our own existence (E3p10), and Grey thinks that for a suicide to be rational we would need an adequate idea of the situation which includes our own death to compare 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. (2017, 387)

But our reply here is also quite simple. 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 a horrid amount of misery and sadness at the hand of Nero. However, in the scenario where he pursues suicide, up until he attempts the suicide, his high degree of joy (only relative to the situation in which he does not pursue suicide and so is taken by Nero) is unaffected. What happens after he dies is irrelevant for Seneca's purposes, since, obviously, he will no longer exist. 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 in either situation. Given his knowledge of the expected amount of joy or misery leading up to his death in both situations, Seneca is still able to exercise what degree of freedom he has access to to make a rational decision about which scenario is superior, and this situation is the one which includes suicide. There is, then, still the possibility for rational suicide on Spinozist grounds, despite Grey's objection.

One might raise a qualm here by pointing out that, for Spinoza, at least some parts of our souls or minds persist after death (E5p23), 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 is an irrelevant point. As you will recall from Chapter 1, what makes me *me* is also my body, given that my mind, properly speaking, is just the idea of my body (E2p11). So, whatever bits of me which persist after my body dies are no longer enough to properly constitute *me*, since my mind, being the same "mode" (or "thing") as my body but considered under a different attribute, cannot be what it was

when it was *me*. As such, whatever bits of me that persist after my death are irrelevant in considering whether suicide is rational for *me*.[22]

It should be clear now that Nadler's view that Seneca's death constitutes a rational suicide, insofar as it exercises whatever degree of freedom Seneca maintains, and so there are at least some rational suicides in the Spinozist view, survives Grey's attack. I turn now to the Bennett-BR Debate.

4.2 The Bennett-BR Debate

Bennett is not convinced that Spinoza's reading makes any sense 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. The point here is that 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. However, 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 (Bennett 1984, 237).

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[22] An alternative reply to this objection may be developed following (Lebuffe 2009, ch12), 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 2009, 210).

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. So, 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 (Bennett 1984, 237).

Barbone and Rice deal satisfactorily with this argument. 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, and 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 of the apple-orange scenario:

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. (Emphasis my own) (Barbone and Rice 1994, 232-3)

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, we can say that the apple-orange issue is resolved; Bennett's analogical argument fails because the analogy is not sufficiently similar to the case at hand, and so it does not give us reason to 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 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* opt for the preferred one. In this sense, Seneca still exercises his available *degree* of freedom, even if he is *forced* by Nero to do so. More on this, though, as the chapter progresses. Here I return to Bennett's issues with Spinoza.

Bennett raises another issue as well. It seems that Seneca's death *must* have followed from his *own* nature. Again, in Spinoza, something's "nature" or "essence" may sometimes refer to that thing's *actual* essence, its instantiated existence as a thing which is different than other things, or to that thing's *formal* essence, its abstract definitional

essence. Though he does not speak of it in exactly these words, we can say that on

Bennett's view, if Spinoza means that Seneca is killed by forces external to his nature in

the sense of his *actual* essence, then he is simply wrong, since clearly Seneca's actual

body at the time of his death, i.e. some subset of all the facts about "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 *formal* essence, then

Seneca would have been killed by some "accidental" property which he had taken on at

some point, since, again, it seems like some part of Seneca proper must be what resulted

in his death. 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, yet he makes it clear that "*No thing* can be destroyed except

through an external cause" (emphasis my own) (E3p4), and so it should not be the case

that even accidental properties may be the cause of self-destruction. 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 (1984, 238).

Again, though, this problem is solveable. 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, as we

saw in our discussion of Nadler, what is rational and thus follows from Seneca's nature,

either in the sense of *actual* or *formal* 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. As noted in the earlier discussion of Sharp, what is best depends,

always, on our circumstances. In this sense, the suicide was forced by Nero, and not by

Seneca's capacities. Insofar as Nero forced the situation to present an option set which only includes suicide and options worse than suicide, Nero forced Seneca to die by suicide.

In both the case of the apple-orange issue and also this thought about Seneca's suicide following from his own nature, it would be prudent to recall what was said earlier about freedom: insofar as humans are differently situated, different options are better. 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" (E4App17), but if I am starving, and *must* eat as soon as possible, and am actually situated in a McDonalds and, you are similarly starving and are actually situated in a Taco Bell (and we both have enough money and the kinds of dietary and religious commitments/lack of commitments that allow us to eat these foods) then the actual dishes most available to fill our requirements for food will seem to be different. Similarly, as we have already seen, we should all pursue the least available evil or the greatest available good (E4p65), and so exhibit freedom and self-causedness 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 final line of thought leads us to the fifth section of this chapter.

5: Squaring External Causes and Internal Rationality

Through the discussion of these two debates, we see now that Spinoza holds both that all suicides are externally caused, and also that at least some suicides are rational. But, as has

been noted, this is a potential source of great tension: how can a suicide be rational *and* externally caused, if what it means for an action to be rational is that it results from our own *internal* natures? I will here point out Nadler's way of relieving this tension, and give my own solution by turning to a particular bit of the *Theological-Political Treatise* 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 (2020, 168), like we saw Sharp do. There is no denying this, Spinoza makes it 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). 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 someone be as rational as is possible given the way that things external to them act on them, present the world to them, and force them to act. So, 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. (Nadler 2020, 169)

In my view, this is a perfectly fine way of dissolving the tension, and is also sort of mirrored by others like Lebuffe:

> 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. (Lebuffe 2009, 192).

Lebuffe thus holds that Seneca is right 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 is possible, but Nero still, as external condition, forces suicide to be the "right thing".

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. They always maintain, it seems, some *degree* of freedom, according with our earlier discussion of precisely this concept of *degrees* of rationality and 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, 5). Whenever one does something, 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, 5)

So, in cases where we are "impelled" by *anything* (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, 9-10)

Even though we always maintain some capacity for rationality and freedom, we are still subjected to the "supreme 'power" (or the "sovereign" in more familiar early modern political philosophy verbiage).[23] Our socio-political environments, even if indirectly, can determine how our lives proceed, and in the case of Seneca that is what Nero does as tyrant: he shapes Seneca's socio-political environment in a way adverse to Seneca's potential good living. He is, as a result of the relevant "supreme 'power" Nero, put in a

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[23] The "supreme 'power", or the "sovereign", need not always be a tyrant. The sovereign is just whatever person or persons wield a state's power. In principle, the "sovereign" of a tyranny is the tyrant, of an aristocracy the aristocrats, of a democracy its citizens, and so on. In the case of Seneca, the relevant supreme power is quite obviously Nero.

situation where suicide is the least available evil, and through the rational capacity for "judgement" which he retains he can rationally pursue suicide. Freedom, we saw earlier, may come 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. His suicide is thus coherently both externally caused and rational.

A warning note must here be made, too. When we move to talking about oppression near the end of Chapter 3, I will not retain discussions of the sovereign or supreme power, since on our Young-informed understanding of oppression there need not be a specific sovereign aiming to harm or command the oppressed. The oppressed may be oppressed regardless of the intents or actions of their relevant "supreme power", even though Seneca's situation was a result of direct political repression (not *oppression*, contemporarily understood) by his own relevant "supreme power" figure. All this conversation of the *TTP* is here meant to convey is how we may maintain *degrees* of freedom, while still having our freedom constrained to *degrees*. It is not to say that the "supreme power" to which Seneca is subjected is exactly akin to how oppression functions.

6: Conclusion

I have shown that Spinoza provides a theory of human life wherein rationality and freedom are interchangeable. I have also shown that Spinoza gives reason to think nothing can self-destruct, and in light of this develops a philosophy of suicide which holds both that all suicides are externally caused and that at least some suicides are

rational. Problems which have been raised for both the denial of self-destruction and against this reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide, given by Matson, Bennett, and Grey, all end up resolved, either by appeals to Barbone and Rice, Sharp, Nadler, or to relevant passages of Spinoza's work. I move now to the next task: showing that, on Spinozist grounds, we must aim to organise the world in such a way that suicides are never forced to be rational.

Chapter 3:

Ethics for the Sake of Self, Ethics for the Sake of Others:

Spinoza and Abolishing Suicide Inducing Conditions

> *the [care] of the poor falls upon society as a whole,*
> *and concerns only the general advantage*
>
> *(E4app17)[24]*

In Chapter 2, I showed that there is a plausible reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide

which holds both that suicides are externally caused and also that suicides may in some

cases be rational. In this chapter I argue that Spinozism demands that we work to lessen

or, if we can, abolish conditions which may force suicides to become rational. I show

here that this is an implication of the conatus doctrine which I discussed in Chapter 2,

whereby all things strive by nature to increase their powers. The centrality of the conatus

to the Spinozist system might imply that Spinozism encourages only ethical concern for

oneself. Spinoza, by virtue of this doctrine, is undeniably a moral egoist, in at least a

limited sense.[25] That which is good is good for us, ultimately, insofar as it aids our

striving to increase our *own* powers. Yet, as I show in this chapter, Spinoza calls for us to

care for others quite deeply, and to increase their powers too. I must explain then how it

is that Spinoza's moral egoism encourages also moral concern for others. In particular, I

show both that Spinozist egoism encourages us to arrange things such that suicide is

never rational for ourselves, and that Spinozist ethics encourages us to arrange things

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[24] The translation by Curley that I am using writes "case" where I have substituted "care". I think
Curley made a typo here, since the original Latin text reads "cura" in that spot, and "cura" is normally
translated from the Latin along the lines of "concern", "care", or "worry".
[25] This assumes that Spinoza is a moral realist. See Marshall (2017) for an overview on this topic, and also
for what I take to be good defense of the view that Spinoza is indeed a moral realist.

such that suicide is never rational for others. These principles of Spinozist ethics demand that we abolish conditions that make suicide rational, in the special Spinozist sense. We will see that Young's account of oppression shows oppression to be one of these conditions, and thus oppression, for the Spinozist, must be abolished.

This chapter thus proceeds in the following order: in §1 I explain Spinoza's moral egoism and how it demands that we work to not have suicide be rational for ourselves. In §2 I explain how this ends up encouraging us to better the state of others' lives and to work to not have suicide be rational for them. In §3, I offer an example of something similar to my view that exists in the literature. Though the example I offer is not exactly like or related to suicide, its level of similarity to what I say about a Spinozist approach to suicide shows that there is reason for Spinoza scholars to take seriously what I argue about Spinoza's philosophy of suicide. In §4, I diagnose some conditions which may force suicide to become rational, and focus on a discussion of oppression as such a condition. I then conclude the chapter in §5.

1: Ethics for the Sake of Self

In Chapter 2 I discussed Spinozist conceptions of freedom, rationality, joy, sadness, and conatus. All of these are vital to understanding Spinozist good living. Recall: we act "freely" or "rationally" when we act from our own internal natures and expand our powers, thus approaching perfection. When we pass to a more perfect state, and so expand our natural powers, we experience joy (E3def aff2). When we do the opposite, we experience sadness (E3def aff3). Being free and rational is *how* we approach perfection. Experiencing joy and sadness indicates that we are either approaching or being distanced

from perfection, our powers are being expanded or diminished. As Youpa has put it, joy and sadness are "symptomatic" of increases or decreases of power, they are how we *feel* or *experience* such increases or decreases respectively (2020, all of Chapter 1). So, to achieve joyful increases in power and to avoid sad decreases in power, and thus live well, we must live freely and according to reason.

As we saw, though, which actions this actually entails will depend on each person's position in a complex universe full of external conditions that shape which options seem open to us and which options are best. But reason may still demand that we pick certain options out of those which evidence indicates are available to us. For example, we should choose those options which most accord with our nature, since "the more a thing agrees with our nature, the more useful, or better, it is for us" (E4p31c), and we must be careful that we do not choose options which fuel desires that might cloud our judgements, since "Love and Desire can be excessive" (E4p44). Most importantly for our purposes, the rational person always chooses the lesser of the available evils or the greater of the available goods (E4p65).

Now, Spinoza holds that "No one can desire to be blessed, to act well and to live well, unless at the same time he desires to be, to act, and to live, i.e., to actually exist" (E4p21). It may seem then that this proposition implies that suicide is *never* permissible, since suicide makes it so that we cease to "actually exist", and so problematizes again the view that Spinozism accounts for rational suicides. But, as we saw in Chapter 2, Spinoza elsewhere explicitly prioritizes other things above a longer durational existence, like for example maintaining honesty even in situations where doing so might threaten our lives (E4p72s). We thus cannot read this proposition as insisting that to live well we must

always aim to continue existing. Rather, we must read it as making the following, qualified claim: 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 act and live well*. This, as in Chapter 2, accords with Nadler's reading of Spinoza: "for the free person, actual durational existence is not an end in itself but only a necessary condition for a free and rationally virtuous life. And if there is no hope for the latter, there would seem to be no reason to persevere in the former" (2020, 164). So, in general, it is good for us to pursue those things which allow us to maintain life, but if there is no chance of freedom and joyful living, rationality no longer demands that we continue living.

We can thus draw out the view that, if there is nothing stopping us from acting to expand or preserve our powers, then it is better for us to continue living so as to keep expanding or preserving those powers. It is only rational to die by suicide when evidence suggests that the conditions which allow good living are not present. The only time it becomes worse to go on living than to die is when evidence indicates that powerful living is impossible. This is why, as I noted in Chapter 2, Lebuffe writes 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" (2009, 192). For Spinoza, it is better that we have the opportunity to exercise our freedom and rationality, and only when that becomes impossible is life no longer worth living. Having the chance to exercise our powers, to be free and rational, is a greater good than being in a situation where it is not possible, which is a relative evil.

Naturally, then, because the rational person wishes to pursue the lesser of two evils or the greater of two goods (E4p65), we should want to arrange things such that, for ourselves at least, suicide is not the rational option. Our rationality, and hence our being free, demands that we push for situations that further allow us to be free, insofar as doing so is possible. While suicide may be rational once our option-set is fixed and suicide is the least evil element of that set, it would also be better to arrange things beforehand such that an option-set where suicide is the least evil element is never instantiated. Even if suicide is right for the paradigmatic rational suicide in the Seneca case, we do not, and should not, want to be in Seneca's spot. Seneca's situation is evil, for Seneca, insofar as overwhelming external conditions (in his particular case, these conditions are Nero and his tyranny) have thrust him into a situation where he cannot exercise any significant power, and cannot expand his powers, and so, considering our own Spinozist priorities of power preservation and expansion, we should aim to abolish or prevent situations like Seneca's in our own lives.

This much is not likely to be controversial in the literature on Spinoza's views of suicide, granting my defence of there being rational suicide in the Spinozist framework, as offered in Chapter 2. Lebuffe, as I've mentioned, thinks situations where suicide is forced to be right action are "tragic". Nadler, writing about Seneca's suicide, finds that "The rational person must respond to the circumstances in which he finds himself; and yes, this represents a *constraint upon his freedom*" (emphasis my own) (2016, 274-275). Barbone and Rice conclude their paper on Spinoza and suicide with the following note:

> Suicidal behavior, in short, is always a symptom of the failure of life-giving and
> reinforcing contingencies within the environment itself. In our society this

environment is largely man-made, to an even greater degree than in Spinoza's; thus the increasing number of suicides can be seen, from a Spinozistic perspective, as an indictment not of the suicidal person, but of our collective failure to produce environments which support inbuilt tendencies for self-preservation. (1994, 241)

In all cases, the circumstances that lead to a rational suicide are "tragic", a "constraint upon… freedom", and represent "an indictment not of the suicidal person, but of our collective failure to produce environments which support inbuilt tendencies for self-preservation". When suicide is forced to be rational, as I argue Spinoza thinks it sometimes is, it is because the environment, which is, as Barbone and Rice note, "largely man-made", fails to be constructed in life-affirming ways. It is not the doings of the suicidal person that forces the suicide to be rational, it is the doings of the "largely man-made" environment. So, to make it so that we do not have to suffer these situations ourselves, we should want to change our "largely man-made" environments such that we do not ever run into situations where suicide is forced to be rational.

2: Ethics for the Sake of Others

Spinoza also emphasises the importance of striving unto the betterment of others' lives, since doing so accords with the striving towards the betterment of our own lives. In the *TIE*, for example, Spinoza tells us that, given that we strive for a perfected human nature, "the highest good is to arrive—together with other individuals if possible—at the enjoyment of such a (perfected) nature", and that to do this we must aim to both "understand as much of Nature as suffices for acquiring such a (perfected) nature; (and)

next, to form a society of the kind that is desirable, so that as many as possible may attain it as easily and surely as possible" (TIE 13-14). We must both understand what is best for us by studying nature, or the universe and our place within it, and then also must strive to make sure that both ourselves and others live in a social and political environment which allows us all to strive for perfection. That Spinozism encourages a deep care for others, for the sake of one's own benefit, is uncontroversial in the literature: Youpa notes that "insofar as we empower ourselves, we will seek to empower others" (2020, 178), and Bennett writes that Spinoza believes "that the thoughtful egoist will be led by his egoism to care as much for the welfare of others as for his own" (1984, 299). Even those who, as Stephenson words it, give a "'conservative' interpretation of Spinoza's ethico-rational politics – according to which reason commands strict obedience to political authorities" (2010, 4), tend to recognise the Spinozist need to aid others, regardless of its political implications. Smith, for example, thinks that "Spinoza may have been a radical, but he was not a political revolutionary. He follows Machiavelli here in maintaining that the effort to alter government by changing its original principles is always a mistake" (1997, 158), yet he also grants that "A person is liberated who, as far as possible… thinks and acts not out of envy and fear but out of love and friendship" (1997, 24). Even amongst those who read Spinoza as a political "conservative", insofar as he supposedly does not allow outright "revolution" for the sake of the betterment of others, there is recognition that we must help others in some important way, in order to help ourselves.

Further, we have already seen that it is better that we not be in a position where suicide is rational. Having thus increased our understanding of this one aspect of striving for our own human perfection, we must turn towards organising our social and political

environments such that both we *and* others do not run into situations where suicide is rational. If we can create conditions which allow others to thrive, then we have created conditions where we can further thrive ourselves, and so creating these better conditions for others in the end benefits ourselves.

We must first answer, though, why it is that we strive for the betterment of others, or why the betterment of the lives of others is conducive to our own benefit. Striving for the benefit of others is entailed by Spinoza's moral egoism: it is to our own benefit. This is because joining powers with other humans make us more capable of achieving those things which are good for ourselves. I need to eat to survive, and though I may be able to feed myself, unaided by others, enough to eke out an uncomfortable survival, I would expand my powers much further were I to pool my powers with those of other humans into a functioning farm which produces enough for all of us to eat a much more comfortable amount of food. In joining our food-making powers together, we each wind up with more food than we would have if we did not join our powers. This works out because, by nature, having access to more food is to all of our respective advantages. This kind of reasoning is why Spinoza gives us strikingly communal-sounding passages like E4p35: "When each man most seeks his own advantage for himself, then men are most useful to one another" (E4p35c2), and "There is no singular thing in Nature that is more useful to man than a man who lives according to the guidance of reason" (E4p35c1) and "man is a God to man" (E4p35s). Insofar as our natures agree, and the same things are useful to us, reason demands that we work together to accomplish useful things more efficiently. Indeed, "all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of

all" (E4p18s). When people behave rationally, and so act for their own benefit, they will act for the benefit of others as well.

Now, we have seen that suicide is rational when death is the least evil of someone's available options. We have seen also that it is rational and useful that we strive to make the world such that suicide is not rational for ourselves. This general rule is not dependent on one's actual, instantiated existence. Whereas suicide may be rational in particular instantiated moments, it is *always* better that it not be rational, since in *any* case where suicide is rational, powerful living has become impossible. Expanding or maximising our powers is *always* good, and since situations where suicide is rational are situations where our freedom to expand our powers has been, as Lebuffe puts it, "tragically reduced" (Lebuffe 2009, 192), it is *always* better that these situations not be present. This holds even if, sometimes, the actual world forces suicide to be the least evil option available to people. Because it is *always* better that suicide not be rational for *ourselves*, given that we strive for situations which allow us to preserve or expand our powers, we must generalise this precept out to others. Since all beings, as we discussed in Chapter 2, have as their essence a striving to preserve and expand their powers, it is better for all beings to be in situations where suicide is not natural. Precepts which are *always* true, insofar as they apply to ourselves as *things* or *modes* living in accordance with our conatus, and not insofar as we are a *particularly instantiated* being, generalise out to *all* beings. Insofar as humans consider things which are good for *all* humans, "men who are governed by reason—i.e., men who, from the guidance of reason, seek their own advantage— want nothing for themselves that they do not desire for other men" (E4p18s). Examples of such precepts include, of course, that it is always rational to

pursue the lesser of two evils, since what is evil for all modes is what restricts their conatus. So, if we recognise that it is *always* better for us, or for modes in general, to be in a position where suicide is not rational, we must also grant that suicide should never be rational for others. Obviously, modes of substance, which strive to expand their powers, all want to avoid situations where suicide is rational, since that only occurs when their powers are deeply constrained. As such, suicide should never be made rational for others, from their own modal perspectives.

The next corollary here is quite quick: since it is the case that we must strive for the betterment of others, in order to increase the quality of our own lives, and since all other humans are negatively impacted by being in situations where suicide is rational, we must thus strive to arrange things such that suicide is not made rational not only for ourselves but also for others. We must, then, aim to abolish conditions which render suicides rational for *anyone* and *everyone*.

3: Sharp on Plastic Surgery as Example for the Spinozist Account of Suicide

Again, granting the success of my defence of rational suicide in Spinozism, the views expressed in §1 and §2 should be acceptable to Spinoza scholars. The position I have so far articulated already finds some friendly views in the literature. Indeed, there is a relevant passage which serves as an example of the kind of argument I am making, thus reinforcing the viability of my position. That is, we already find an example within the literature of a phenomenon which is forced to be rational in light of unjust circumstances, and whose unjust circumstances also need changing. Given that Spinoza scholars can

entertain one phenomenon of such a type, they should be able to entertain another, namely suicide.

Specifically, Sharp (2011) holds the view that, on a Spinozist reading, a woman's plastic surgery performed to appease patriarchal beauty norms is rational, but it would be better if it never become so. Sharp recognises that, within a patriarchal framework, plastic surgery undertaken to conform to patriarchal beauty standards may be "rational" insofar as those surgeries "may be sources of joy", and that "Empirical studies show that women who correspond to patriarchal standards of beauty are better remunerated and more likely to be encouraged in school and to receive regular expressions of affirmation from intimates as well as strangers". So, Sharp notes, "in a sexist context, a woman may fare better if her body conforms to patriarchal standards" (2011, 79-80). As such, plastic surgery may represent "an increase in the power to persevere in being, on Spinoza's model", and so plastic surgery may be "'rational' (in the calculative sense) as a strategy of well-being" (80). Because external conditions are such that having plastic surgery may end up being a further increase in power than not having plastic surgery, it may beat out the option of not having plastic surgery as a greater good or lesser evil. Because of our living in a patriarchal society, women may see their powers maximised by having patriarchy appeasing plastic surgeries. Plastic surgery is, like Spinozist rational suicides, rational in light of an unjust context. What is more, Sharp places much emphasis on the idea that this situation needs to change, much like I do about rational suicide: "The transformation of the causal nexus upholding oppressive measures of beauty is one of the tasks of feminist action. That surgical alteration of one's body is an appealing means to attenuate self-hatred must *cease to be* true" (emphasis in original) (80). Further, the

situation of plastic surgery reinforces itself. Plastic surgery becomes appealing in light of patriarchy, and then once it is pursued as a result of its forced appeal it reinforces patriarchal beauty norms, reproducing the harms of patriarchy: "Forcibly altering one's body to conform to oppressive standards reinforces those standards, perpetuates misogyny, and harms women as a social group" (79).

This self-reinforcement may, I suggest, also occur with suicides. Someone may see that suicide became a rational response for another person in a similar situation to them, and so be exposed to evidence that suicide is an available conservation of power. This reinforces suicides as rational responses to unjust circumstances. Evidence mounts that suicide functions as a conservation of power. Similarly, when women see other women's lives improving after getting plastic surgery to conform to patriarchal beauty norms, the rationality of plastic surgery gets reasserted. In such cases, evidence is produced that plastic surgery maximises the powers of others in similar situations, and so, naturally, one desires the same power maximisation themselves. Plastic surgery's rationality becomes re-asserted. Plastic surgery's rationality is reinforced by plastic surgeries, and suicide's rationality is reinforced, or suicide is at least made appealing, by suicides.

Now, situations where people see suicides in media, real or fictional, and then are influenced to pursue suicide, fall under what is called the "Werther Effect", named after a supposed spike in young men's suicides after the publication of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, in which a young man dies by suicide. In the last several years, after the release of the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*, in which a character pursues suicide and leaves behind tapes detailing her reasons for death, there have been a number of

publications about the Werther Effect and how much *13 Reasons Why* has provoked it.

Some have found the show to be "associated with approximately 195 additional suicide

deaths" (Bridge et al 2019, 240). Often, too, "suicide contagion disproportionately affects

those who strongly identify with the person who died by suicide" (Bridge et al 2019,

240). This was the case, for example, after news coverage of Robin Williams' suicide,

which saw an increase in male suicides using the same methods as Williams had, (though

there was not a specific increase in adolescent girl suicides in the wake of *13 Reasons*

Why, despite the show's suicide being of an adolescent girl) (Bridge et al 2019, 240-

241).[26] The Werther effect may be interpreted Spinozistically through what Spinoza calls

"Emulation". Spinoza writes that "Emulation… is nothing but the Desire for a thing

which is generated in us from the fact that we imagine others like us to have the same

Desire" (E3p27s). Someone P in a situation which seems like another someone Q's

situation, sees that Q has aptly desired suicide for power maximising reasons, and so P

thinks suicide to be desirable for themselves. When P sees Q avoid power-limiting

conditions by suicide, P feels that Q maximises their power by partaking in suicide: P

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[26] For a very interesting and very short response to the article I have here discussed, and for the view that scholars often interpret the Werther Effect too simplistically, see (Arendt & Romer 2020). For example, the Werther effect is often thought of in terms of purely *net* impact (net value = the number of lives saved by a media portrayal of suicide minus the number of lives lost by a media portrayal of suicide). But net values do not take account of differences in the numbers which can produce said net value: "It is possible, for example, that the series influenced an ultimate outcome involving the potential deaths of n = 205 vulnerable individuals, of whom 200 died by suicide but 5 survived a suicidal crisis as a result of experiencing the suicide portrayal. This +200/−5 pattern results in a net effect of +195. Of course, more extreme patterns are also possible, such as +395/ −200, also equalling a net effect of +195" (Arendt & Romer 2020, 665). Further, because we speak of the Werther effect mostly in terms of net deaths, and make recommendations based off of this, it may be the case that a consequentialist ethics is pre-emptively assumed by those making use of the Wether Effect. This is because the analysis focuses on a total consequence, a single quantitative value representing impact. However, if, for example, a "deontological" perspective were assumed, we might say that *any* death caused by portrayals of a suicide in media is an evil, regardless of whether that portrayal had an overall net-positive impact or not (Arendt & Romer 2020, 665-666).

desires something which they saw a similar person Q find desirable. In this sense, situations where suicide is forced by available evidence to be rational for one person may make suicide appealing to others. In the case of suicide, emulation forces suicide to be deisreable, and in the case of plastic surgery, evidence is provided that plastic surgery expands one's powers. These are not entirely the same: in the case of suicide, suicide is reasserted as *appealing* or *salient*, and so suicide becomes an available, desireable option, which may be more or less rational, whereas in the case of plastic surgery one actually sees the surgery recipient's powers grow after the surgery. But, in either case, suicide or plastic surgery being rational, and thus leading to suicides and plastic surgeries respectively, reassert suicide and plastic surgery as desireable. Suicide seems to avert a loss in power, surgery seems to grant an expansion of power, and in either case power is seemingly maximised. In this sense, they are alike. It is *not* the case that they are directly related: it is not as if, when someone who cannot conform to patriarchal beauty norms is unable to get plastic surgery, suicide becomes rational for them (unless all other evidence also suggests there are no power-affirming paths available to them, I suppose). But rather that Sharp's discussion of plastic surgery serves as a similar enough example to what I say about suicide to show that Spinoza scholars can accept the kind of interpretation I offer of a Spinozist view of suicide. I am not, of course, directly linking the rationality of plastic surgery and suicide, only Sharp's reading of plastic surgery and my reading of suicide being sort of analogous.

Now, continuing on, because we want to cease the repetition of these harms, whether they be cases of plastic surgery or suicide, there is thus even more reason to alter the conditions that force them. This illustrates in another phenomenon the kind of views I

find in Spinoza concerning suicide. Thus, there are good reasons to think that my comments so far in this chapter could find a place in Spinoza scholarship, in light of similar views expressed by Sharp about plastic surgery. Both plastic surgery and suicide are sometimes turned from an otherwise undesirable phenomenon into a rational one, yet it would still be better to be in situations where neither phenomena is rational, and so conditions which force these phenomena to become rational must be abolished.

4: Suicide and Sociality

On the Spinozist view, we should aim to do away with the conditions which force suicide to be rational, both for us and for others. Further, we have seen that responsibility for suicide does not fall on any individual who is subjected to situations where suicide becomes rational. Rather, we see that external conditions are responsible for making evidence such that powerful living no longer seems possible. The question thus remains: what kind of conditions count as suicide inducing ones, and thus must be abolished?

4.1: Suicide Inducing Conditions

Seneca's accessible evidence made his options quite clear; as discussed in Chapter 2, his options were to die by his own hand or to die a much more evil death by hands of the tyrant Nero. So, available evidence makes it rational for Seneca to pursue suicide. Most other suicides are not like this. Perhaps the most obvious example of a similar kind of "suicide" may be those related to excruciating terminal illnesses. Many people with certain kinds of terminal illnesses may face similar situations: the best available medical evidence may indicate to them that they will die after suffering some prolonged, painful

existence, characterised by more and more suffering, until the moment of death, and evidence may also indicate that they can pursue medically assisted suicide, and die a quicker, much less painful death. In many such situations, suicide will be forced to be rational, indicating a greater conservation of one's powers than will prolonging one's life in an especially restricted way. Effectively, whatever conditions that bring on such a terminal illness are the kinds of external conditions which limit one's option-set to either dying by suicide or dying in an even worse state. Suicides of this nature can be considered as rational suicides in the special Spinozist sense, along the same lines as Seneca's.

Nadler makes this link too, when he notes that a situation comparable to Seneca's is when an "individual is suffering from a painful and incurable disease" (2015, 271). In these cases, of course, we should want to abolish conditions which force these suicides to become rational: we should aim to make medical strides that help treat a variety of conditions and make living powerfully with them possible, and we should aim to arrange things socially and politically such that those with relevant medical conditions can enjoy a good quality of living in terms of access to housing, food, comforts, etc… without having to worry about their conditions preventing them from working and making the kind of money currently necessary for these things. We should also aim to provide evidence that powerful living with certain conditions is possible: i.e. provide evidence that people in similar conditions, if given the right social and medical accommodations, may still live well for the remainder of their lives.[27]

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[27] Analogues to these suggestions will be discussed explicitly in the concluding section of Chapter 5.

Further, I contend that other, less "medical" situations can be comparable. Of course, I write "medical" in quotes here because I do not mean to imply that physical illnesses cannot also be "non-medical", insofar as their causes and treatments are tied up in a "social" milieu. Indeed, for the Spinozist, since all modes of substance are tied up in a nexus of external causal conditions, it is very hard to cleanly cleave between "internal" things like biological health and "external" things like social determinants of health. Regardless, Nadler writes that situations where "the social and material conditions necessary for the pursuit and maintenance of the life of knowledge and virtue cannot possibly exist" (2015, 271), for example, are also comparable to Seneca's death. If, because of one's "largely man-made" environment (Barbone and Rice 1994, 241), such a life does not seem to be possible given the available evidence, then suicide will become rational.

In any case, we need to do our best to abolish, or at the very least hinder, the conditions that lead to suicide being rational.[28] As was noted, abolishing both the "medical" and the "social" or "political" conditions which induce suicide demands increasing our understandings of medicine and of the social and political aspects of our world, either through attention to science, theory, philosophy, lived experiences, etc.[29]

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[28] I do not include a dedicated discussion about the rationality of many medically assisted suicides, since the discussions on this matter are already quite well-tread, and they are not really the focus of my project. There are many decades-old classic texts on the matter, including Brandt (1975) and Graber (1981) who think suicide can be rational, not to mention the even older contributions of, for example, Hume (in his essay "Of Suicide"), but there are also some for whom the rationality of suicide is irrelevant: For this view, and the view that rational suicides may still be "mistakes", see Pilpel and Amsel (2011), and for a reply to this view, see Cholbi (2012).

This all being said, my own view is that these debates focus too much on when an individual should be allowed to opt for suicide, and not enough on abolishing or ameliorating the kinds of situations which force medically assisted suicide to be appealing. In an ideal situation, of course, there would be no conditions which render medically assisted suicide appealing, and we should strive to achieve this situation.

[29] Again, these are not so easily differentiated, in light of e.g., social determinants of health.

Increasing such understandings grants us knowledge about what specific instantiations of illness or of social and political conditions limit our powers to such a tragic extent that suicide begins to become rational, and so also what conditions must be abolished.

This being said, I am not sure how much Spinozism can help with regards to relevant medical aspects in our contemporary context. But, as I will show, Spinozism is absolutely able to help by illuminating that oppression, as understood by Young, is antithetical to powerful living. For this reason, the rest of the project focuses most emphatically on oppressive conditions which force suicide to be rational. It is a strength of Spinozism that it allows a discussion of these matters, and so this strength will be explored.

It is here that we finally turn to Young's understanding of oppression, as I alluded to in Chapter 1. Recall Young's classic characterisation of oppression: "In the most general sense, all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings" (1990, 40), and oppressed people suffer these constraints because they are part of an oppressed social group. While one oppressed group or another may experience this limitation of power in different and unique ways, any oppressed group is subjected to a limitation on their capacities to attain powerful living.

Oppressed people, then, can be in situations like Seneca's. Where Seneca's powers are constrained by direct political repression by a tyrant, oppressed people's powers are constrained by the oppressive conditions of their social environment. Though Seneca suffers because he is thought by Nero to have conspired against him, and not because he is part of an oppressed group, his situation is similar to someone suffering

oppression insofar as an evil external force constrains his powers to act and live well. What the Seneca case does is provide an illuminating tool for reading certain suicidalities of oppressed people. The limitations placed on an oppressed group are power limiting, just as Seneca's political repression is power limiting. Oppression, it can be shown, potentially leads to situations of rational suicide akin to Seneca's. If this is the case, the Spinozist must aim to abolish or reduce oppression as much as possible, since, as we saw, the Spinozist must commit to abolishing conditions which render suicide rational, even though Spinoza does not speak of oppression in the same way as do contemporary theorists.

4.2: Oppression as Suicide Inducing

Specific examples of how oppression forces suicide to be rational are discussed in Chapter 5. In this section, I discuss how, generally, oppression restricts people's abilities to live powerful lives in the Spinozist sense, and hence may force oppressed people to sensibly find suicide rational. That is, I diagnose oppression, generally speaking, as a condition which can force suicide to be rational and thus as a condition which must be abolished. To do this, I explain how, on a Young-informed Spinozist model, oppression limits both, most importantly, the oppressed, insofar as it makes suicide appear as a greater conservation of power than is living, but also *potentially* the oppressor, insofar as it may lead to retaliation against the oppressor. I include this later point to further emphasise that, even if one ostensibly benefits from the oppression of others, they must still aim to abolish oppression. I do this by trying to discuss oppression in terms of Spinoza's metaphysical psychology. Of course, as developed in §2 of this chapter,

oppressors also have interest as *humans* in abolishing suicide inducing conditions like oppression, but more than that can yet be said on the matter.

Though I aim to offer this discussion in terms of metaphysical psychology, having so far focused on Spinoza's very psychological magnum opus, the *Ethics*, I should note that a similar case could probably also be made using Spinoza's more explicitly political writings. While such a case is beyond the scope of this project, hints at it already appear in the literature. I will, as this section progresses, show not only that oppression is bad for the oppressed, but also for the oppressor, insofar as it may lead to their own destruction. Similarly, Sharp (2021) notes that Spinoza's political philosophy demonstrates that:

> domination of thought and speech by the State also constitutes violence against itself. State action contrary to the striving of one's subjects necessarily provokes indignation. Indignation is, according to Spinoza, an inevitable collective response to violent rule, and is expressed in the desire that the rulers suffer 'all sorts of bad things.' When a commonwealth is afflicted by such violence, according to Spinoza, this contradicts its own striving to persevere in being, since 'it does, or allows to happen, what can be the cause of its own ruin.' (372).

For more in this direction, see also some comments in Sharp (2011, Ch5) and Steinberg (2019, §3.5). If state violence can be a harm both to those subjected to it and also the state which causes it, an analogical point may be made such that oppression which forces suicides on the oppressed may similarly harm any potential oppressors (in cases of oppression where there *is* an identifiable oppressor(s). As Young notes, this is not always the case).

But let us move to explaining this on grounds of Spinoza's metaphysical psychology. Seeing how oppression may abstractly lead to Seneca-esque rational suicides amongst the oppressed is not hard, and requires only a quick line of thought. The oppressed have their powers limited by oppression *directly*. The very nature of oppression is that it limits the powers of whoever it oppresses: this is precisely what Young's account discusses when she describes *constraints* placed on the oppressed. If oppression is thus significant enough, it could make suicide rational to the oppressed if it makes it seem like powerful living is not possible, given that suicide becomes rational when powerful living no longer seems possible in light of the available evidence. But oppression may, in the end, *sometimes* force suicide to be rational for oppressors too, and so be against the oppressor's own interests as well.

In perpetuating oppression, the oppressor may put themselves on the path of facing resistance. When someone is oppressed, their power is restricted. When someone's power is restricted, they experience sadness, since "Sadness is a man's passage from a greater to a lesser perfection" (E4def aff3). When one feels that their sadness is the result of some external condition, in our case oppression and its source(s), they grow to hate that condition, since "*Hate is* nothing but *Sadness with the accompanying idea of an external cause*" (emphasis in original) (E4p13s). Finally, when one hates something, one strives to destroy that something: "he who hates someone will strive to remove or destroy him" (E4p39d). So, the oppressor, when oppressing, may sometimes put themselves on the path of danger, on the path of being challenged by resistance. The oppressor causes the oppressed to hate them, and so causes the oppressed to fight back against the oppressive conditions which benefit oppressors. This may happen subtly, too. If one

performs a sit-in at a police office to protest police violence against Black or Indigenous people, for example, they are destabilising or limiting the powers of police; the powers of police, operating as an oppressive institution, are thus limited. If this kind of thing occurred on a large enough scale, and destabilised oppressive powers sufficiently, suicide could become rational to those doing the oppressing (in our example, oppressive police forces). Though the oppressor in this case expands their power by oppressing others, i.e. the police may reassert their powers by wielding the threat of police violence, in the end they *may* face sufficient resistance, as a result of their own actions, to be in a position which is overall worse off for them.

Now, the only way of pre-empting resistance is to show more threat by demonstrating greater power to restrict the powers of the oppressed: "He who Hates someone will strive to do evil to him, *unless he fears that a greater evil to himself will arise from this*" (emphasis my own) (E4p39). But this will only work for so long. Since the oppressor must flex their powers, so to speak, they must make it appear that they are willing to restrict the powers of the oppressed even more, and this will in turn cause the oppressed to hate the oppressor even more, and thus will cause the oppressed to endeavor to destroy the oppressor even more. An oppressor or oppressive institution may sometimes put itself on a path to destruction, or at least deeply destabilising resistance, when it oppresses people. Whether it is an individual or an institution which is oppressing, if the oppressed aptly see the oppressor as a source of oppression, they will grow to endeavor its destruction. Oppression may thus limit the powers of oppressor(s) too, if the oppressed successfully rise up against the oppressor, and so if oppressors

behaved rationally, they would aim to end the oppression which they are guilty of maintaining.

In either the case of the oppressor or the oppressed, if their respective powers are limited enough, oppression can plausibly make suicides rational. The case of rational suicide amongst oppressor is, fittingly, analogous to the fate of Nero, who forced Seneca's suicide to be rational: according to the historian Suetonius, Nero died by his own hand after being declared a public enemy following a successful revolt against him (Suetonius, §49). While Nero's own political tyranny eventually led to his destruction, cases of oppression with identifiable oppressors may sometimes, in the end, lead to the limiting of the powers of oppressors. Given that, for the Spinozist, we must aim to abolish conditions that make suicide rational, it follows that oppression must be abolished, not just from the perspective of oppressed or the non-oppressor and non-oppressed person, but *even from the perspective of the oppressor*, and from all these perspectives must be abolished for the sake of everyone.

5: Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed Spinozist egoism and also Spinozist ethical concern for others, and how Spinozism demands that we abolish conditions which force suicide to become rational. A condition I evaluated as suicide inducing was oppression as described by Young, and so, given that the Spinozist must aim to abolish suicide inducing conditions, the Spinozist is given reason to abolish oppression.

This chapter marks the end of my focused interpretation of Spinoza in this thesis, the rest is concerned with the application of the interpretation I've offered. What I have

developed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 make up the Spinozist framework for suicide studies that I propose could fruitfully complement dominant forms of studying suicide in contemporary suicidology. I summarise the gist of this framework as the following:

1. Suicides are externally caused.

2. If available evidence forces a situation P to appear to make continued powerful living impossible, then suicide will properly be rational to someone facing P.

3. If someone is in such a situation P and they pursue suicide, any conditions in the relevant social environment which gives rise to P are responsible for making suicide rational.

4. We must strive, both for our own sakes and for the sakes of others, regardless of who we are, to abolish the conditions which give rise to such a situation P.

5. Oppression is a condition which may give rise to such a situation P, and so we must abolish oppression.

The following chapters of this thesis articulate the need for this Spinozist framework of suicide in light of some criticisms of mainstream suicide research, and shows how Spinozism illuminates understandings of certain kinds of oppressed suicides, and encourages us to deal with what causes them. I have shown what Spinozism offers theoretically, what remains to be seen is why and how we should make use of it practically.

Chapter 4:

On the Risks of Contemporary Suicide Research:

Individualism and Epistemic Injustice

> *Myself when young did eagerly frequent*
> *Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument*
> *About it and about: but evermore*
> *Came out by the same Door as in I went*
>
> *(Khayyám 1859, quatrain XXVII)*[30]

We turn now to what might be considered "Part 2" of this thesis, wherein I discuss the current state of suicide research, and how the Spinozist framework for suicide studies might avoid some risks that are present in current suicide research. Before showing how we might apply a Spinozist framework for suicide studies in the context of suicides of members of oppressed groups in our next and final chapter, I must here explain *why* such a framework may be needed. In this chapter, following recent critiques of mainstream suicidology, I argue that contemporary suicide research runs the risk of inadequately accounting for external conditions which induce suicide, even when, in some cases, it tries to do so, and also that mainstream suicide research and prevention methods commit epistemic injustice against suicidal people. In the next and final chapter, I will turn to showing how Spinozism may avoid these issues and may encourage practices which avoid them as well.

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[30] Omar Khayyám, to whom the original quatrains are attributed, lived in the 10th and 11th centuries. This translation was written in 1859, and no date of publication is in the copy I am citing. As such, I give the translation date as the citation date.

To prepare the landscape of that final chapter, this chapter will proceed in the following way. In §1, I explain the kind of mainstream approach to suicide research and prevention in which I aim to point out risks. In §2, I identify 2 risks in mainstream suicide research. Specifically, in §2.1, I explain what I will call the *Individualism Risk*, and in §2.2, I explain what I will call the *Epistemic Risk*. Finally, in §3, I conclude the chapter, and note that there is thus a need for approaches to suicide which avoid the two risks I identify.

1: Mainstream Suicidology

Largely speaking, as Alexandre Baril (2020a, 2020b)[31] has noted, we can generally sort mainstream approaches to thinking about suicide into the following three models: the medical model of suicide, the biopsychosocial model of suicide, and the social model of suicide (Baril 2020b). The medical model treats suicide as an entirely individual phenomenon, divorced from social contexts, dependent only on an individual's bio-chemical states. Research done under this model includes, for example, one suicidologist calling for an "oncology of suicide", which looks only at empirically verifiable medical factors to fully explain and treat suicidality (Marsh 2016, 24-25). The biopsychosocial model takes from both of the other models, trying to explain or think of suicide in terms of an amalgamation of bio-medical and social factors. As Baril (2020b) notes, this is the model undertaken by the World Health Organisation, who tell us of "the importance of the interplay between biological, psychological, social, environmental and cultural factors in determining suicidal behaviours" (WHO 2014, 8). Lastly, the social model thinks of

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[31] Both of these papers are published without pagination, and so no pages will be cited for them.

suicide as a result of primarily, or only, being subject to certain social conditions, which may help explain why certain groups subject to oppression experience especially high suicide rates. These groups include, in the Canadian context, various Indigenous peoples, queer people, and unhoused people, among others.[32] An example of published suicide research from this model is Vikki Reynolds' "Hate Kills: A Social Justice Response to 'Suicide'" (2016).

To grasp how each of these models functions, and thus get a sketch of the current state of suicidology (given that the field may be understood as comprising work done via all three models), we will here look at an example of research performed under each of the three respective models. Each example I discuss is chosen because it can clearly illustrate both the kinds of research that is done under each model, and also allow me to demonstrate the risks that each model possesses. There are, of course, many more examples of research done in each model than I here discuss, and they will or will not all fall subject to the risks I identify in varying degrees. But, these examples should be enough to demonstrate what is argued in this chapter. The risks I identify will be articulated via reference to the examples I discuss here in §2.

Before moving to this discussion, though, I must make the goal in discussing the three models clear. As noted in Chapter 1, I am not condemning or rejecting any of these models entirely. Indeed, they each have made important contributions to the field of suicide studies. For example, a recent meta-analysis of the effectiveness of psychotherapeutic and pharmacological treatments of mental disorders, many of which

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[32] For official recognition of the high rate of suicide amongst certain Indigenous groups, and amongst queer youth, see (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019), for recognition that unhoused people are 2-6 times more likely to die by suicide than are housed people, see (Sinyor et al. 2017).

often end up associated with suicide, found that both types of treatments demonstrated "limited additional gain… over placebo or TAU (treatment-as-usual)" (Leichsenring et al 2022, 141). As such, research stemming from what might be called "medical" models plausibly seems to offer, for at least some people, an effective approach to achieving "gains" with regards to managing or dealing with their suicidality. Alternatively, research done from a more social model, by Kral and Idlout (2016), has seen some success too. Their examination of suicide prevention in the context of Nunavut, based on "looking at the historical, social, cultural, and political contexts behind suicide and suicide prevention", including the legacy of Canadian colonialism, has produced successful results as well. Kral and Idlout note that, for example, supporting youth centres in Inuit communities which allowed for elders to pass on cultural traditions, for youth to play games and sports, and other community activities, saw suicide in those communities decrease by 67% (2016, 234-235). This allowed them to conclude that "community-driven action can prevent suicide. Inuit community action for suicide prevention, often by youth, has been successful" (235). Approaches stemming from social models have also, then, seen success.

So, given that there has been some success, even if not universal, with both medical and social approaches to suicide, it is no surprise that some biopsychosocial models have seen success as well, given that they incorporate both medical and social concerns about suicidality. The WHO has noted, for example, that Scotland achieved some success in reducing suicide rates after employing a strategy that included both improvements to medical affairs, like "health-care services", and also to more social affairs, like efforts to improve "welfare and employment services" (2014, 62). Since each

of these models has seen success, then, we should not reject any one of them entirely. Indeed, in light of their successes, it would be foolish to think there is not a use for aspects of medical, biopsychosocial, and social models respectively in researching suicide. The Spinozist must also praise some of their attempts at ameliorating external conditions, like "welfare and employment services", as we just saw.

However, in light of the issues I will here identify, we must propose alongside them, "multiple frameworks, methodologies, epistemologies, and perspectives…to adequately (re) theorize suicide and its prevention" (White et al 2016, 4). I argue in Chapter 5 that the Spinozist framework will be one of these. With this note made, let us move to illustrating these three models and the risks I identify in them.

1.1: The Medical Model: An Oncology of Suicide

In the 2011 edition of the *International Handbook of Suicide Prevention*, the first non-introductory chapter is Morton Silverman's "Challenges to Classifying Suicidal Ideations, Communications, and Behaviours". In this chapter, Silverman explains the issues supposedly plaguing the unclear, imprecise terminology and nomenclature used in suicide research and prevention. Silverman argues that the word "suicide" and its associated concepts have taken on so many meanings in medical and non-medical contexts that the useability of these words in research and prevention settings is limited. For just one example, Silverman argues that concepts like "deliberate self-harm" (DSH) are vague, and do not provide much information about the kind of activities encompassed under the concept. Because of the vagueness of the term, and the imprecise diversity of activities included under the label, the concept becomes less useful for suicide research

and prevention: the sheer diversity of unclassified activities under the umbrella of DSH makes it hard to see exactly what knowledge about DSH provides in our understandings of suicide and suicidality generally:

> The DSH literature, as well as the suicide attempt literature, rarely distinguishes the populations by method (self-poisoning, cutting, etc.), location of the injury (wrists, arms, legs, head, etc.), physical location at the time of self-injury, time of day, day of week, etc. Without such a classification system it is more difficult to differentiate between non-suicidal deliberate self-harm and suicide-attempt behaviours. Thus, we are describing a deliberately initiated act of self-harm with a non-fatal outcome, including both self-poisoning and self-injury. This self-injurious behaviour has been labelled attempted suicide, parasuicide, intentional self-harm, deliberate self-harm, and nonsuicidal self-injury. (Silverman 2011, 15-16)

DSH as a concept includes, then, both activities intended to cause death, but which do not achieve death, as well as activities not intended to cause death. These are obviously quite different kinds of activities, with some being called "attempted suicide" and others the seemingly contradictory "nonsuicidal-self injury". As such, the imprecision of the term can be said to hinder suicide research and prevention.

Here we turn to the especially "medical" aspect of Silverman's paper. To solve this and similar problems in other kinds of vague, imprecise terms in suicide research and prevention, Silverman argues that we need to develop more a precise, more exact taxonomy, classification system, and nomenclature for concepts pertaining to suicide research and prevention. The ideal model for such a precise language of suicide is

supposedly found in oncology. According to Silverman, the precision of the medical terminology pertaining to cancer is an exemplar for good suicidological research and prevention:

> An ideal goal is to develop, for example, a classification system similar to that used in oncology, where first a tumour is classified by type of cancer, and then by staging (e.g., based on size, location, degree of invasiveness, extent of metastasis, etc.), which not only informs diagnosis, but also treatment, management, monitoring, and prognosis. In a similar fashion, 'staging' criteria for suicidal behaviours might be degree of intent, lethality of method used, likelihood of rescue, degree of planning (impulsivity), and presence and status of psychiatric or medical illness. Scales or ranking systems can be developed to measure these elements and provide clinicians and researchers with a richly nuanced approach to classifying the full range of suicidal thoughts, communications, and behaviours. (Silverman 2011, 22)

Suicidality, then, is to be considered by researchers and clinicians in the same way as cancer is considered by oncologists. In this way, it is clear that Silverman is articulating a "medical" model of suicide, an approach characterised by the same "medicality" which we no doubt agree characterises cancer research and treatment. Indeed, Silverman even notes that, in suicide studies, "The terminology we use is often based on our training; theoretical, political, social, psychological, biological, and religious perspectives" (10), and that this is a problem: "As a result, researchers cannot easily compare their study populations, and clinicians have difficulty in translating research findings into practical applications when working with an individual at risk for suicidal behaviours" (10). The

proposed solution is thus a medicalised, universal approach to the language of suicide, which, ideally, leaves little to no room for vagueness or imprecision, and further enables suicide to be studied and treated in the same way as cancer is studied and treated. As Marsh, quoting Silverman, puts it,

> The suggestion is that 'suicidal behaviours' could be (with a sufficiently uniform use of language) objectively measured and categorized as if they were tumours, and thus not only 'diagnosis' 'but also treatment, management, monitoring, and prognosis' (2011, 22) of a suicidal individual could proceed along similar lines to those of a cancer patient. (2016, 25)

This particular case, then, helps us see the ways in which instances of suicidology employing the medical model describe suicide as only, predominantly, or ideally, a subject of medical study, and liken the proposed study of and response to suicide to medical research and treatment (in this case, oncology). Suicide is, on the medical model, an object of medico-scientific study and treatment.

1.2: The Biopsychosocial Model: The World Health Organization

The WHO's *Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative* (2014) is a fairly comprehensive report on the state of suicide research and prevention which aims to provide "two key elements to moving forward: (1) a global knowledge base on suicide and suicide attempts… and (2) actionable steps for countries based on their current resources and contexts" (2). To do so, they emphasise the importance of thinking of suicide as multifaceted, and they note that "countries should employ a multisectoral approach that addresses suicide in a comprehensive manner", without placing the "burden", as they call

it, of dealing with suicide solely on the medical sector (2). On this model suicide is to be studied by recognising "the interplay between biological, psychological, social, environmental and cultural factors in determining suicidal behaviours" (WHO 2014, 8).

In their discussion of "risk factors" for suicide, then, the WHO has distinct sections of their report dedicated to "Health system and societal risk factors" (32), "community and relationship risk factors" (32), and "individual risk factors" (40). "Health system and societal risk factors" include things like "Barriers to accessing mental health care", "Stigma associated with help-seeking behaviour", "Access to means (to attempt suicide)", and "Inappropriate media reporting and social media use" (32). "Community and relationship risk factors" include things like "Disaster, war and conflict", "Discrimination", and "Trauma or Abuse", among others (36). Finally, "individual risk factors" include things like "Previous suicide attempt(s)", "Mental disorders", "Harmful use of alcohol and other substances", and "Genetic and biological factors" among others (40-41).

The WHO also notes, however, that though they differentiate these kinds of risk factors, they do not think clear lines can be drawn between and among them:

It would be a mistake to assign a clear distinction between the areas identified. Just as each individual risk factor interrelates with others, the areas are not mutually exclusive. It is far more useful to view the areas as moving from systemic through to individual. Specific risk factors could actually sit within more than one of the areas simultaneously. (30)

And, in this vein, some of their recommended "intervention" methods range across these divides. For example, in response to supposed "individual" risk factors, one of their

recommended intervention methods is "Follow-up and community support", which, as a response, obviously extends beyond the individual alone.

So, from just this limited discussion of their report, we can see that the WHO advocates a *biopsychosocial* model of suicide, insofar as they advocate for considerations of biological, psychological, and social components of suicide and suicidality. They articulate the need for considerations of many different factors in thinking about suicide research and prevention.

1.3: The Social Model: Hate Kills

Finally, for our example of the social model of suicide, we will look at Vikki Reynolds' "Hate Kills: A Social Justice Response to 'Suicide'" (2016). Reynolds aims to discuss suicide in a way that rejects individualism, rejects an apolitical view of suicide, recognises the resistance effort of those who die by political suicide, and encourages more socially responsible therapeutic care for those whose loved ones died by suicide (169). Reynolds, in undertaking this work, is aiming to approach suicide from an "anti-oppression and decolonizing ethical stance and a social justice response" to the kinds of death that we tend to call "suicides" (169).

Reynolds emphasises that many suicides are deeply political. Examples she gives of political suicide or suicide-like actions are hunger strikes of Irish political prisoners in British confinement under Thatcher (173), hunger strikes by Indigenous people as part of the "Idle No More" movement in what is currently called Canada (173-174), the self-immolation of Tibetan monks and nuns as protest against the Chinese government (174), the death by suicide of an Eritrean refugee in what is currently called Canada after he lost

a case to remain in the country (174), and the deaths by suicide of women who suffer

misogynistic violence whilst living under rape culture (174-175). All of these cases are

characterised by conditions in particular political contexts: the people in these situations

die by suicide as a result of brutal treatment in their socio-political contexts. So, on

Reynolds' account, these cases of "suicide" cannot be considered *individualistically* at

all, they are *directly* related to the socio-political contexts beyond the individual. They

also cannot be properly captured by any medicalised language of suicide, which is

supposedly guilty of "obscuring violence", "hiding the victim's resistance to violence",

"obscuring the perpetrator's responsibility", and "blaming the victim" (171). Of the

Tibetan monks, for example, Reynolds writes that

> A social justice stance requires us to resist understanding their deaths within the
>
> realm of psychology and mental illness, and instead situates these deaths in the
>
> political world in which genocide, occupation, and torture are happening. (174)

And of the Irish political prisoners, Reynolds writes that

> Constructing these deaths by hunger strike as suicide, issues of mental illness, and
>
> criminality misses entirely the mark of the prisoners' autonomy, courage,
>
> resistance, and intelligence. The language of suicide obscures the political
>
> situation in which these deaths occurred. (173)

So, in the wake of Reynolds' general social justice response to the "language of suicide",

"medicalisation", and "individualism", she aims to develop a therapeutic practice which,

for those who know people who have died by suicide, does not focus on the dead

person's supposed medicalised issues, and does not work on "getting over" the death of

the loved one (177). Rather, Reynolds suggests that therapists ask questions that

emphasise the agency of the person who has died and that focuses on their achievements. In the example she provides, Reynolds meets with a councillor, called "Elliot", who had a client, called "Jonah". [33] Jonah was a queer man who had died by suicide. Reynolds asks Elliot social justice informed questions that include "How will you keep what Jonah taught you alive in your life and work", "How did you honour Jonah's resistance to oppression and hate in his life" and "What difference might you have made in Jonah's life", among others (178). These kinds of questions are intended to shift the therapist's concern away from "getting over" a sort of inevitable medical end and towards recognising and honouring the life and resistance of the person who died by suicide. Reynolds also, in the conclusion of her paper, suggests on the basis of one of her clients' testimonies that political organization is an even better approach to mitigating suicide than is therapy.

Reynolds' paper is thus a work done under the social model of suicide. Her paper rejects individualised medical approaches to suicide, and holds that suicides are a result of their socio-political environments. Reynolds emphasises the necessity of looking primarily at suicide as situated in the whole of society, and so articulates a social view of suicide, and this social view of suicide also informs her recommended therapeutic practices for helping those whose loved ones died by suicide and the suicidal alike.

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[33] Names of suicidal people and their loved ones in academic discussions of suicide are normally anonymized unless discussion is of an especially public suicide. "Elliot" and "Jonah" are not the names of the actual people involved.

2: The Risks of the Above Models

Again, as I noted at the beginning of §1, each of these models has seen some success, and so need not be entirely rejected, but all three models run certain risks. I will focus on two of these risks: first, the medical and biopsychosocial models run the risk of neglecting the impacts of external conditions on suicidality. That is, they are subject to the *Individualism Risk*. Second, all three models run the risk of committing epistemic injustice against suicidal people. That is, they are subject to the *Epistemic Risk*. The Individualism Risk has been given by a number of scholars, and the Epistemic Risk is developed most fully by Alexandre Baril.

2.1: The Individualism Risk

It is not hard to see how the medical model runs the risk of over-individualising suicide, and thus failing to consider external, social aspects of suicidality. Insofar as the medical model construes suicide as entirely or predominantly a medical issue, it looks primarily at what is going on medically in suicidal people as individuals. As with other defined medical issues, the medical model is concerned with physico-chemical phenomena attached to suicide. It runs the risk of divorcing suicide from its external contexts, seeking only to treat and cure suicide and suicide adjacent behaviour (e.g., non-suicidal self-harm) rather than deal with the social or other external factors relevant to suicidality.

Returning to Silverman as an example, recall his defence of an oncology of suicide, one that explicitly rejects language that could be informed by political, religious, and social contexts, among others (2011, 10). He takes these factors as undermining the precision and universality of the study of suicide. A single, universal medical language of

suicide is proposed, akin to the medical language of oncology. But, if we exclude social contexts in our discussions of suicide, then, as Marsh says of Silverman's piece, "we will lose sight of the importance of these contextual, relational, or 'subjective' factors" (2016, 25-26). Indeed, as Marsh also notes:

> By excluding from our vocabulary terms that fall outside the medical-scientific, we would be reducing the possibilities for thought and action available to the field of prevention. By insisting that suicide be read as an issue primarily (or even exclusively) of individual pathology, as something analogous to oncology, we would be limiting the field to an unnecessarily impoverished and decontextualized set of discursive resources. (26)

If the language of suicide is medicalised in the same way as it is in oncology, then important aspects of suicidality cannot properly be conceptualised. In a universalised, pathological, medicalised language of suicide, there is, as Reynolds pointed out in her paper, no way of differentiating between a political suicide and, say, Spinoza's third kind of suicide, where someone is so overwhelmed by external causes that they take on a nature contrary to their normal one and destroy themselves (E4p20s). Of course, for the Spinozist, this distinction matters: Seneca's death is different from the first and third kinds of suicides. For the medical model, using a purely medicalised language, all that is described in any case of suicide is the medical-scientific makeup of the "suicidal" person before and after the action which could lead to death, and there are no tools available for making sense of the social context in which a political suicide arises, or any other kind of suicide.

Approaches to suicide which focus only, or predominantly, on medical aspects of suicidality thus run the risk of being unable to take account of important external contexts. But, in a more subtle way, the biopsychosocial model runs this risk as well.

First, let me offer an example of this risk, identified against one instance of the biopsychosocial model. This critique is offered by Simone Fullagar and Wendy O'Brien (2016). Fullagar and O'Brien critique the "Living Is For Everyone *(LIFE)* Framework", a suicide prevention initiative in Australia. This initiative accepts the interplay of social and medical factors in suicide, and it thus approaches suicide biopsychosocially. The *LIFE* initiative writes that, when it comes to suicide,

> the causes often appear to be a complex mix of adverse life events, social and geographical isolation, cultural and family background, socio-economic disadvantage, genetic makeup, mental and physical health, the extent of support of family and friends, and the ability of a person to manage life events and bounce back from adversity. (Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing 2007, 10)

Given their focus on both "social" aspects, such as "socio-economic disadvantage" and "medical" aspects, such as "genetic makeup", the *LIFE* initiative is also an example of a biopsychosocial approach.

Now, the *LIFE* initiative notes at one point that, concerning the suicides of aging men, "Nothing can be done about their age or gender (non-modifiable factors that increase risk), but it is possible to change their social isolation (modifiable factors)" (Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing 2007, 10). Fullagar and O'Brien point out the problem with this kind of framing. The *LIFE* initiative treats

gender, sex, and age as immutable factors in the production of suicidality, of which "nothing can be done", and misses the chance to discuss how social contexts may, in fact, be what renders people of certain genders, sexes, or ages, at higher risk of suicide than others. Though the biopsychosocial model may sometimes allow for considerations of the relationship between social demographics and suicide, it sometimes fails to consider how those relations are only present *because* of how our social world is organised. The biopsychosocial model often runs the risk of over-individualising aspects of suicidality by suggesting that aspects of suicidal people, like, say, gender, are "immutable", rather than developed in a complex social and historical context; as social groups defined in relation to other social groups, to bring back Young's work. That is, the gender, for example, of individuals is taken to truly be an unmodifiable *individual* property, rather than a changeable historically and socially determined phenomenon. Suicide is thus "individualised" insofar as certain aspects of suicidality are removed from external, social considerations (2016, 98).

The WHO's *Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative* also ends up having a similar issue. Despite their recognition that a good approach to suicide requires a recognition of "the interplay between biological, psychological, social, environmental and cultural factors in determining suicidal behaviours" (WHO 2014, 8), the fact that their report ascribes a *unique* section to "Individual risk factors" (40) shows the creep of individualism into their model. Indeed, if they fully followed through on their view that "It would be a mistake to assign a clear distinction between the areas identified" (30) then they would not assign such a dedicated section to "individual" risks of suicidality, as opposed to other kinds of risks. It is bizarre that things like "Job or financial loss" can so

easily be put into a section on "individual" risks, given that one's losing a job is often a result of uncontrollable external contexts, which even the WHO admits when they note that "economic recessions" can lead to the increase of this particular risk factor (40). Many of their other listed "individual risk factors" do not seem especially individual either: they include things like substance addictions and family histories of suicide as "individual" risk factors, despite their often being the result of external social circumstances. For example, substance abuse amongst Indigenous people in what is currently called Canada has been found to be a result of the evils of Canadian residential schools, and other Imperialist, Colonialist endeavors (e.g., (Tait 2003, xviii) and (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015, 145)), and these evils have also led to increases in suicides in communities (and thus family histories of suicide) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015, 385). External conditions thus impact supposedly "individual" risks of suicidality.

Now, the implication of dedicating a specific section of the WHO report to "individual" risk factors, intended or not, is that these risk factors *are* indeed individual in a meaningful enough way to be separated from non-individual risk factors. They are thus divorced from social contexts. Regardless of their paying "lip-service" to external conditions of suicidality, as Baril (2020b) has noted, the WHO's initiative, and similar biopsychosocial models, run the risk of over-individualising important aspects of suicidality.[34]

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[34] Though I do not aim to diagnose the source of this problem in this thesis, I propose that it may be attached to the prevailing liberal, capitalistic individualism in Western society. Indeed, the WHO, for example, frequently frames suicide as primarily a problem for "Stakeholders" (2014, 2,3,9,12,35,48,54-56,58,60-61,66-70) rather than using any other, less economically charged terms to describe those impacted by suicides (and indeed by demarcating "stakeholders" they are implicitly entailing that there are some who

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Alternatively, the social model does a good job avoiding the Individualism Risk. Insofar as the social model sees suicide and our views of suicide as entirely engulfed in a world of external social, political, and historical conditions, by its very nature it aims to avoid seeing suicide or aspects of suicide as individual. Since, for example, Reynolds aims to work towards an "anti-oppression and decolonizing ethical stance and a social justice response" to "suicides" (2016, 169), and explicitly intends to be "resisting individualism" (169), she is motivated to consider suicide in ways that are necessarily social, and thus not limited to a focus on the suicidal individual. Oppression, colonialism, and social justice expand beyond the realm of any given individual, and so, in focusing on these, Reynolds' approach to suicide escapes the Individualism Risk. Much the same can be said of others who employ the social model. That being said, the social model does fall prey to the Epistemic Risk.

2.2: The Epistemic Risk

If I am going to identify risks in each of these models with regards to epistemic injustice, then I ought to give an overview explanation of epistemic injustice first. Briefly, epistemic injustice, as originally conceived by Miranda Fricker, occurs when one is harmed in their capacity as a knower (Fricker 2007, 1). Fricker identifies two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when "prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a

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are *not* stakeholders, and thus not affected by or interested in reconciling the current suicide situation). One other example of evidence that liberal capitalism has deep impacts on suicide research and initiatives can be found in the fact that, just recently, it was found out that one of the most used suicide crisis lines, Crisis Text Line, has been selling the data of its users for profit. A magazine article on the instance can be found at Levine (2022).

speaker's word", and hermeneutical injustice occurs when "a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (1). An example of an occurrence of testimonial injustice is when a white person may distrust the testimony of a Black person because the white person holds racist views concerning the honesty or reliability of Black people. In such a case, a Black person suffers injustice on the grounds that their testimony is unfairly disregarded.

To illustrate the concept, Fricker uses the literary case of Tom Robinson's testimony, the black man on trial in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, not being believed by the white jurors, despite evidence seeming to lean his way (23-25). Fricker discusses how this particular instance of testimonial injustice results from, and is tangled up in, the larger context of American racism. Real instances of anti-black epistemic injustice are of course still found today. An example from Tharao and Massaquoi (2013), is of a Black woman whose doctor refused to treat her medical issues, insisting that "it was all in [her] head" despite her insisting that her issue was serious. The woman notes that eventually, a different doctor identified and ameliorated her condition (2013, 474), which demonstrates the harms of her first doctor disregarding her testimony and prolonging the time before treatment. Epistemic injustice against groups who are subject to systems of oppression which unjustly discredit their testimony is, of course, still present.

Fricker also illustrates *hermeneutical* injustice by way of example: in the late sixties, women were unable to describe their experiences of being sexually harassed at work, because the collective interpretive resources in the available language lacked the concept of "sexual harassment". Without the concept of "sexual harassment" women

were unable to express their concerns in ways that could be heard and understood. Women who were being sexually harassed at such a time were suffering hermeneutical injustice because they could not communicate the kind of injustice they were facing, despite understanding that something about the experience was deeply uncomfortable, since their interpretive resources did not have the necessary tools to express these experiences as instances of injustice. Once a group of women had come together, told each other their stories about unwanted advances, touching, and other harms in the workplace, they were able to come up with the term "sexual harassment", and were then able to effectively describe the injustices thrust upon them by their male coworkers (2007, 148-151). Importantly, after the hermeneutical tool was created, women were able to get the concept of sexual harassment taken up into law and thrust into the collective interpretative resources of the powerful. Instances of hermeneutical injustice occur because the conceptual toolbox available to people, largely determined by those groups that hold social power, fails to have the proper tools to describe experiences of groups without such dominating social power. This may, in turn, harm an oppressed person's ability to contribute to efforts to reduce their oppression, as they cannot even name that which must be fought. Without apt hermeneutical tools, the oppressed cannot even be heard or understood by groups with social power unless the oppressed are able to thrust apt conceptual tools into the conceptual toolbox of those with more dominant social positions.

With our brief explanation of epistemic injustice out of the way, let us move to how all three models of suicide may commit it, in either the testimonial or hermeneutical sense. Now, it should be noted, there is already some significant work done on epistemic

injustice and issues pertaining to mental illness generally. For example, Jake Jackson (2017) has identified some specific ways that people with depression may experience testimonial injustice from non-depressed people, even those who are well-intentioned, and has called for empathetic approaches to depression from the non-depressed in light of this. In another example, del Pozo and Rich (2021) discuss how the medical world often treats those with mental illness as cognitively deficient, and so often commits testimonial injustice against the testimony of the mentally ill (92).

However, little is said of epistemic injustice in relation *specifically* to suicide rather than mental illness more generally. One scholar who has done substantial work on this is Alexandre Baril. Baril has developed a concept he deems "suicidism", which he takes to be a subset of ableist oppressions targeted specifically at suicidal people (see for e.g., Baril 2020a, 2020b). On Baril's account, suicidist epistemic injustice occurs in both senses of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice.

Baril suggests that suicidal people are often subjected to testimonial injustice because of the views that our society tends to have of suicide as inherently irrational. He notes: "testimonial injustice is produced by interlocking sanist, suicidist and paternalist views that regard the judgment of suicidal people as irrational, incompetent, illegitimate or alienated and which destroy the suicidal subject's credibility" (Baril 2020b). Much like del Pozo and Rich, Baril holds that suicidal people, by virtue of "sanist, suicidist, and paternalist views" are thought of as cognitively deficient, and so their testimony concerning the nature of suicide is unjustly disregarded.

Similarly, says Baril, because of sanism, suicidism, and paternalism, suicidal people are subjected to hermeneutical injustice. That is, because suicidist views in society

characterise suicide as *always* needing to be prevented or as inherently irrational, hermeneutical injustice creeps into the situation.

Now, I must make a digressionary note. As we saw in Chapter 3, the Spinozist must hold, contrary to Baril, that it is always preferable that suicides not occur, i.e., that it is always better that situations where suicide is rational do not arise. Baril opposes this, writing that we should not even think of "rational suicides" as the specific instances where suicide is sort of "faultless" (on his view we should not talk of suicides as epistemically "faulted" or "faultless" at all), as it reasserts "sanist" views of suicide. But this view of Baril's neglects, implicitly, the capacity of mentally ill people to be rational, insofar as it construes an emphasis on "rationality" as "sanist", and thus implies a view which may lead to further testimonial injustice against suicidal people, since their testimony would be separated from rationality. Baril writes: "I would also add that most authors in favor of 'rational suicide' adhere by default to sanist perspectives, since rational suicide is seen as an act accomplished by a rational subject competent to decide, usually defined in opposition to people labelled as having intellectual, cognitive, mental, and psychological disabilities or illnesses." (2020b, fn23).

Returning to suicidist hermeneutical injustice, though: our conceptual toolbox does not include the necessary instruments for suicidal people to easily conceptualise and contribute to knowledge about suicidality, since their experiences with suicidality may run contrary to that narrative. While it may still be *possible* for suicidal people to conceptualise suicide outside of the ways that society does, it is still the case that, given our social views of suicide, "suicide is not considered a valid option and hence is not rendered intelligible or rational" (Baril 2020b). Many aspects of being suicidal, by virtue

of suicide's being viewed as inherently irrational, are rendered totally incommunicable to any suicidal person who feels their experiences are more rational than the social view of suicide allows. In other words, the collective interpretative resources of the powerful with respect to suicide itself prevents acknowledgement or recognition of what suicidal people may, in some cases, say about their experiences.

Let us look at how these issues apply specifically to our three models. Obviously, insofar as the medical model aims to treat suicide like other medical phenomena, it construes psychiatrists and other relevant medical practitioners as having privileged knowledge of suicide and suicidality. As Marsh has put it, in his Foucauldian book on the genealogy of suicide, the medical approaches of the "psy" disciplines, with regard to suicide, create "relations of power in the clinical encounter between suicide patient and clinician", and thus lead to "imbalances of power in practices of assessing suicide risk and preventing such acts, as well as in the production of authoritative knowledge of suicide and the suicidal patient" (2010, 225). In Silverman's calling for an oncology of suicide, we can see how he implicitly calls for the authority of the clinician as "knower" about suicide and patient as the one who does not know. When one goes for cancer treatment, that knowledge relation is maintained, the oncologist is the "knower" about cancer, and the patient is not. In calling for an oncology of suicide, then, we can see how the risk of testimonial injustice creeps into the medical model: insofar as the clinician is the "knower", they may disregard the patient's testimony about their suicidality if it conflicts with the clinician's own understanding of suicidality.

Similarly, each section of the WHO report analysed in this chapter was "conceptualized and drafted by leading suicide prevention experts who have drawn on

their collective expertise to paint a global picture of suicide and create a road map for suicide prevention" (2014, 12). The sole reliance on "experts", which does not include survivors or the actively suicidal (or at least insofar as they are speaking *not-only as research* experts), in what is supposed to be a "comprehensive overview of suicide" (12), implies that knowledge of suicide resides solely with the suicidologists and suicidology-adjacent researchers. This creates, again, a power imbalance in the perceived-having-of-knowledge. Again, in the same way as the medical model, research undertaken on the biopsychosocial model thus also runs the risk of committing testimonial injustice against suicidal people by implying that they do not have authoritative knowledge of suicidality, despite their experiencing it, as that knowledge supposedly lies with the experts.

The social model may, also, imply a disregarding of the voices of actively suicidal people insofar as it construes their suicidality as *always irrational* and as a result of some altered state of mind which limits the capacity of the suicidal person to think rationally. As Baril has put it, the "sanism" of many instances of the social model

> mène à une invalidation et à une délégitimation des discours des personnes
> suicidaires, vues comme irrationnelles; leur volonté de mourir ne peut être
> légitime car leur jugement est considéré comme altéré par la détresse mentale
> (qu'elle soit causée biologiquement ou socialement).[35] (2020a)

That is, the social model, even when it recognises that suicidal people are sometimes led to suicide by social causes, views those social causes as fundamentally altering the capacity of suicidal people to be rational. We can see shades of this in the Reynolds paper

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[35] "leads to an invalidation and a delegitimization of the testimonies (*discours*) of suicidal people, (who are) seen as irrational; their will to die cannot be legitimate because their judgment is considered to be altered by mental distress (whether that distressed is caused biologically or socially)" (translation my own).

that I have discussed. In an admirable attempt to avoid "blaming the victim", Reynolds notes that those who die by suicide in light of adverse social conditions are not, on her account, said to "kill themselves", but rather, Reynolds says, "I believe their lives were stolen" (2016, 172). This is laudable in the sense that the "stolenness" of their lives by structures of oppression is pointed out, something which, as I am sure is obvious by this point, a Spinozist framework supports in its account of suicide-inducing external conditions. However, this framing by Reynolds, wherein she entirely rejects that people "kill themselves", removes the agency of the person who died by suicide; it removes their freedom, their Spinozist capacity to think and act, as opposed to just be acted on. It can be true both that someone died by suicide, or "killed themselves", and also that this is only the case because their situations robbed them of seeing the possibility of continuing a powerful, joyful life.

Thus, Reynolds' proposal implicitly rejects the capacity of many suicidal people to be agentive and to possibly be conceived as rational in their thinking about suicide. This is so despite Reynolds recognising the importance of emphasising the "resistance" that some suicidal people displayed before their death as a result of social conditions (172). Even if in some spots she does her best to emphasise the agency and the fight of suicidal people, we see how testimonial injustice may result from the implications in this passage. If one is not able to agentively "kill themselves", and only has their life "stolen" without any action of their own, can they be said to be thinking or acting "rationally" about their death? Probably not, and definitely not for the Spinozist, who sees free action and rationality as so closely linked. So, given their implied irrationality, the testimony of the suicidal may be disregarded. In this sense, her proposal runs the risk of committing

testimonial injustice, in pre-emptively ruling out testimonies which could claim suicide as a rational option.

So, all three models of suicidology run the risk of committing testimonial injustice, as illustrated by each of our three examples of these models. The hermeneutical injustice they all run the risk of committing or promoting, though, is basically the same for each model.

As discussed already, Baril has highlighted aspects of hermeneutical injustice in his discussion of broader social contexts which pre-emptively interpret suicide as *always* irrational. Given that this is ingrained in our larger social conceptual toolbox, it is not surprising that it creeps into all three models. Silverman's comparison of suicide to cancer implicitly suggests that it is *always* an illness-to-be-cured, the same way a cancerous tumour is *always* such. The WHO's report, when suggesting national strategies for suicide prevention, notes that "the *problem* of suicide is different in each country" (2014, 58), and so construes suicide as inherently problematized, pre-emptively eliminating any conception of suicide as "reasonable". Further, as we saw, in saying that people who die by suicide do not "kill themselves", Reynolds pre-emptively removes the possibility of an agentive suicide, and hence a rational suicide (on our Spinozist view of freedom and rationally as interchangeable, as described in Chapter 2). In all cases, the possibility of a rational suicide is ruled out; there is on each model no conceptual tool to explain such a thing. Thus, if there are suicidal people who feel that their suicides are rational, they cannot easily articulate such a phenomenon, and we lose thoughts relevant

to dealing with whatever conditions that forced suicide to be rational.[36, 37] All three models of suicidology thus not only run the risk of committing testimonial injustice, but of hermeneutical injustice as well.

3: Conclusion

We have seen now how all three models run the risk of providing accounts that are too individualistic and of committing epistemic injustice, both in the testimonial and the hermeneutical senses. I can recap what has been accomplished in this chapter, then, quite simply: I have explained each of the three dominant models in suicidology and clarified them by way of examples of work employing each model. Each of these models, and each of the clarificatory examples, have been shown to run undesirable risks: either they may be subjected to the Individualism Risk, and thus be shown to be too permeated by individualistic understandings of suicide, or they may be subjected to the Epistemic Risk, and be shown to run the risk of committing epistemic injustice. These risks are present, despite the ongoing and laudable successes that each model has shown with respect to preventing suicide.

It remains, in the following and final chapter of this thesis, for us to show that the Spinozist framework developed in Chapters 2 and 3 avoids both the Individualism Risk

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[36] There are real examples of such, some of which will be considered in Chapter 5

[37] Baril takes a different route here: He thinks we should allow for "positive" accounts of suicide, i.e., accounts of suicide which view suicide as a positive thing, as opposed to universally negative. This would, presumably, give a conceptual tool for suicidal people to articulate any of their "positive" views of suicide (2020b). The Spinozist cannot accept this: as we saw in Chapter 3, it is *always* better that suicide *not* be rational, and so, suicide cannot properly be described as "positive". However, the Spinozist *does* want to promote access to a better conceptual toolbox, one which allows people who feel their experiences of suicide are forced to be rational, in the special Spinozist sense, even though we want to eliminate situations where such a rational suicide becomes possible.

and the Epistemic Risk, and provides an interpretive tool to grasp certain testimonies and hermeneutical resources of the suicides of the oppressed. Indeed, the Spinozist framework must, then, be non-individualistic, and must also respect and enable the testimony and interpretative resources concerning the conceivability and legitimacy of the experiences of suicidal people with regards to their suicidality. The Spinozist framework must also, while doing this, be able to reaffirm its life-positive position. The goal is, as we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, to make a world where suicide is not rendered rational. Even though, on the Spinozist account, suicide may be forced to become rational in some situations, it is always better that suicide not become rational. It remains for all of this to be tied together; it remains to be shown that suicide *is* really *forced* to become a rational option, and often as a result of oppression, and this must be shown on grounds of the testimony of suicidal people themselves.

Chapter 5:

Spinoza and Suicidology Today:

An Interpretive Tool Against Oppression

> *Il y a des situations-limites*
> *où ce retour au positif est impossible,*
> *où l'avenir est radicalement barré ;*
> *alors la révolte ne peut s'accomplir*
> *que dans le refus définitif de la situation imposée,*
> *dans le suicide.*[38]
>
> (Beauvoir 1947, 45-46)

In this final chapter, I will tie the two strands of this thesis project together. In Chapter 2, it was shown that Spinoza accepts both that suicides are externally caused and also that Spinoza thinks suicides may sometimes be rational, when evidence suggests to someone that powerful living, or a life where we are able to pass to greater states of joy and agency, is impossible. In Chapter 3, it was shown that Spinozism demands that we strive to make a world where suicides are never forced to become rational, both for ourselves and for others, and since oppression, as described by Young, is one phenomenon which may force suicide to be rational, the Spinozist must commit to combating it. In Chapter 4, we saw that contemporary suicide research and suicide prevention initiatives run the risks of either being too individualistic, or committing epistemic injustice, or both. In this chapter, by way of tying the parts together, it will be shown that the reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide developed in Chapters 2 and 3 can help with contemporary suicide research, while also avoiding the risks identified in Chapter 4.

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[38] "There are limited situations where this return to the positive is impossible, where the future is radically blocked off. Revolt can then be achieved only in the definitive rejection of the imposed situation, in suicide." (Translation by Bernard Frechtman, in (Beauvoir 1948)).

To do this, I show that the framework developed in Chapters 2 and 3 provides a fruitful way of interpreting the testimonies of some oppressed suicidal people. This will be done via discussion of three different suicide notes. In discussing these suicide notes, I will illustrate the capacity of the Spinozist framework to provide understandings of the testimonies contained in these notes, and also illustrate how the models discussed in Chapter 4 run the risk of missing important aspects of these notes (by virtue of the risks I identified in Chapter 4) for properly grasping what is contained in these suicide notes.

The chapter will thus proceed in the following way: in §1, I will introduce three suicide notes, and illustrate the interpretive capacities of the Spinozist framework to grasp the contents of these notes. As I illustrate these interpretive capacities, it will become clear how the Spinozist framework avoids both the Individualism Risk and the Epistemic Risk, as described in Chapter 4. In §2, I will explain how the three models of suicide that were discussed in Chapter 4, and their associated risks, render them risky in interpreting these suicide notes. In §3, in light of these discussions, I will point towards two general directions for improving how we approach suicide. These are, first, producing more evidence that powerful, joyful living is possible, and second and most importantly, continuing the discussion of oppression developed in Chapter 3, eliminating structures of oppression. In §4, I will conclude this chapter, and indeed the entire thesis project, and express some thoughts about what I hope this kind of project accomplishes and encourages.

1: Spinozist Readings of Three Suicide Notes

I ought here to make an important, preliminary point about appealing to suicide notes in suicide research. Using suicide notes as sources of general information about suicidality is not an uncontroversial practice. There are some suspicions about their usefulness: "Considerable debate has taken place about using notes that victims of suicide leave behind to help us to understand suicidal behavior" (Meyer et al 2017, 25), largely because it is unclear whether those who die by suicide who leave notes are really "comparable to non-note writers" (25). Some research has already been done on just how much difference there is between note writers and non-note writers (e.g., Freuchen & Grøholt (2015), where there are both similarities and differences, and Cerel et al (2015), where basically no differences were found), but this issue is not important for our discussion. Indeed, since the Spinozist holds that suicide may only be rational *in certain contexts*, the Spinozist framework I develop cannot hope to apply to all possible suicides. So, whether the findings of an analysis into suicide notes are generalizable to non-writers or not, we need only show that the Spinozist framework helps us understand the kinds of suicidality found in *some* suicide notes and motivates actions for making it so those *particular* kinds of suicide do not occur. The notes I examine have in common that they are the suicide notes of members of oppressed groups.

We have other special reasons to attend to suicide notes as well. Because of the wariness we must maintain of the risks of epistemic injustice in our discussion of suicide notes, we must find sources wherein one finds the actual testimony of suicidal people themselves. While it may seem like interviews with formerly suicidal people may also be helpful here (and indeed, they are better than nothing), they will not provide as immediate

a testimony as do suicide notes, which are plausibly written at the highest intensities of suicidality. In reading and trying to understand suicide notes, we are making a concerted effort to take seriously the testimony, and thus the epistemic capacities, of suicidal people. As I argued in Chapter 4, two kinds of epistemic injustice, testimonial and hermeneutical, apply in contexts in which members of oppressed groups are undermined in their capacity as knowers.

Given the complexity of factors and features of oppression, I must also make another note here about the complications of considering oppression and suicide. Not all oppressed groups have especially high rates of completed suicide. For example, Black Americans do not have an especially high suicide rate when compared to the general population (Castle et al 2011, 342) despite America's persistent and egregious anti-Black racism, and women in Canada have a lower completed suicide rate than do men (Statistics Canada 2017) despite Canada's being a largely patriarchal society. That being said, it is not as if oppression does not have an impact on the suicidality of even these oppressed people. For example, in §1.2, I discuss one instance of how a patriarchal society that normalizes rape can impact the suicidality of women suffering these injustices. Further, Black Americans, for example, may have rates of suicidal ideation increased when they are forced to assimilate to white American culture (Castle et al 2011, 347), and women in general attempt suicide at a higher rate than do men, despite their lower rate of completion (Statistics Canada 2017).

This being said, as mentioned in Chapter 4, many oppressed groups *do* have especially high suicide rates, including, in the Canadian context, Indigenous people,

genderqueer people, and unhoused people.[39] Of course, we also need to recognise that

many people from these oppressed groups never experience any suicidality, and they are

still oppressed. So, it is not the case that oppression *always* forces suicide to be rational.

But we are focused here on instances where it *does*. Oppression does, of course, cause

suffering in a variety of ways, and its forcing suicide to be rational is only one way in

which it does so.

Now, the reason that some oppressed groups do not have especially high suicide

rates may be due to, for example, mitigating factors in their respective environments. For

example, the frequency of hopefulness amongst Black Americans and within Black

American culture and history has been suggested by some to mitigate the amount of

suicidality amongst Black Americans (Hollingsworth et al 2016). Regardless of these

issues, the fact that some oppressed groups do not have especially high suicide rates does

not problematize the work in this chapter. Again, the goal of this project is only to present

one of many needed new approaches to suicide studies, and we are thus only aiming at

helping to explain some instances of some suicides of oppressed people, not all of them.

As such, whether this or that particular oppressed person or particular oppressed group of

people is led to suicide by oppression is not centrally important. Rather, all that matters is

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[39] Again, as written in Chapter 4: For official recognition of the high rate of suicide amongst certain
Indigenous groups, and amongst queer youth, see (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019), for recognition
that houseless people are 2-6 times more likely to die by suicide than are housed people, see (Sinyor et al.
2017).
　　Particularly relevant to the predominance of queer youth suicide, at least in this chapter which
discusses transphobia, is the fact that some surveys have indicated that as many as 41% of transgender
people have attempted suicide at some point in their life (National Center for Transgender Equality 2010),
and further that "These statistics are most likely underestimates because transgender people who die by
suicide are not always recognized and obviously cannot participate in this research" (Reynolds 2016, 181).

that some oppressed people are, and that the Spinozist framework may help explain some

of these instances.

1.1: Note 1, Leelah Alcorn

With these preliminary notes established, we may move to our Spinozist readings of

some suicide notes. The first note we will look at is an especially public one, and it is

unique in this chapter in that it is the only *complete* note to which we have access. When

Leelah Alcorn, a 17-year-old transgender youth, died by suicide in 2014, she left a

substantial and public suicide note on her Tumblr page.[40, 41] Her suicide and her suicide

note made waves in the media, largely because her note discusses transphobic treatment

by her parents and community, and this coverage led to further discussions about

transphobia in parenting. Alcorn's case was the subject of articles in many major public

news sources, such as *ABC News* (Mohney 2014), the *BBC* (Cammeron 2014), and *Time*

(Fox 2015), among a variety of others. Leelah Alcorn, named "Josh" Alcorn at her birth,

had an enlightening moment when she was 14 upon learning what "transgender" meant,

and had in that moment finally made sense of her experience in the world. She notes that

"When I was 14, I learned what transgender meant and cried of happiness. After 10 years

of confusion I finally understood who I was" (Alcorn 2014). She immediately told her

mother of her powerful realisation, and her mother reacted negatively, telling Alcorn that

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[40] Tumblr is a social media platform where people may post text, images, and videos on their "Tumblr blog", and share the contents of other peoples' blogs on their own.
[41] For another excellent discussion of this note, and what we should draw from it in suicide research, see Baril (2020a). Much of what Baril draws from this discussion is mentioned in Chapter 4, though without reference to the note, and includes, most importantly, that we must listen to the voices of actively suicidal people to best understand suicide, and not just those who are speaking as formerly suicidal persons or as loved ones of suicidal people.

"it was a phase, that I (Alcorn) would never truly be a girl, that God doesn't make mistakes, that I am wrong" (2014). Alcorn was, following this, never provided the means to live happily and powerfully, and indeed was subjected to much transphobic discrimination. Eventually, she writes, the seeming impossibility of a satisfying future life made suicide her best available option. Her complete note is as follows:

> If you are reading this, it means that I have committed suicide and obviously failed to delete this post from my queue.
>
> Please don't be sad, it's for the better. The life I would've lived isn't worth living in… because I'm transgender. I could go into detail explaining why I feel that way, but this note is probably going to be lengthy enough as it is. To put it simply, I feel like a girl trapped in a boy's body, and I've felt that way ever since I was 4. I never knew there was a word for that feeling, nor was it possible for a boy to become a girl, so I never told anyone and I just continued to do traditionally "boyish" things to try to fit in.
>
> When I was 14, I learned what transgender meant and cried of happiness. After 10 years of confusion I finally understood who I was. I immediately told my mom, and she reacted extremely negatively, telling me that it was a phase, that I would never truly be a girl, that God doesn't make mistakes, that I am wrong. If you are reading this, parents, *please* don't tell this to your kids. Even if you are Christian or are against transgender people don't ever say that to someone, especially your kid. That won't do anything but make them hate them self. That's exactly what it did to me.

My mom started taking me to a therapist, but would only take me to christian therapists, (who were all very biased) so I never actually got the therapy I needed to cure me of my depression. I only got more christians telling me that I was selfish and wrong and that I should look to God for help.

When I was 16 I realized that my parents would never come around, and that I would have to wait until I was 18 to start any sort of transitioning treatment, which absolutely broke my heart. The longer you wait, the harder it is to transition. I felt hopeless, that I was just going to look like a man in drag for the rest of my life. On my 16th birthday, when I didn't receive consent from my parents to start transitioning, I cried myself to sleep.

I formed a sort of a "fuck you" attitude towards my parents and came out as gay at school, thinking that maybe if I eased into coming out as trans it would be less of a shock. Although the reaction from my friends was positive, my parents were pissed. They felt like I was attacking their image, and that I was an embarrassment to them. They wanted me to be their perfect little straight christian boy, and that's obviously not what I wanted.

So they took me out of public school, took away my laptop and phone, and forbid me of getting on any sort of social media, completely isolating me from my friends. This was probably the part of my life when I was the most depressed, and I'm surprised I didn't kill myself. I was completely alone for 5 months. No friends, no support, no love. Just my parent's disappointment and the cruelty of loneliness.

At the end of the school year, my parents finally came around and gave me my phone and let me back on social media. I was excited, I finally had my friends back. They were extremely excited to see me and talk to me, but only at first. Eventually they realized they didn't actually give a shit about me, and I felt even lonelier than I did before. The only friends I thought I had only liked me because they saw me five times a week.

After a summer of having almost no friends plus the weight of having to think about college, save money for moving out, keep my grades up, go to church each week and feel like shit because everyone there is against everything I live for, I have decided I've had enough. I'm never going to transition successfully, even when I move out. I'm never going to be happy with the way I look or sound. I'm never going to have enough friends to satisfy me. I'm never going to have enough love to satisfy me. I'm never going to find a man who loves me. I'm never going to be happy. Either I live the rest of my life as a lonely man who wishes he were a woman or I live my life as a lonelier woman who hates herself. There's no winning. There's no way out. I'm sad enough already, I don't need my life to get any worse. People say "it gets better" but that isn't true in my case. It gets worse. Each day I get worse.

That's the gist of it, that's why I feel like killing myself. Sorry if that's not a good enough reason for you, it's good enough for me. As for my will, I want 100% of the things that I legally own to be sold and the money (plus my money in the bank) to be given to trans civil rights movements and support groups, I don't give a shit which one. The only way I will rest in peace is if one day transgender

people aren't treated the way I was, they're treated like humans, with valid

feelings and human rights. Gender needs to be taught about in schools, the earlier

the better. My death needs to mean something. My death needs to be counted in

the number of transgender people who commit suicide this year. I want someone

to look at that number and say "that's fucked up" and fix it. Fix society. Please.

Goodbye,

(Leelah) ~~Josh~~ Alcorn. (Sic) (Alcorn 2014)

Alcorn's note is a powerful condemnation of the conditions of her life leading up to her

death. Her note explains both that the unjust quality of her life is a result of the

transphobic conditions into which she was forced, and also that, upon reflection about the

likely futures of her life, suicide became the option which seemed to make the most

sense. That is, on our Spinozist reading, her death is both externally caused, insofar as

external conditions force the available evidence to indicate that death is the least bad

option, and rational, in the special Spinozist sense, insofar as she acts on her available

evidence to pursue what evidence indicates as the least available evil. The evidence is

arranged by her society such that suicide is forced to be rational: oppressive conditions

bombard her with evidence that good living is not possible. Let us look at how these

points are established.

There are many ways that Alcorn expresses the view that transphobia has

seemingly removed the possibility of living joyfully. Her parents sent her to what she

calls "biased" Christian therapists, who insist that she is "wrong". One can plausibly say

that the therapists' supposed "right" way of living is being cisgender, or identifying with

the gender that one is assigned at birth. The supposed "wrongness" of being transgender

then, implies that good living is not possible for her, insofar as by being transgender Alcorn is prevented from accessing "right" living. Alcorn's mother makes the same implication when suggesting that Alcorn is "wrong", and insisting that God does not make mistakes.

Further, Alcorn's being barred from accessing transition therapy early enough produced evidence to her that she would never be able to transition in the way that would allow her to fit social conceptions of gender that allow for better living. When she writes that "When I was 16 I realized that my parents would never come around, and that I would have to wait until I was 18 to start any sort of transitioning treatment, which absolutely broke my heart. The longer you wait, the harder it is to transition" and that her only two options are thus "Either I live the rest of my life as a lonely man who wishes he were a woman (by not transitioning) or I live my life as a lonelier woman who hates herself (by having to transition too late). There's no winning". So, given the perceived inadequacy of late transition, Alcorn sees her being barred from transitioning early enough as evidence that her available options do not accord with good, powerful living. Because, in her own words, Alcorn is forced to feel that "I'm never going to transition successfully, even when I move out", she is forced to envision a future where "I'm never going to have enough friends to satisfy me. I'm never going to have enough love to satisfy me. I'm never going to find a man who loves me. I'm never going to be happy". The evidence produced to her from her external conditions indicates that she is never going to have access to a good, powerful life. Evidence indicates that she is never going to have the capacities to experience love from a man, or to develop healthy friendships,

or be "happy". So, as she writes, suicide becomes appealing: "that's why I (Alcorn) feel like killing myself".

Indeed, in this note Alcorn is even near-explicitly thinking about her own power maximisation. Her death, it seems, represents to her a final chance at having an effective impact on the world, and thus increase her power of activity in the Spinozist sense. Alcorn sees suicide as her chance to highlight the need to deal with transphobia, as her closing paragraph makes clear:

> The only way I will rest in peace is if one day transgender people aren't treated the way I was, they're treated like humans, with valid feelings and human rights. Gender needs to be taught about in schools, the earlier the better. My death needs to mean something. My death needs to be counted in the number of transgender people who commit suicide this year. I want someone to look at that number and say "that's fucked up" and fix it. Fix society. Please.

Alcorn's death, given all available evidence, represents to her a greater capacity to express powerful being than does, given her available evidence, the future life routes available to her. Her death is expressed rationally, in the special Spinozist sense, and it is forced by external circumstances. Alcorn's writing that "Sorry if that's not a good enough reason for you, it's good enough for me" expresses her feeling that suicide is rationally justified, and her call to "Fix society. Please" expresses that this death is a result of her external social circumstances.

The Spinozist framework makes this reading obvious and intuitive. It highlights both the rational capacities of Leelah Alcorn, insofar as she is acting on her available evidence about the path to the most powerful possible being, and also points to the

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vileness of her external social conditions, which forces evidence to indicate that life is worse than death. The Spinozist reading, too, forces us to consider what external conditions lead to Alcorn's suicide, since all suicides are seen as externally caused, and so, in this case, avoids the Individualism Risk as found in Chapter 4. What is more, since Alcorn's unjust social conditions are the result of transphobic oppression, we are yet again encouraged, as anticipated in Chapter 3, to end the structures of oppression that result in undermining or dismissing what Alcorn says about her own experiences (to her parents, the Church, and perhaps even medical authorities). Without challenging and changing these forms of epistemic injustice, suicides may be forced to be rational, as the onslaught of evidence that life is not worth living persists.

Further, the Spinozist framework also demands that we take seriously Alcorn's epistemic agency, that we listen carefully to her testimony, and that we can conceptualise her finding a "good enough" reason for her suicide. Because suicide may, on the Spinozist framework, be rational in some situations, we must take seriously Alcorn's capacity to rationally consider her suicide, and to consider the possibility that from her perspective it really is rational. This potential rationality in light of evidence seems to be expressed, again, by her holding that she has found a "good enough" reason to pursue death. To the merits of the Spinozist framework, we also already have in our framework a conceptual tool for understanding expressions of rational suicidality. That Spinozism gives an account of "rational suicide", in the special sense, of external conditions of socio-political oppression, allows us to grasp what Alcorn is describing in her seemingly deeply thought-out deliberations about her suicide. The Spinozist framework also, then,

avoids the Epistemic Risk in this case, by avoiding issues both of testimonial and of hermeneutical injustice.

1.2: Note 2, Ashley Billasano

The next note to be considered is of an unusual nature. In the last 24 hours before her death in 2011, Ashley Billasano, aged 18, had made over 140 Twitter posts ("Tweets"). Billasano's twitter account has since been deleted, and so we do not have direct access to the tweets as a primary source, but we can stitch together important points about what was effectively a Twitter suicide note by considering both an academic discussion of this note, in Lester David's 2015 book *The "I" of the Storm: Understanding the Suicidal Mind*, as well as some quoted excerpts from Billasano's tweets which appear in public articles after Billasano's death occurred.

Billasano's tweets talk about her having to deal with years of alleged sexual violence at the hand of her father and of the failures of those in power to do anything which could help her. Indeed, Billasano was even sent back to the home in which she had allegedly been abused, harming her further. Lester David writes of the instance:

In these tweets, she (Billasano) alleged that she had been sexually abused from ages 14 to 17 by her father. She tried to bring the abuser to justice, but she had received news that her alleged abuser would not be prosecuted. After Ashley's death, her mother said that Ashley felt that the investigation into her abuse had made her feel like a suspect rather than the victim that she was. The investigating authorities were accused of being insensitive and sending her back to the home

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where the alleged abuse took place because they claimed that they could not

remove her. (2015, 135)

In her tweets, Billasano notes that when she was told that nothing would be done about

her abusive father, her orientation towards life changed. A *New York Post* article provides

the following quoted excerpt from Billasano's Tweets:[42] "Weeks passed, then I got the

call. They said sorry but there isn't enough evidence … That's when I changed I didn't care

anymore and the people I was meeting gave me no reason to" (*New York Post* 2011). It

should be noted further that, though it is unclear whether she mentioned this in her suicide

note/tweets, Billasano's father allegedly not only abused her, but also allegedly "used to

rent her out to his friends" (David 2015, 136).

Billasano, then, was allegedly forced to suffer years of the kind of sexual abuse

which is so prevalent within patriarchal rape culture, given that rape culture "describes a

status quo in which sexual violence and exploitation (in all its forms) is normalised"

(Faranghanel 2019, 8). In other words, Billasano's father's alleged sexual abuse and,

perhaps even more so, his getting away with it, is situated within such a patriarchal status

quo. Indeed, the fact that nothing could be done about Billasano's alleged abuser

evidences exactly such a status quo in which sexual violence is normalised. External

conditions, imposed by the kind of patriarchal society in which we live, limited

Billasano's capacity to live powerfully, insofar as she was not allowed to pursue action

against her alleged abuser. When Billasano was told that no case would be mounted

against her alleged abuser, and indeed that she would be sent "back to the home where

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[42] This quote is included as a primary source, despite the *New York Post's* analysis of the quote being predictably shoddy, it being a tabloid of a questionable nature. But, that doesn't dismiss the relevancy of the quoted excerpt.

the alleged abuse took place" (David 2015, 135), she was provided with evidence that a future, powerful life would not be possible: that is when, as she said, she "changed" and she "didn't care anymore" and saw that "the people I was meeting gave me no reason to" (*New York Post* 2011). Evidence was thrust upon her that a powerful future life would always be obstructed by her alleged abuser remaining unaccountable and, possibly, remaining a danger. Further, in realising the incapacity of her social environment to pursue any action against her alleged abuser, Billasano is shown evidence that no one cares about her suffering, and so the world provides evidence that nothing will be done to alleviate any further suffering either. This much is clear by Billasano's explicitly noting that the people she had contacted for help regarding her alleged abuser had given her "no reason" to "care anymore". No evidence that something could be done about the matter was produced. In its implicit normalisation of Billasano's alleged abuse, by doing nothing about it, patriarchal culture forced powerful living to seem impossible.

Oppressive external conditions thus impacted Billasano in such a way that evidence, again, indicated that good living would not be impossible, forcing suicide, given the evidence, to seem the least available evil, or to be the path with the least constrictions on power maximisation. This reading is, again, enabled by the Spinozist framework, in the sense of its allowing for oppression to be the external condition which forces suicide to be rational, in recognising that what Billasano said about the abuse was not believed or taken to be credible, and in the sense that rationality is at hand here, in Billasano's considerations of "reasons".

1.3: Note 3, Christy

The final note to be discussed is excerpted from a book length study of suicide notes

(Meyer et al 2017). This note is written by "Christy", who had become disabled after a car

accident at age 42, and who had a history of drug addiction. She writes:

> I can no longer tolerate the pain I feel & have felt for many years. I am referring
>
> to the emotional pain which has only increased since I stopped using drugs. I
>
> contemplated using again but I know in my heart that drugs would only
>
> compound the problems so that was not an option. My facial injuries make me
>
> feel grotesque…I isolate myself because I cannot stand for people to see me. My
>
> depression is paralyzing. I hate being on disability. I want to work & be a
>
> productive member of society. I am not in any kind of trouble. I am also in a great
>
> deal of physical pain. (75)

We can see from Christy's note that it was not, strictly speaking, the physical pain that

she suffers from her injuries or from her being a recovering addict (though she does

mention she is "in a great deal of physical pain"), but the "emotional pain" she undergoes

which makes suicide appealing. This pain stems from, on Christy's account, her feeling

"grotesque" and because she cannot "work & be a productive member of society". We

can see these issues as resulting from external structures and conditions of oppression. In

disability studies, it is common to understand disability by virtue of norms around what

bodies count as "able" and the material or social implications of those norms (for one

e.g., see Goering (2015)). While some people may have physical makeups which do not

accord with what we see as "able" bodies, they become "disabled" in light of the ways

that society is structured, in light of the ways that exclude them from participating in that society. There is a difference in seeing people as having specific bodily makeups which fall outside the social definition of "able bodied" as being *inherently* disabled, and being disabled according to our environmental conditions and social orientations. Similar to our discussion of the medical model of suicide in Chapter 3, the former assumes a medical model of disability. Rather, we can say that those who are disabled are oppressively barred from actively involving themselves in the social world, and thus *in this way* become "disabled". Goering wishes to emphasise that the point

> is to show how much and sometimes all of what is disabling for individuals who have impaired bodies has to do with physical and/or social arrangements and institutional norms that are themselves alterable (e.g., stairs vs. ramps; presentation of data using only auditory means vs. universal design for communication, restrictive definitions of job requirements vs. expansive accommodations for different modes of performing work, etc.). People with impairments of a particular kind may be in a minority, but they are typically not thereby rendered incapable of work and social relationships. They need a more inclusive framework in which to participate. (135)

Understanding how people become disabled by virtue of societal norms and structures can be explained in a simple way, with the example of eyeglasses.[43] People who wear glasses cannot effectively see the world without their glasses on. However, because eyeglasses are so available in North America, their inability to see without

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[43] This explanation was first given to me by a guest-lecturer in an undergraduate course on gender and pop-culture. I wish I could recall their name, so as to best attribute it to them.

glasses does not render them disabled. If, on the other hand, glasses were not readily available for those who need them, then many people who need glasses could not work jobs, or play sports, or engage in a variety of mainstream social activities. This would effectively render them disabled; they would have a body for which there is no accommodation, and thus they would be excluded from participating in many aspects of society. Similarly, because useable ramps, elevators, sufficiently large aisles/hallways, and other relevant things are not always made available, people who need wheelchairs are rendered disabled; they cannot participate in many jobs or go to restaurants and so on, and so are often excluded from social participation. They are disabled, and thus are oppressed, in light of their social environment refusing to enable them to partake in the same level of access to good living as is made available to abled people. This kind of oppression is *ableist* oppression, and it does not *only* extend to material matters like ramps and access to work but also to social attitudes including, among others, "the ugly and unwelcoming attitudes of others, (and) the strict insistence on the standard modes and levels of functioning" (Goering 2015, 137). Obviously, people can be disabled in light of the social treatment of a variety of other characteristics, whether these people are wheelchair users, or have learning disabilities, or so on.

Now, this discussion of disability as socially mediated further informs our reading of Christy's note. As we saw, her "emotional pain" is produced by her being unable "to work & be a productive member of society", because "My facial injuries make me feel grotesque" and so "I isolate myself because I cannot stand for people to see me". Many of the things Christy mentions in her suicide note are clearly socially derived. As a disabled person, she is forced to deal with ableist social conditions that bar her from

working as she wants, and the ableist bodily norms which make her facial injuries of the sort that members of ableist societies hate seeing, or which make them seem "grotesque". Christy is forced to receive evidence from her conditions that living a powerful life as a person with her kinds of disabilities is impossible, and so, given the available evidence, it seems that the best way to avoid a future without the possibility of living well is to pursue suicide. Suicide is forced to be, in the special Spinozist sense, rational, and the Spinozist framework clearly enables this interpretation of Christy's suicide note.

2: The Individualism Risk and the Epistemic Risk in Reading the Above Notes

With the Spinozist readings of the above suicide notes described, we must now demonstrate how the three suicide studies models described in Chapter 4 might fail to adequately capture important aspects of each suicide note. This task should be fairly straightforward: each of the medical, biopsychosocial, and social models of suicide, as was shown, fall subject to either or both of the Individualism Risk and the Epistemic Risk. As such, I need to now show that, in all three notes, both the Individualism Risk and the Epistemic Risk can encourage undesirable readings of the above notes.

To show this, we need not even go through each note one-by-one, and some of this "one-by-one" discussion has already been offered in the above sections. Indeed, in the case of all three notes, the risks effectively function the same way. The Individualism Risk might allow researchers to neglect the important social factors involved in all three of the suicides notes discussed in the previous section. The Epistemic Risk might force researchers to neglect the rational capacities of those who wrote the discussed notes, and thus might, in implication, disrespect the agency of the note writers or refuse to see their

testimonies as being potentially rational, and thus potentially disrespect their epistemic capacities.

With respect to the Individualism Risk, insofar as the medical model participates in the Individualism Risk, it may only see Alcorn's, Billasano's, and Christy's suicides as characterised by individual issues, be they cognitive, physical, or mental. Instead of seeing how transphobia builds an environment in which Alcorn is forced to see life as not worth living, the medical model may simply read her death as resulting from her self-described "depression", conceived bio-medically. Instead of seeing transphobia as inseparable from this death, the Individualism Risk may lead proponents of the medical model to see this death as caused only or primarily by unhealthy brain states, to be rectified only or primarily by proper medical or clinical treatment alone, rather than accompanying that treatment with support against transphobic structures of oppression (e.g., by providing her with trans accepting life spaces rather than her having to live with her transphobic parents). The same could be said of Billasano, whose suicidality is situated within patriarchal rape culture, or of Christy, whose suicidality is situated within ableist oppressions: the Individualism Risk of the medical model may divorce their suicidalities from their oppressive conditions, and may view their suicides as resulting *only* from bio-chemical states rather than from patriarchally perpetuated sexual violence or, in the case of Christy, from what they see as *biomedical and fixed issues of disability*, rather than from how social, environmental, and economic structures work to exclude and oppress disabled people.

Though in Chapter 4 we saw that the social model avoids the Individualism Risk, we can also identify the Individualism Risk when we turn to the biopsychosocial model.

Similarly to how Fullagar and O'Brien criticized the *LIFE* initiative for seeing gender and age as immutable aspects of suicidality (2016, 98), as described in Chapter 4, proponents of the biopsychosocial model may see Alcorn's being transgender, Billasano's being a woman, and Christy's being disabled, as "immutable" suicide risks inherent to them as individuals. This would fail to see that it is *not* Alcorn's being trans which encourages her suicide, it is her being subjected to transphobia, and it is *not* Billasano's being a woman which encourages her suicide, it is her being subjected to conditions of patriarchy, and, of course, it is not Christy's being physically constituted in a way that counts as "disabled" that encourages her suicide, it is her being subjected to ableist oppressions. Insofar as the biopsychosocial model participates in the Individualism Risk, research undertaken on this model may run into these issues.

The Epistemic Risk also rears its head in the following ways. As was established in Chapter 4, all three models run the Epistemic Risk in both the testimonial and the hermeneutic sense. In the case of the medical and biopsychosocial models, testimonial injustice may occur because the knowledge is said to rest only or principally with researchers or clinicians, and not with suicidal people (insofar as they are suicidal, and not otherwise knowledge producers, e.g., in the case of a clinician who also happens to be suicidal). In the case of the social model, we saw that testimonial injustice may occur because, in some instances, the social model may see the judgements of oppressed suicidal people as impaired or biased by their oppression, and so, by implication, as potentially disposable judgements. In the former case, the medical and biopsychosocial models may disregard the testimony of our note writers as insignificant to a proper analysis of their suicidality, given their supposed relative lack of understanding compared

to authorities, and so the pointing out of oppressive circumstances in the suicide notes may be disregarded. In the case of the social model, if this occurs, the testimony of our note takers may be disregarded as impaired, rather than rationally shaped, by their oppressive circumstances. If this occurs, our note writers' comments on how their circumstances have, for example, given them a "good enough" (Alcorn 2014) reason to pursue death may be disregarded. This would pre-emptively lock out the legitimacy of some of their testimony, on grounds of them being unable to properly think rationally.

Similarly, concerning issues of hermeneutical injustice, the Epistemic Risk may render some aspects of the note writers' testimonies to be unable to be properly captured. As was shown in Chapter 4, all three models of suicide research which we have discussed may fall prey to social constructions of suicide as *inherently irrational*, and so risk being unable to properly conceptualise or properly understand any testimony from people who feel that their suicides are rational, or that they have good reason to pursue death. In the suicide notes of this chapter, this may mean, again, disregarding Alcorn's testimony that she has "good enough" reason to pursue death (Alcorn 2014), or disregarding Billasano's view that she has been given "no reason" (*New York Post* 2011) to care about continuing life, or Christy's view that, given the state of her life, she "can no longer tolerate the (emotional) pain" (Meyer et al 2017, 75). If suicide is seen as inherently irrational, the strength of these reasons for finding suicide appealing might be neglected, since they could not, by the very proposed nature of suicide, be sufficient reasons for pursuing suicide. This opens the door for all kinds of problems to creep in: without these external factors as legitimate reasons for pursuing suicide, one might be tempted to place responsibility for the suicide solely on the individual, and so revert to the Individualism Risk, or one might see

suicidal people as incapable of producing reasonable thoughts about suicide, and so, again, disrespect them in their capacity as epistemic agents. If such a risk of hermeneutical injustice gets actualised, we will miss aspects of these suicide notes which the writers clearly felt were important enough to include, and so potentially miss important information about their suicidality which could help with suicide research and prevention.

The Spinozist framework, conversely, avoids both risks by necessity. Insofar as the Spinozist must, by metaphysical necessity, look to external conditions in explaining suicide, the Spinozist is encouraged, by necessity, to avoid as much as possible seeing suicide individualistically. The Spinozist thus will avoid the Individualism Risk. Insofar as the Spinozist must also, by virtue of the fact that some suicides are seen by the Spinozist as rational, take seriously testimony that someone had good reason from their perspective to pursue suicide, the Spinozist will *not* be encouraged to pre-emptively disregard the testimony of suicidal people. Further, insofar as the Spinozist has a worked-out account of when suicide is rational, they will be able to understand and grasp claims from suicidal people that they have rational motivation for suicide, without being pre-reflectively barred from conceptualising suicide in this rational light. This much, again, should have been made clear in our discussions of the three suicide notes in this chapter. The Spinozist framework thus affords a way of interpreting the suicide notes of some oppressed people, while at the same time avoiding risks which are present in other available approaches to suicide.

3: Paths Forward, Two Power Affirming Directions

While it has now been shown that Spinozism affords a powerful interpretive tool for understanding some oppressed suicides, there are yet more benefits of a Spinozist approach to suicide. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 3, Spinozism demands that we aim to assure that our environment has the kinds of conditions wherein suicide does not become rational. So, here it remains to be said what actual steps could be taken to make it so that suicide does not become rational, and in doing so expand a bit on our discussion of oppression, as given in Chapter 3.

Given that, on the Spinozist account, suicide becomes rational when evidence indicates that powerful living will not likely be possible, we must aim to change the world such that evidence suggests to people that powerful living *is* possible. We have also seen, though, that oppression is one important phenomenon which forces evidence to suggest that powerful living is not possible. So, generally speaking, we must address what I will call the *Evidential Concern*, and so must force the evidence to indicate that powerful living *is* possible, and we also must address what I will call the *Oppression Concern*, and thus reduce oppression. The former is principally aimed at providing new evidence that powerful living is possible, and the latter is principally aimed at reducing evidence that powerful living is impossible. Of course, there may be other significant specific sources of evidence that powerful life is not possible, and those must be dealt with as well, but since we have so far focused on oppression in this way, we will only discuss oppression. I here offer some thoughts on approaching both the Evidential Concern and the Oppression Concern.

3.1: The Evidential Concern

As we will see, addressing the Evidential Concern alone will not be enough. But, I aim here to explain that addressing the Evidential Concern may help with Spinozist approaches to dealing with suicide. To explain how this might work, we can consider a prominent initiative which, functionally, aims to provide evidence that life is worth living, though as will be shown its execution has not been without deeply significant issues. In 2010, a YouTube video was produced by Dan Savage (hosted by the *It Gets Better Project* YouTube channel) titled "It Gets Better", aiming to give LGBTQ+ youth first-hand accounts from two gay men about how, though they were mercilessly mistreated during their childhood and adolescent periods, they were able to eventually live good, fulfilling lives. Savage's video was produced "in response to the highly publicized suicide of Billy Lucas, a fifteen-year-old boy who hung himself after suffering anti-gay bullying" (Jones 2015, 317). In this video, Savage and his husband Terry aim to show LGBTQ+ youth that it is possible to go on to live fruitful adult lives filled with "love" and "community" and other such indicators of what the Spinozist sees as powerful living. They do this by sharing their own stories of suffering homophobic harassment, violence, and other forms of abuse at the hands of their high school peers, and then afterwards sharing how much the quality of their lives improved, and how their families came to love and accept them in time. They wish to emphasise that, in time, just as in their own life, "it gets better". Functionally, they are aiming to provide evidence that powerful living is possible to those who may be forced to deal with evidence that powerful living will not be possible. Whether intentional or not, this project aims to change the social-scape to make present evidence to people that the future could possibly be powerful.

This sparked what would become a major and still ongoing project. Over 70,000 videos have been made by LGBTQ+ people in a similar vein to Savage's 2010 video (It Gets Better Project) as part of the project. Savage says in his video that "The worst time of your life, really, for many gay kids is high school" (Savage 2010), and the tens of thousands of video makers aim to provide evidence that life can get better in the future, even if being a queer youth is deeply difficult in light of homophobic peers and family. In many ways, as Reynolds notes, the *It Gets Better Project* (as a whole project, extending beyond one video) qualifies as an "inspiring and fabulous social justice–informed responses to suicide that merit celebration in these communities" (Reynolds 2016, 181). Indeed, as Jones has suggested, the "It Gets Better project has been held up as a model of successful social media activism", insofar as it creates a venue for queer youth to potentially find hope (Jones 2015, 317).

This kind of project is in some ways what the Spinozist envisions when they articulate the need for evidence being made available which, for those who are forced into situations where life seems to be the worst available option, could provide hope that life indeed could be worth living. Initiatives like this, in principle, align with the goals of the Spinozist with regards to making sure that suicide is not rendered rational. This does not mean that the *It Gets Better Project* is without important flaws: e.g., it may emphasise celebrity testimonies more than the stories which are more likely directly relevant to LGBTQ+ youth (Michaelsen 2017) and it may associate "better" life primarily with a very narrow kind of white, middle-class, nuclear family-like life, sometimes called a "homonormative" approach to life, which is unappealing to many LGBTQ+ youth (Hawkins, Andalibi, & Haimson 2018). Further, it may be inaccessible to many: not every

queer person on the planet has the resources to access all the videos, or the access to money

or social status necessary to attain the kind of homonormative life which gets emphasised.

These issues may limit the audience of the provided evidence that life "gets better". If very

few people become celebrities, the evidence of celebrity testimony may not be especially

convincing, given the unlikelihood of living a celebrity-like life, and if what awaits queer

youth in the future is only a "homonormative" life, then this will not provide evidence of a

"better" life to those youth who do not see this kind of lifestyle as desirable. As long as the

scope of this project is limited by the kinds of testimonies which get emphasised and

shared, the strength of evidence it produces will be inordinately limited.

Still, despite these and other issues, the intent of the *It Gets Better Project* is

ostensibly in line with what the Spinozist recommends with regards to providing evidence

that powerful living is possible. If the *It Gets Better Project* can address these and other

issues, and thus expand its audience to include a larger scope of LGBTQ+ people and

highlight more accessible lives, it would be in line with the Spinozist effort to reduce

rational suicides. Other similar evidence providing initiatives, assuming they can avoid

these and other scope-narrowing issues, are also to be conceived of and implemented.[44]

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[44] Tangentially, we may pay particular interest on this matter to the growing access to medical assistance in dying (MAID). For reasons pertaining to the Evidential Concern, we may actually be encouraged to reduce access to MAID, or at least reduce an emphasis on it as especially useful. Insofar as we see disabled people as oppressed, and insofar as we place emphasis on accepting their testimony, we may be lead to this route. Many disabled people say that MAID is construed as an increasingly apt option for them. This is so much the case, that many disabled people feel as though doctors coercively suggest MAID to them as the best option, despite their not being priorly convinced. In this sense, the way that MAID is increasingly available and emphasised may actually provide oppressive evidence to disabled people that life is not worth living: they are placed in a space which continuously insists that MAID is a good option for them, and so are forced into positions where suicide becomes rational in light of the available evidence. For multiple testimonies to this effect, as well as one disabled person's testimony who sees increasing access to MAID as a positive thing, see (Gillmore 2021). This public news article is especially relevant to us, being written in light of Canada's increasingly liberal MAID laws. Perhaps MAID must be limited to some capacity, but as I am not here writing a thesis on MAID, which is one of the largest questions in the philosophy of

3.2: The Oppression Concern

With the Evidential Concern discussed, it must still be noted that, even if a comprehensive variety of positive evidence providing initiatives were fully and successfully implemented, there would still be oppression to contend with as a source of evidence that powerful living is impossible. It is important to provide evidence that powerful living is possible, but it is even more important, for the Spinozist, to deal with evidence that powerful living is not possible. As we saw in Chapter 3, oppression is one phenomenon which may provide such evidence, and so our discussion here need not be long, but there is something to be said in light of our discussions of actual suicide notes and of the actual suicide prevention initiative found in the *It Gets Better Project*.

In speaking directly to the *It Gets Better Project*, Alcorn notes in her suicide note that "People say 'it gets better' but that isn't true in my case. It gets worse. Each day I get worse" (Alcorn 2014). So, despite there being some evidence that, for queer youth, life can "get better", further evidence is suggesting to Alcorn that life continues only to "get worse" for her.[45] It is not just that the evidence that life "gets better" is perhaps non-applicable to her, but rather that she is subjected to conditions which continuously reduce the quality of her life. Because Alcorn is constantly being subjected to forms of transphobic oppression, she is constantly being forced to confront evidence such that her life will not ever be one of powerful living.

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suicide literature, I do not wish to dive further into it than as a complicated matter for addressing the Evidential Concern.

[45] The *It Gets Better Project* does include some testimonies from transgender people, inclusive of trans men, trans women, and nonbinary people.

This reiterates what was found in the final parts of Chapter 3: the Spinozist must commit to, as much as possible, abolishing oppression, regardless of what social role a given Spinozist occupies. Insofar as oppression provides evidence that powerful living will not be possible, oppression may make suicides rational, and, thus, must be abolished. Regardless of whether evidence is produced that life could, in the end, be lived powerfully, oppression runs the risk of producing overwhelming evidence that it cannot. There is no choice, then, but to aim at abolishing oppression.

Though it is beyond the scope of this project to specify how oppression can be abolished, we can tie together two important strands here: as far as our concerns are related to suicidality, we must focus on people as fundamentally *social*, we must strive to avoid individualism. It is not the case that suicidal people are divorced from their environments, and in fact they are deeply tied up in a world which, returning to the comments of Barbone and Rice in the early chapters, is "largely man-made" (1994, 241). So, our efforts must address problems socially, insofar as doing so may maximise everyone's potential for powerful living. As Spinoza writes, "all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all" (E4p18s). Further, we must aim to avoid issues of epistemic injustice. Learning and theorising about oppression and its resistance must be done with an eye towards the under recognized testimonies of those whose capacities as knowers have so far been disrespected, and with an eye towards new, provocative conceptual tools which do not emerge only from the dominant hermeneutical toolbox. If we do not take seriously these issues, we risk not knowing much about oppression and resistance to it.

4: Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen two important aspects of the Spinozist framework for suicide studies. First, it can provide tools for interpreting certain suicide notes or suicide testimonies which avoid issues posed by the three major models of suicide studies. Second, it can recommend both that initiatives are implemented which provide evidence such that good, powerful living is possible, and also that we strive to abolish oppression (and any other things which provide evidence that powerful living is impossible).

This chapter has thus, hopefully, tied together all the loose strings which were produced leading up to it. In Chapter 2, I developed and defended a reading of Spinoza's philosophy of suicide which held both that all suicides are externally caused and also that some suicides are rational. In Chapter 3, I developed the implications of the reading I offered in Chapter 2, and in doing so found that we all ought to aim to make it so that suicide is never made rational. Further, since a Young-informed reading of oppression makes it clear that oppression can make suicide rational, the Spinozist must thus strive to abolish oppression. What was found in Chapters 2 and 3 together was said to compose the Spinozist framework for suicide studies.

In Chapter 4, I showed that, despite ongoing successes in contemporary suicide research, the three dominant ways of approaching suicide research and prevention all partake in either or both of the Individualism Risk and the Epistemic Risk. Thus, in showing that the Spinozist framework for suicide studies can help with some aspects of suicide research in ways that avoid these risks, I have brought the first two and the last two chapters of this thesis together, and have hopefully accomplished what I called the aim of this project in Chapter 1. That is, I have hopefully argued successfully that Spinozism can

be one of multiple needed new frameworks for thinking about suicide and suicide research.

Yet, if this is successful, there is still much to be done. I must leave this project here, though, with some few concluding questions and thoughts. Other alternatives in suicide studies must still be developed. As was discussed in the Chapter 1, I offer here only one new approach to suicide of the many that are called for, only one new plant in a garden wanting greenery. What other frameworks will look like I cannot say, but, as anyone seriously trying to address suicide will agree, there is much to be said which has not yet been spoken.

Further, it remains for us to address exactly how oppression is to be abolished. There are many readings on which Spinoza's political philosophy cannot at all endorse outright political revolution, even if it takes it to sometimes be a necessary causal consequence of bad leadership. But even if Spinozism is somehow anti-revolutionary, there still may be encouragement in Spinozist political philosophy to change the organization of society. As Rosenthal writes, Spinoza's "claim that the constitutional form of the state should be maintained does not rule out the possibility that it can be improved. Hence, although we should resist revolutionary impulses, some of them can be incorporated into the state over time" (2013, 125). Other readings, at the very least, find some justification in Spinoza's work for specific kinds of outright revolutionary resistance to specific kinds of unjust social conditions[46] and some have, as Negri puts it, thought that "one could begin to reconstruct a revolutionary perspective on the terrain of Spinozism" (2017, viii).

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[46] E.g., in (Stephenson 2016), where it is argued that Spinoza encourages perpetual philosophical critique against speech-oppressive regimes.

Regardless, though, it is possible that this is where a reliance on Spinozism comes to an end. Endorsing a historical philosophy in contemporary matters is only useful insofar as that historical philosophy aids or illuminates ends of contemporary concerns. With the ends of abolishing oppression and providing evidence that powerful life is possible illuminated, its means may be subject for another discussion, one for whose purposes the continuing value of Spinozism ought to be revaluated. It may be that Spinozism remains useful in this regard, and it may be that it does not, but what we have seen in this thesis project is that, at the very least, Spinozism usefully and compassionately approaches the potential intertwinings of oppression, suicide, and our best reactions to them.

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