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VIRTUE CONSTITUTIVISM: SPINOZA ON AGENCY AND THE GROUNDS OF NORMATIVITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops *Virtue Constitutivism* (VC), a Spinozist contribution to the metaethical project of grounding practical normativity in the constitutive features of agency. I argue that what Spinoza identifies, in non-moralistic terms, as *virtue*—the power to be the adequate cause of one's own actions (E3Def2)—is uniquely suited to this role. This feature exhibits a twofold structure: a *conative dimension* operating as the *constitutive aim*, the *conatus* as conscious desire striving for self-preservation and increased power; and a *cognitive dimension* operating as the *constitutive principle*, the dictates of reason, concretely instantiated in what I call *beacon practices*—patterns of activity that, under conditions of adequate cognition, render adequate striving publicly legible and reliably enable its successful realization. On this basis, I advance three claims. First, VC meets the inescapability challenge without generating relativism, grounding normativity in the intentional structure of desire, prior to any reflective standpoint. Second, beacon practices deliver content-determinacy while resisting reduction to socially successful but power-diminishing customs. Third, VC integrates the central insights of Kantian, Humean, Nietzschean, Aristotelian, and Vellemanian constitutivism while avoiding their characteristic vulnerabilities. The result is an account that is objective without being mind-independent, universal without being abstract, and content-determinate without being relativist.

Keywords: virtue; constitutivism; normativity; Spinoza; metaethics.

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1. Introduction

Consider the following claims:

(A) Killing a baby for pure amusement is wrong in any situation.
(B) If you are aware that your friend is in trouble, you ought to do what you can to help her.
(C) Sara is an exceptionally good driver.

Each expresses a normative proposition grounded in a distinct kind of standard: (A) asserts a *normative fact*, (B) generates *normative pressure*, and (C) conveys a *normative evaluation*. What is the source of such standards, and what accounts for their authority over us?

Constitutivism holds that normativity is grounded in the constitutive features of agency itself—best understood as a *constitutivist strategy* within the broader constructivist programme in metaethics (Bagnoli 2019, 2026). This paper develops a new variant, *Virtue Constitutivism* (VC), drawing on Spinoza's *Ethics*. According to VC, the constitutive feature of agency is what Spinoza identifies as *virtue* in non-moralistic terms—the power to be the adequate cause of one's own actions (E4Def8, E3Def2).[1] It integrates two dimensions: a *conative* dimension—the *constitutive aim* of desire-driven self-preservation—and a *cognitive* dimension—the *constitutive principle* of following the dictates of reason, as exemplified by intersubjectively recognizable *beacon practices,* that is, domain-specific patterns of activity that function as reliable guides to successful action.

The proposal is motivated by three considerations that both preserve the main advantages of existing constitutivist accounts and avoid their characteristic difficulties. First, VC secures *objectivity without mind-independence*: the standards of adequate causation are discovered through adequate cognition—not invented by it—and track the actual structure of agency and shared reality (accessible through *common notions*, E2P38–

[1] References to Spinoza's *Ethics* follow the standard convention. The letter E designates the *Ethics*, followed by an Arabic numeral indicating the part (1–5), and then by the abbreviation of the type of statement: Def (definition), Ax (axiom), P (proposition), Pref (preface), App (appendix), and the following subdivisions of propositions: Dem (demonstration), Cor (corollary), S (scholium), and Expl (explanation). Thus, E4Def8 refers to the eighth definition of Part 4, E3P9S to the scholium of Proposition 9 in Part 3, and E2P38–P40 to the range from Proposition 38 to Proposition 40 in Part 2. All English quotations are taken from the Curley translation (Spinoza 2016).

P40);[2] yet they can only be identified from within the perspective of desiring agents, not from a "view from nowhere". This yields a form of stance-dependent objectivity: objective from within the constitutive structure of human agency. Second, VC achieves *universality without abstraction*: the *conatus* is the essence of every human agent (E3P6–7), which grounds its universality, while that universality is always instantiated in such beacon practices—concrete, situated forms of rational activity—rather than in an abstract standard. Third, VC provides *content-determinacy without relativism*: such practices supply specific normative standards, but the criteria for identifying them are grounded in the objective structure of adequate causation—not in standpoint-relative preferences.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates VC within the constitutivist landscape and identifies the two fundamental challenges—inescapability and content—that structure the debate. Section 3 develops the Spinozist foundations of VC and, crucially, provides the argument connecting adequate causation to genuine normative bindingness. Section 4 presents the full account. It develops the constitutive aim (Section 4.1), introduces beacon practices as instantiations of the constitutive principles of action and specifies their explicit criteria (Section 4.2), and offers an account of examples (A)–(C) (Section 4.3). Before presenting the conclusions, Section 5 compares VC with its main rivals, retaining their core strengths while avoiding their characteristic objections.

2. Constitutivism and the Problem of Practical Normativity

2.1 The Three Dimensions of Practical Normativity

The three opening claims—(A) the moral fact, (B) the normative pressure, and (C) the evaluative excellence—encapsulate the core dimensions of the problem of practical normativity. First is the *metaphysical* dimension, concerning the truth-makers of normative claims: what in the world, if anything, renders them true or false? Second is the *justificatory* dimension,

[2] According to Spinoza, common notions are adequate ideas of properties shared by all bodies or by a determinate set of them. Unlike imaginative ideas, they are formed equally in part and whole (E2P38) and thus express causal structure adequately. They ground the second kind of knowledge, *reason* (E2P40S2), enabling recognition of necessary features of reality from within finite cognition. In VC, they ensure that standards of adequate causation are not invented but discovered, so they track features of the shared causal order of finite modes. Objectivity is therefore grounded in common notions: adequately conceived, yet accessible only from within striving agency itself. On reason and its dictates, see Rutherford (2008). I return to this in Section 4.2.

which shifts the inquiry toward the basis upon which such claims are justified to agents. Finally, the *motivational* dimension addresses how normative claims are linked to an agent's internal reasons and impulses for action. Constitutivism seeks to resolve these concerns simultaneously by grounding them in the very *structure of agency*. In this sense, it is best understood as a "family of views" (Enoch 2011, 208), or a metanormative strategy rather than a full-fledged theory (Ridge 2018, 2951). While diverse in their execution, all constitutivist accounts converge on a central thesis: that some constitutive feature of agency—a property essential to its being an action rather than a mere bodily occurrence—is the source of normative standards. By locating normativity within the essence of acting itself, these standards become metaphysically grounded, justificatorily available—since every agent, by definition, possesses the relevant feature—, and motivationally efficacious, as they emerge from the agent's nature *qua* agent. Ultimately, this framework implies that practical normativity is fundamentally inseparable from agency itself (Bertea 2013, 81).[3] This explanatory breadth is constitutivism's main virtue, as becomes evident in its most prominent variants.

2.2 The Constitutivist Landscape

Every variety of constitutivism instantiates what has been termed the constitutivist move (Ridge 2018): it identifies a constitutive feature *F* of agency, argues that *F* generates certain normative standards *N*, and concludes that any agent is thereby bound by *N* simply by virtue of being an agent. While variants differ over the nature of *F*, this shared structure inevitably gives rise to two fundamental challenges that serve as the benchmarks for any successful account. The first is the *inescapability challenge*: for the standards generated by *F* to have genuine normative force, the agent must be unable to "opt out" of the feature itself. As Leffler (2024) observes, whether this force can be grounded depends on four candidate types of inescapability, each a different strategy for securing this necessity: *psychological*—abandoning *F* is prohibitively costly but remains intelligible; *further-factor*—some additional factor commits the agent to *F*, though it itself needs grounding; *standpoint*—*F* is inescapable from within the agent's evaluative position, at the cost of pluralism; and *plight*—*F* is inescapable given the agent's circumstances, at the cost of relativizing unacceptable costs.[4] The second is the *content challenge*:

[3] Constitutivists variously treat being a human being, a rational being, or simply an agent as the foundational aspect (Schafer 2019, 178); I use these formulations interchangeably, in a general sense.

[4] Leffler regards plight as the only candidate able to explain genuine normative force, though it surrenders objectivity—a dilemma Section 3.4 aims to overcome by grounding inescapability in the intentional architecture of desire prior to any standpoint or plight.

the feature *F* must be determinate enough to generate specific guidance for action, moving beyond mere formal constraints to provide "thick" normative direction.

When we examine the most prominent variants through the lens of these challenges, we find a series of trade-offs. Kantian constitutivism (Korsgaard 2008, 2009), for instance, locates the source of normativity in self-constitution and the demands of practical identity.[5] While this elegantly grounds autonomy and explains the categorical nature of obligations without moral realism, it struggles with the *shmagency objection* (Enoch 2011): if self-constitution is a project we reflectively adopt, a reluctant agent might simply decline to care about it. It also faces a *content objection*, since the formal requirement of integrity underdetermines which identities are normatively permissible; on Leffler's analysis, the inescapability Korsgaard invokes remains primarily psychological, often insufficient to secure categorical force. In contrast, Humean constitutivism (Street 2010, 2012)[6] offers superior motivational integration by locating the constitutive feature in the agent's own evaluative standpoint: norms are action-guiding because they must cohere with what the agent already values. Yet this coherence comes at the cost of relativism—as Street acknowledges, different standpoints yield different "truths", and the "plight inescapability" available here ultimately generates relativism rather than resolving it. Conversely, Nietzschean constitutivism (Katsafanas 2013, 2019) grounds normativity in the aim of power: because this aim is structural rather than reflectively adopted, it evades the shmagency objection more effectively.[7] Yet it faces the content challenge

[5] Although Korsgaardian constitutivism presents self-constitution under the regulative ideal of practical identity as the constitutive aim, the source of normativity lies more precisely in the categorical imperative *qua* formal structure of practical reason: the constitutive feature is not the contingent shape of any particular identity, but the formal requirement under which any identity must be coherently constituted at all.

[6] Street's position is more accurately classified as constructivism rather than constitutivism *stricto sensu*, since the grounding feature is the agent's contingent evaluative standpoint rather than a structural feature of agency as such. It is included here because it employs the constitutivist move and is standardly discussed within the same literature (cf. Katsafanas 2019; Ridge 2018).

[7] Katsafanas locates the constitutive aim of action in a dual structure: agential activity—the active expression of the agent's drives (2013, 111)—and power, the enhancement of the capacity to overcome resistance (2013, 156), addressing inescapability and content respectively. VC preserves the appeal to power but reconfigures the structure: *conatus* as conscious desire functions as the constitutive aim, while reason—articulated through beacon practices—functions as its immanent principle of determination. This also explains why Nietzschean constitutivism evades shmagency more effectively than Kantian versions: the aim of power is not reflectively endorsed but a feature of any genuine action, so a "shmietzschean" agent who disavowed it would fail to act at all.

in its sharpest form: from disciplined cooperation to predatory exploitation, the structural aim alone offers *no principled way to discriminate*.

Other models attempt to secure content through more robust aims. Aristotelian constitutivism (LeBar 2008; Foot 2001) grounds normativity in *eudaimonia*, drawing on the social and rational human form of life to generate rich moral guidance.[8] However, it faces the familiar naturalism challenge—the risk of an is/ought gap—[9] and its inescapability claim remains contested, particularly for agents disengaged from such a teleological conception of life. Similarly, Vellemanian constitutivism (Velleman 2009) introduces a sophisticated epistemological dimension by taking self-understanding to be the constitutive aim of action. While this connects normativity to self-knowledge, critics (Setiya 2003; Bratman 2007, ch. 10; Enoch 2011) have argued that self-understanding is not constitutive of all exercises of agency: many genuine actions are performed without it, which means the account fails the inescapability requirement at a basic level.[10]

Each of these variants thus encounters a characteristic tension between securing inescapability or providing determinate content. The following sections develop a Spinozist alternative to overcome these dilemmas. By re-imagining the constitutive feature not as self-constitution, evaluative standpoint, bare power-aimed,[11] *eudaimonia*, or self-understanding, but as *virtue*—understood as the power to be the adequate cause of one's own actions and thus as centrally bound up with self-preservation—, I argue

[8] Foot (2001) and Thompson (2008) ground evaluative claims in the norm-governed life-forms of species; Thompson's "natural-historical judgments" are especially influential here. The present view shares their emphasis on flourishing but relocates its ground in the immanent metaphysics of the *conatus* rather than in a teleology of biological life-forms. LeBar's constructivist proposal can likewise be read constitutivistically insofar as practical wisdom oriented toward *eudaimonia* is taken to be constitutive of agency itself.

[9] Street's Humean constructivism avoids the naturalistic fallacy by refusing to derive normative facts from any independent natural order, but at the cost of dissolving the structural objectivity of agency: what is "good for an agent" is indexed to her evaluative standpoint, with no resources for trans-standpoint adjudication. VC retains the desire-based grounding while recovering objectivity through the metaphysical invariance of *conatus* across finite modes.

[10] Setiya in particular argues that the appeal to self-understanding either trivializes the aim of action—if any minimal coherence counts—or excludes routine non-reflective agency—if substantive transparency is required.

[11] The Spinozist proposal exhibits significant affinity with Katsafanas' Nietzschean constitutivism in its appeal to power as the basic explanatory category of agency; Nietzsche himself, in his letter to Overbeck (30 July 1881), acknowledges Spinoza as a precursor (KSB 6, 111). Section 4.2 clarifies where VC departs from Katsafanas: reason as constitutive principle—via beacon practices—supplies the content-determinacy that the bare notion of power leaves underspecified.

that we can secure a normativity that is at once structurally inescapable and richly determinate.

3. Spinozist Foundations for Agency: Causation, Desire, and Virtue

3.1 Action as Adequate Causation

Spinoza's account of agency rests on the distinction between activity (*actio*) and passivity (*passio*) (E3Def1–2, for overviews of Spinoza's ethical theory, see Bennett 1984 and Nadler 2020). This is not merely the difference between doing and being affected, but a causal-metaphysical distinction. We are active insofar as we are *the adequate cause of an effect*, i.e., when it can be understood through our nature alone (E3Def2). Conversely, we are passive when we are only *partial causes*, with external factors playing an irreducible role. Consider Sara, the good driver of (C). On a wet road she stops in time. If she does so because she has read the surface and the distance, her stopping follows *from her own nature*, and she is its *adequate* cause. If she does so because the lights ahead startled her, the very same outcome is explained less by her than *by what befell her*—and she is, to that extent, only a *partial* cause of it. An effect counts as an action only if it follows from the agent's nature as its sufficient explanation. Otherwise, the agent is a link in a wider causal chain exceeding her control. The distinction is therefore not psychological but *ontological*: it concerns the structure of causation itself, not subjective experience.

For the constitutivist, this account is significant in two respects. First, it establishes a *structural criterion* for distinguishing genuine action from a mere occurrence: an event qualifies as an action precisely insofar as the agent serves as its adequate cause. Second, it links agency to the agent's essence: to act is to manifest one's own nature rather than merely react to external impingements. This nexus between action and self-expression provides the Spinozist foundation for a constitutivist account of normativity—one grounded not in a contingent aim that agents might adopt, but in the *very structure* of agency itself. To see how this grounds normativity rather than merely describing causal structure, we must examine the *conatus* and its relation to desire.

3.2 *Conatus*, Desire, and the Essence of Human Being

The *conatus* doctrine identifies a thing's essence with its striving "to persevere in its being" (E3P6). Far from being a contingent aim that a thing might adopt or discard, the *conatus* constitutes its very essence—the

immanent power through which an entity sustains its identity amidst the causal flux of nature. For human beings, this striving takes a distinctive form: in the mind, it manifests as *will*; in mind and body, as *appetite*; and finally, when accompanied by consciousness of that appetite, as *desire*, such that "desire can be defined as appetite together with consciousness of the appetite" (E3P9S). Crucially, Spinoza identifies desire as "the very essence of man" (E3Def1Expl). To be a human agent is, therefore, necessarily and constitutively to be directed by desire toward self-preservation and flourishing.[12]

This identification is philosophically decisive. Desire is not a blind impulse. In contrast to *mere* appetite, it is a striving *open* to consciousness, an orientation toward what the agent perceives as conducive to her perseverance. Consequently, desire is in principle responsive to reasons, which may operate alongside the affections that determine an agent's conduct, modifying the expression of the *conatus* without displacing it. This responsiveness to reasons is not an optional supplement to desire, but *a structural feature* of what desire is as a striving conscious of itself.

This explains why Spinoza distinguishes between desires arising from inadequate ideas and those stemming from adequate ones (E5P4S). While the former constitutes *passions*, representing expressions of partial causation in which the agent is determined by external influences she does not adequately understand, the latter embody *virtue*, manifesting as expressions of adequate causation in which the agent's own nature is the sufficient ground of her action. This distinction parallels and grounds the division between *passio* and *actio*: to act virtuously is to desire from adequate ideas, which is to be the adequate cause of one's own actions. The distinction is not merely between two different desires with different objects, but between two modes in which the same desire—the *conatus* toward self-preservation—can be expressed. Adequate and inadequate desires share the same immanent drive; they differ in the degree to which the agent's power of acting is realized or constrained by external factors. This variation in causal efficacy paves the way for understanding virtue not merely as an epistemic achievement, but as the actualization of the agent's own power.

[12] One might object that desire's dependence on consciousness renders it purely mind-dependent. Yet desire, defined as appetite accompanied by consciousness of it (E3P9S, E3Def1), is not an additional mental entity but *conatus* insofar as it is represented to the mind. This matters for Section 4.2, since the normative force of reason arises not from external standards but from the reorganization of *conatus* under adequate ideas.

3.3 Virtue as Power

Spinoza's definition of virtue (E4Def8) is foundational for the account here presented (cf. LeBuffe 2011): "By virtue and power I understand the same thing, i.e., virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, or nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone". Three features of this definition deserve emphasis. First, virtue is explicitly identified with *power* (*potentia*) as the capacity to be the adequate cause of one's own actions. Virtue is therefore not an external moral property added to agency, but a natural capacity that expresses what a human being is. Second, virtue is inherently scalar, that is, *it comes in degrees*: agents are more or less virtuous insofar as they are more or less adequate causes of their effects, that is, insofar as their power is more or less fully expressed through their own nature rather than through external determination.[13] Third, virtue is coextensive with *genuine agency* understood as adequate causation, given that to possess virtue is to express one's essence as an immanent causal source of one's actions, that is, to act from one's own nature, which is to achieve what may be called *causal autonomy*.[14]

This identification of virtue with power is further clarified in Spinoza's account of the passions and actions in E5P4S:

> [H]uman nature is so constituted that each of us wants the others to live according to his temperament. And indeed, in a man who is not led by reason this appetite is the passion called Ambition (…). On the other hand, in a man who lives according to the dictate of reason it is the action, or virtue, called Morality. In this way, all the appetites, or Desires, are

[13] This non-moralistic conception of virtue departs from both classical virtue ethics and Kantian deontology, while showing partial affinities with Machiavelli's notion of *virtù*, insofar as both reject virtue as conformity to external norms (Mansfield 1998, 25). Spinoza, however, revises this by treating moral normativity as an expression of human power guided by adequate ideas. As he writes, "in a man who lives according to the dictate of reason it is the action, or virtue, called Morality" (E5P4S). It is worth noting that, although Curley renders *pietas* as "morality", other commentators prefer to retain the term "piety". Totaro, for example, interprets it as a duty (2017, 227), in the sense of "the Desire to do good generated in us by our living according to the guidance of reason" (E4P37S1). The shift from inadequate to adequate desire is thus an internal reorganization of striving. Virtue is the increase of power through reason. I thank one of the reviewers for drawing attention to the need to clarify that Spinoza is not necessarily referring to morality *per se*.

[14] "Causal autonomy" is shorthand for Spinoza's notion of acting from one's own nature—being the adequate immanent cause of one's actions, *ex sola sua natura*—and should be read strictly in terms of adequate causation, not in any Kantian sense of self-legislation or independence from causal determination. It aligns with acting under the dictate of reason as sketched in E4Pref and clarified in E4P18S.

> passions only insofar as they arise from inadequate ideas, and are counted as virtues when they are aroused or generated by adequate ideas. For all the Desires by which we are determined to do something can arise as much from adequate ideas as from inadequate ones (E5P4S).

What this passage makes clear is that the same conative structure—desire as expression of *conatus*—can function either as passion or as virtue depending on its causal structure. The difference does not lie in *what* is desired, but in *how* the desire expresses the agent's power: whether it is determined externally or arises from the agent's own nature. Virtue, therefore, *is not a different kind of desire, but a higher degree of realized power*: a mode of activity in which *conatus* is expressed as adequate causation. This is what allows Spinoza to identify virtue with power in a non-moralistic sense: to be virtuous is to act from one's nature insofar as it is internally active rather than externally determined.

At this point, the connection between metaphysics and normativity emerges only in a preliminary form: evaluative distinctions begin to track degrees of realized power rather than conformity to external standards. Yet how such an immanent ordering of power can ground a fully articulated account of normativity remains to be clarified.

3.4 The Normative Upshot: From Adequate Causation to Normative Bindingness

Three objections may be raised against the preceding account, two of which are closely related. The first—the *functionalism* objection—holds that failing to be the adequate cause of one's action amounts to a merely functional deficiency rather than a genuine normative failure: it is causal impotence, not a norm violation. The second—the *necessity* objection—maintains that if the *conatus* is metaphysically necessary, then the distinction between normative "ought" and causal necessity collapses, thereby eliminating the space of responsibility. The response to both turns on a structural feature of Spinoza's account of desire. Since desire is *conatus* accompanied by consciousness of itself (E3P9S), this consciousness does not introduce an external standpoint of evaluation; rather, it expresses the agent's own activity as something of which she *could be* aware. What is thereby given is the agent's own striving as something that can succeed or fail in its expression. On this basis, failing to be the adequate cause of one's action is not merely a functional breakdown. The crucial insight is that the *conatus* already contains within itself an immanent criterion of success: the degree to which it realizes its own telos of persistence and enhancement of power. When an agent's

activity falls short of adequate causation, the failure is relative to the agent's own immanent measure—the flourishing that the *conatus* itself aims toward. Thus, evaluative distinctions that track degrees of adequacy are not external impositions but internal differentiations within the structure of striving itself.[15]

The necessity objection can be answered by extending this response to the metaphysical level. Every finite being necessarily strives to persevere in its being (E3P6–7), but this necessity does not eliminate variation in *how* that striving is expressed. The same *conatus* can be more or less adequately expressed depending on whether it is determined by adequate or inadequate ideas. The relevant distinction is not between striving and non-striving, but between modes of expression of the same striving: what might be called *normative bindingness* arises not from an external requirement added to the metaphysical picture, but from the fact that a being whose essence is striving necessarily admits of better and worse ways of expressing it. The evaluative dimension is thus *internal* to the structure of *conatus* itself, insofar as it can be more (*actio*) or less (*passio*) fully realized. *Nor does this* reduce normativity to mere conceptual inescapability: what is inescapable is that any instance of desiring involves a determinate form of striving; the evaluative distinctions concern the degree to which it is *adequately* expressed.

One final objection remains: the *enlightened egoism* objection. The Spinozist framework may seem to support a refined prudentialism, in which concern for others is grounded in its contribution to one's own preservation and power. If so, the appeal to *conatus* would fail to ground genuinely normative relations to others, reducing them instead to instrumentally rational strategies. The worry rests on a misunderstanding of human power under adequate ideas. As Spinoza argues (E4P35–P37), human power is fundamentally relational: individuals of the same nature do not stand in zero-sum *competition*, but can enter into *compositions* that enhance their capacity to act.[16] Under adequate cognition, the agent recognizes that her own power is partly constituted through such relations.

[15] This is why *passio* is best understood as a diminished form of activity rather than its absence (E3Def2). The contrast with artefacts such as clocks is therefore misleading: a clock has its function assigned *externally*, whereas a desiring agent is constituted by a striving that belongs to *its own nature* and tends toward its continuation.

[16] (E4P35–P37) show that, under the guidance of reason, human power takes a non-competitive, compositional form: individuals guided by reason necessarily agree in nature (E4P35); the highest good they pursue is common and equally accessible to all (E4P36); and the virtuous agent desires for others the good she seeks for herself—not from altruistic duty, but because her own power is expressed through such shared striving (E4P37). Mutual assistance is thus not a constraint on the *conatus* but the form its activity takes when guided by reason.

The orientation toward others' flourishing is therefore not externally imposed upon *conatus*, nor derivable from contingent preference, but follows from the way in which *conatus* is adequately understood in its relational expression.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that the distinction between causal structure and normative significance is not as sharp as the objections assume. What remains to be clarified is how this internal articulation of *conatus* can be rendered fully explicit as a basis for normativity. It is this task that the following section undertakes.

4. Virtue Constitutivism

With the preceding analysis of action, power, desire, and virtue in place, *Virtue Constitutivism* (VC) can now be introduced as the view that normativity is grounded in Spinozist virtue as the constitutive feature of human action. Virtue, in this sense, is the capacity to act as the adequate cause of one's own actions (E3Def2), and is therefore to be understood not as a character trait but as *a mode of activity*.[17] This constitutive feature exhibits a twofold structure. On the one hand, virtue has a *conative dimension* that functions as a *constitutive aim*: it expresses the agent's *desire*, or conscious *conatus*, as orienting agency toward self-preservation and the expansion of power. However, as Spinoza emphasizes, we do not strive for things because we judge them to be good; rather, we judge them to be good because we strive for them (E3P9S). Accordingly, what an agent happens to desire does not always coincide with what *genuinely*

[17] One might object that the opposition between virtue as a *character trait* and virtue as a *mode of activity* rests on a false dichotomy, since Spinoza could understand character traits themselves *as* modes of activity. If one grants that character traits are subject to change over time—that is, that they are diachronic rather than expressions of some essentially innate feature of a person—the opposition appears to dissolve. Yet character traits are not typically understood in this way. As Harman argues, "robust character traits"—defined as stable dispositions to act in distinctive ways across a broad range of situations—lack empirical support and often reflect a "fundamental attribution error", leading him to conclude that "[t]here is no reason at all to believe in character traits as ordinarily conceived" (2000, 223). Spinoza anticipates this concern by distinguishing between *ingenium*—disposition or temperament—and *virtus*—virtue as power. For Spinoza, *ingenium* typically belongs to the "common order of nature" (E2P29C) and to the realm of the passions, in which the subject is determined by external circumstances. By contrast, he defines virtue strictly in terms of power and activity, identifying it with the agent's capacity to be the adequate cause of their own effects. Thus, construing virtue as a mode of activity emphasizes that it is not a passive or static state—what Spinoza calls "mute pictures on a panel" (E2P49S2)—but rather a *diachronic exercise of reason* through which the agent constitutes her own essence as an active cause. I thank the reviewer for raising this important point.

contributes to her power. For this reason, virtue must also be understood in its *cognitive dimension*, which functions as a *constitutive principle*. This principle is articulated through the *dictates of reason*, which provide the standards that guide desire toward its adequate expression. These standards are not externally imposed: they express what follows from the agent's own nature, concretely instantiated in exemplary forms of action, here identified as *beacon practices*. With this twofold constitutive feature in place, the view can now be unfolded in detail.

4.1 Desire and The Constitutive Aim of Agency

The constitutive aim of agency, under VC, is the expression of desire in its most foundational sense: the striving of the *conatus* toward the enhancement of the power to act. This aim is constitutive in two respects. First, it is metaphysically *essential*, for to be a human agent is, by definition, to be a locus of striving for persistence in one's own being. Second, it is *normatively* structured: because desire constitutes our essence, its adequate and rational expression supplies the internal standard of "good" action. As previously established, the "good" does not function as an external end to be achieved, but as the measure of an activity's success in expressing the agent's nature.

The inescapability of this aim avoids both psychological and merely formal readings of the constitutivist accounts. It is not that striving is too costly to abandon—plight inescapability—, nor that its denial generates a logical contradiction. Rather, its necessity is *structural*: it is the very form of existing as a desiring individual. This provides a direct response to the shmagency objection. A *shmirtuous* agent—one who, in the manner of Enoch's shmagent (Enoch 2011), purports to act while declining to strive toward adequate self-causation—cannot be coherently understood as an instance of agency within the Spinozist framework. The point is not that such an agent would contradict a description, but that she would fail to instantiate the very form of being in virtue of which something counts as action at all. The normative pressure of VC is therefore internal to the structure of desire prior to reflective endorsement.

One might worry that this response merely relocates Enoch's objection: if the shmirtuous agent cannot be an agent at all, why should she care about instantiating agency? The response turns on a crucial disanalogy with Korsgaard's account: for Korsgaard, self-constitution is a project the agent *reflectively* undertakes, and Enoch's objection is devastating precisely because such projects can in principle be declined by an agent willing to forfeit the identity in question. By contrast, the Spinozist constraint operates at a metaphysically deeper level: it is inscribed not in what an

agent *chooses to care about*, but in *what a finite being is* insofar as it persists. The necessity at issue is therefore not psychological but *structural*—prior to any voluntary stance that could be coherently rejected: there is no standpoint from which a finite agent could coherently opt out of striving without ceasing to be the kind of entity for which questions of agency arise at all. This does not eliminate responsibility; rather, it grounds it in a necessity that cannot be intelligibly questioned without question-begging.[18]

On the other hand, and crucially, this constitutive aim is never instantiated in isolation. Human beings are not "kingdoms within a kingdom" (E3Pref), so adequate self-causation essentially involves relations of composition with other agents that enhance power. As Spinoza writes:

> [I]f, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man […] that all should so agree in all things that the Minds and Bodies of all would compose, as it were, one Mind and one Body (E4P18S).[19]

The metaethical implication is that the constitutive aim of VC is intrinsically non-egoistic in a structurally strong sense: adequate self-understanding of *conatus* already discloses its relational form. The agent who understands her own power under adequate ideas recognizes that it is not self-enclosed, but partially constituted through relations of composition with other agents (E4P35–P37, see fn. 16 above). On this view, the flourishing of others is not an external object of concern added to self-preservation, but part of its internal articulation when properly understood.

This is why the apparent dichotomy between egoism and cooperation is misleading: it treats sociality as a contingent strategy chosen by an already-formed agent. The Spinozist claim is more radical. The constitutive aim is not a goal selected from outside a neutral field of possibilities, but the

[18] Unlike Korsgaard's appeal to self-constitution, which operates at the level of reflective adoption—and is thus vulnerable to Enoch's objection precisely because of its voluntariness—the Spinozist appeal to *conatus* operates at the level of metaphysical constitution: the standpoint required to decline striving is itself constituted by *the very striving in question*.

[19] The social dimension of *conatus* is developed by Spinoza in the doctrine of the *multitudo*, whose normative significance has been explored at length by Sainz Pezonaga (2021). On this reading, the relational structure of striving is constitutive of agency rather than supervenient on it.

internal condition of agency itself—like buoyancy in relation to navigation: one does not first become an agent and then decide whether to enter relations of composition with others; agency already unfolds within those relations as conditions of its own persistence and enhancement of power.

For this reason, VC resists relativist reinterpretations of cooperation as a matter of preference or standpoint. The *conatus* is not a variable evaluative orientation but a necessary feature of finite existence, whose adequate expression systematically involves compositional enhancement of power: to understand one's own striving adequately is to understand that it is increased, not diminished, through the flourishing of others. It is in this sense that the constitutive aim of agency already contains within itself its own normative articulation as principle, insofar as reason is nothing other than the immanent form in which that aim is adequately expressed.

4.2 Reason and The Constitutive Principle of Agency: Beacon Practices

If the constitutive aim specifies the "what" and partly the "why" of action, the constitutive principle specifies the "how". The aim identifies agency as striving that grounds normativity, but does not determine how such striving succeeds *through* its adequacy. Left to itself, *conatus* expresses only a tendency toward persistence and increase in power, remaining exposed to *passio*. Reason, then, is not external to desire but its internal articulation—a claim that turns on Spinoza's conception of reason, which must here be made explicit. Reason does not name a faculty opposed to desire, nor a source of ends imposed upon it from without. Rather, as the *second kind of knowledge*, reason consists in the adequate cognition of what follows from the agent's own nature through common notions—ideas of what is equally present in the part and in the whole (E2P38–P40, E2P40S2). Since desire is the conscious expression of *conatus*, adequate cognition transforms the way by which *conatus* understands and pursues its own activity: reason is not a constraint upon desire, but the form that desire takes when the agent adequately grasps the conditions of her own flourishing. As Spinoza holds, this follows with the necessity of a geometric truth (E4P18S; cf. Rutherford 2008). It is *not optional*, but *a structural demand* through which *conatus* is adequately realized. Normativity thus arises from *conatus* under adequate cognition.

Yet this answer remains incomplete. If reason is the internal articulation of desire, it must take shape in the lives of agents for whom acting from fully adequate ideas is *as difficult as it is rare* (E5P42S). What form does adequate striving assume when it must guide finite agents? This is the work

done by *beacon practices*:[20] concrete exercises of activity in which the harnessing of *conatus* by reason becomes both real and recognizable. To play this role, a practice must meet two demands: it must genuinely enhance the agent's power of acting—otherwise it fails the constitutive aim it is meant to express—and it must be seen to do so—otherwise it cannot orient agents lacking full cognitive adequacy. A beacon practice is thus defined by two jointly necessary conditions: a *power-enabling condition*—that the practice reliably contributes to the enhancement of an agent's power to act under conditions of adequate cognition—and a *legibility condition*—that the practice becomes recognizably exemplary for agents sharing the same practical form of life. The two are not symmetrical. The power-enabling condition is causal-metaphysical, concerning a practice's contribution to the enhancement of a being's power of acting. The legibility condition is epistemic-intersubjective: for cognitively limited agents, adequacy must become publicly legible to operate as a practical guide. The two conditions are mutually dependent at the level of practical access—an unrecognized practice cannot function as a beacon—yet asymmetrical at the level of grounding. What ultimately makes a practice *genuinely* beacon-like is its contribution to the enhancement of power rather than mere social recognition. Beacon practices are therefore not imaginary icons or unattainable standards—like the "Free Man" (E4Praef; cf. Jarrett 2014; Sainz Pezonaga 2021), a theoretical limit-case at the margins of abstraction.[21] They are *actual* performances by *actual* agents, recognizable as conducive to power and worthy of emulation. The concept here draws on Spinoza's account of *emulatio* (E3P27S, E3DefAff33): the desire awakened in us when we witness others like ourselves acting successfully.[22] When an agent navigates a situation with clarity, precision,

[20] The term *beacon* is used in its richer functional sense: like a navigational marker, it renders the relevant direction publicly visible; like an active aid to passage, it contributes to successful navigation. Unlike a fixed standard, it remains relative to the conditions under which agents attempt the passage, comprising the four functions developed below: articulating, tracking, stabilizing, and refining the practical realization of adequate striving.

[21] Beacon practices respond to a recurrent difficulty in constructivist accounts: the appeal to idealized agents as sources of normative guidance. Jarrett (2014) emphasizes the "Free Man" of E4Praef as a normative exemplar; Zuk (2015) stresses the rational organization of the multitude. Both risk the circularity Leffler (2016) identifies in related frameworks: the standards meant to ground normativity presuppose the authority of the ideal standpoint itself. Beacon practices avoid this by shifting from hypothetical ideals to publicly recognizable forms of successful activity, whose significance lies in tracking the adequate realization of *conatus* under finite conditions.

[22] Spinoza's *emulatio* (E3P27S) is the desire awakened in an agent when she perceives someone similar to herself affected by a desire toward an object; unlike envy (*invidia*), which converts recognition of another's power into passive *tristitia*, emulation channels it into the agent's own striving. It thereby captures, in Spinoza's own terms, how beacon practices acquire intersubjective traction: one agent's activity renders a form of adequate

and composure—when she acts as an adequate cause rather than merely reacting passively—her activity becomes exemplary not because it conforms to an externally codified rule, but because it renders visible *how* adequate striving is practically achieved.[23] This *visibility* is essential to their intersubjective authority: beacon practices are not validated by collective approval alone; collective recognition tracks, however imperfectly, patterns of activity that realize the constitutive aim under the guidance of reason. Their authority derives neither from convention nor from external prescription, but from rendering the structure of adequate striving publicly intelligible within ordinary practical life.

These two conditions become operative through four functional roles, each traceable to one or both of them. From the *legibility condition* follows the role of (a) *rendering reason legible*: beacon practices make publicly intelligible what otherwise remains implicit in adequate striving, exhibiting reason as a form of life rather than as an abstract structure. From the *power-enabling condition* follows the role of (b) *tracking adequacy*: beacon practices function as reliable indicators of configurations in which *conatus* and reason successfully coincide; their authority is derivative rather than foundational, since they are reliable because adequate causation obtains in them, not adequate because they are recognized. From *their joint operation* follow two further roles: (c) *stabilizing finite deliberation*—beacon practices let agents orient action without full cognitive adequacy at every step, mediating between the structural demands of rational agency and the partial conditions of finite deliberation; and (d) *sustaining gradable revision*: because adequacy itself is scalar (E4Def8), beacon practices are intrinsically revisable under improved cognition, so that mastery is not a fixed destination but a horizon that recedes as the agent's power expands.[24] A concern of circularity might arise: do we not identify beacon practices simply by treating as successful whatever already appears successful from

striving publicly visible, awakening a structurally analogous striving in observers without imposing it as an external rule.

[23] Because beacon practices are grounded in publicly recognizable forms of successful activity rather than hypothetical ideals, they remain vulnerable to misidentification under inadequate cognition. Agents often imitate what merely appears successful (E3P9S), and communities may recognize as exemplary practices that are in fact passive or power-diminishing (E3P32S). Beacon practices must therefore be assessed on two axes: as genuine enablers of power, insofar as they actually increase the agent's power to act, and as objects of recognition, insofar as they are socially recognized as exemplary. The divergence between genuine and merely apparent beacons remains an issue for further investigation.

[24] The gradability of beacon practices follows from the scalar structure of adequacy in Spinoza's account of virtue. Since rational activity admits of degrees, beacon practices cannot function as fixed standards, but only as relatively more adequate articulations of agency within determinate contexts, open to refinement under more adequate cognition. This reflects the Spinozist conception of virtue as progressive intensification of power, echoed in "ideal agency" (Jarrett 2014) and collective rational integration (Zuk 2015).

within a given standpoint? The appearance of circularity disappears once the explanatory order is made explicit. Beacon practices do not make an activity normatively correct. Rather, an activity is normatively correct *insofar as* it expresses the constitutive demands of *conatus* under the guidance of reason. A practice counts as a beacon because it makes such forms of rational activity publicly identifiable and therefore available for recognition and emulation. Just as a beacon *marks a route* whose significance is independent of the marker itself, beacon practices do not determine what is normatively correct. Their function is *indicative* rather than justificatory: beacon practices help agents identify the practical expression of rational activity, but they do not generate its normativity. As agents' understanding improves, they may discover that a purported beacon no longer performs this indicative function. What is then revised is not the standard of normativity itself, but our identification of the practices that genuinely express it. VC is therefore *dynamic* and *self-corrective*: repeated failure of a purported beacon to enhance an agent's power provides reason to revise its status. So beacon practices do not constitute rationality *as such*, but only its finite articulation. Rationality itself rests on common notions (E2P38–P40) and *conatus*, independently of social recognition. Beacon practices merely make this structure operatively accessible. Their recognition requires only partial adequacy and is progressively refined in a scalar process akin to Spinoza's transition from *imaginatio* to *ratio* (E2P40S2).

It follows that reason is not an external faculty imposing norms upon desire, but the immanent form of *conatus* under adequate cognition. Beacon practices are the finite, structured manifestations of this form within determinate domains of activity—conditioned by what enables power and what becomes legible, and operative through the four functions just described.

4.3 Virtue Constitutivism in Action

The explanatory scope of VC is revealed by its capacity to unify the diverse normative dimensions identified in the opening section of this paper. These cases can be read as instantiations of the twofold structure articulated in Sections 4.1 and 4.2: the constitutive aim of agency as *conatus* or striving for enhanced power, and the constitutive principle of reason as the form in which such striving becomes adequately determined.

Consider first (A)—the claim that killing a baby for amusement is wrong in any situation. VC frames this not as the violation of a transcendent moral law, but as a constitutively self-undermining configuration of agency. The act is not thereby denied to be an action: the agent is its proximate cause.

But it is a *passio* rather than an *actio*—it springs from inadequate ideas and passive affects, so that the agent is not the adequate cause of her own effect (E3Def2). As such it is itself a form of *tristitia*—a transition to a lesser perfection, a decrease in the very power of acting (E3P11S). Its wrongness lies in this diminution: as an expression of *conatus*—which strives for nothing but the increase and preservation of its own power—the act turns against the very power it expresses, destroying a being whose flourishing is constitutively implicated in the relational structure on which the agent's own power depends (E4P18S). The wrongness is thus not external prohibition but internal incoherence: the striving contradicts its own aim, purporting to exercise agency while eroding the conditions of agency itself. Normativity here tracks the *degree* of adequate self-causation, not a yes-or-no verdict on whether an action has occurred. Its universality rests not on a formal test of universalizability, but on the metaphysical invariance of this structure: wherever there is *conatus*, the destruction of another's power under conditions of inadequacy is incompatible with its own adequate realization.

This logic extends to the normative pressure expressed in (B). Within VC, the "ought" involved in helping a friend is the expression of *conatus* insofar as it is guided by adequate cognition. Helping is not a plain suspension of self-interest but its rational articulation: under adequate ideas, the agent recognizes that her own power is partially constituted through relations of composition with others. The Spinozist claim that nothing is more useful to a human being than another human being (E4P18S) is not a moral slogan but *a structural fact about the relational architecture of power*. The distinction between aim and principle here becomes operationally visible: while inadequate striving expresses desire left to the instability of passive affects, adequate striving expresses desire organized through reason, including through the beacon practices introduced in Section 4.2. A friend's assistance in distress therefore does not appear as obedience to an external norm, but as the immanent pressure of *conatus* adequately understanding its own conditions of persistence. To refuse assistance would be to fragment one's own power by isolating it from the very relations that sustain it.

Finally, Sara's excellence in (C) represents the paradigm case of integration between constitutive aim and constitutive principle in practical rationality. Sara is a good driver not because she conforms to an externally imposed standard, but because *her activity exhibits a high degree of adequate causation within a determinate domain*—the difference already visible in the braking case of Section 3.1. Her performance is structurally stable, compositionally integrated, and publicly intelligible as successful. It thus stands as an exemplar of a beacon practice: a concrete realization of

rational agency that renders visible how adequate striving is practically achieved. Here, *conatus*—desire as constitutive aim—and reason—the constitutive principle structuring such striving—converge in a single performance. Beacon practices are therefore not merely evaluative exemplars but the mode in which reason itself becomes externally legible as a form of lived activity.

Taken together, the three cases exhibit a single underlying structure—the varying degrees of adequacy with which *conatus* is articulated through reason—of which normative fact, normative pressure, and normative evaluation are internal differentiations. VC thus unifies moral, practical, and evaluative normativity in a single measure—the increase or diminution of the power of acting—without collapsing the distinctions among them. The difference is one of generality rather than of kind: moral norms follow lawfully from the common dictates of reason (E4P18S)—that is, from the rational nature all agents share—and thereby concern the common good and true virtue, or *pietas* (E4P35–P37); local practical and evaluative norms—for example, that one should eat more fiber, or that a house with a roof is a better house—track contributions to power indexed to particular constitutions and ends, and do not rise to those common dictates.[25]

5. Conclusion: An Integrative Assessment

By way of conclusion, VC's metanormative plausibility is best assessed by situating it within the constitutivist landscape of Section 2. What is at stake is not whether VC replicates the explanatory successes of its rivals, but whether it rearticulates their central insights within a single account of agency grounded in *conatus* as desire and in reason as its immanent articulation.

Seen through its conative dimension, VC preserves what Kantian and Humean constitutivism got right while avoiding their characteristic costs. With the Kantian, it holds that normativity arises from the structure of agency itself and binds categorically; yet it locates the relevant necessity not in reflective endorsement—the flank exposed to shmagency-style objections—but in the metaphysical structure of striving: a shmirtuous agent does not reject a requirement; she fails to instantiate the very form

[25] This is not yet a full taxonomy of norm-kinds, nor is it meant to be. As a first systematization of VC, the present account aims to establish that the model can ground and distinguish the three normative axes with its own resources; how the common dictates of reason order the space of particular practical, moral and evaluative norms—and where exactly *pietas* shades into prudence—demands a study of its own. I thank the reviewer for pressing this point.

of agency that would ground her rejection. With the Humean, it insists that normativity must engage the agent's motivational life, for its ground is desire itself; but since what is universal is not a standpoint but the very condition of having one, relativism does not follow—the question is never whether desire is present, but whether it is adequately expressed.

Seen through its cognitive dimension, VC absorbs the remaining rivals. It retains the Nietzschean insight that power is the basic explanatory category, while insisting that power is intelligible only under rational structure: beacon practices articulate the forms in which enhancements of power are sustainable and integrated—which is what distinguishes adequate causation from episodic dominance. It inherits from Aristotelian constitutivism excellence, gradability, and rich normative content, but relocates their ground from a teleological species-function to the immanent metaphysics of *conatus*, beacon practices here playing the role of practical wisdom without presupposing a fixed form of life. And it takes from Velleman the demand of intelligibility while refusing to identify it with reflexive self-understanding: adequate causation includes, but is not exhausted by, cognitive transparency.

Seen as a whole, then, VC does not simply occupy one more position within the constitutivist field. It reorganizes it by keeping distinct—but internally related—the two dimensions of virtue as the constitutive feature of agency: desire as *conatus*, the constitutive aim that secures inescapability; and reason articulated through beacon practices, the constitutive principle that secures content. Once this distinction is in place, the trade-offs presented in Section 2 no longer appear as fate.

Much remains to be done—particularly the extension of VC to epistemic normativity, since beacon practices bear on epistemic success as much as on practical success, and to the collective agency of the *multitudo* (see fn. 19). But if the argument of this paper is sound, virtue is not a reward for successful conduct: it is agency coming into full realization (E5P42). To act virtuously is to express, as fully as finite conditions permit, what it is to be an agent—to become the adequate cause of one's own life.

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