

“Spinoza on Conatus and the Impossibility of Suicide”.

One of the most pivotal doctrines in Spinoza's *Ethics* states that every *thing* has a striving for self-preservation, and that such striving constitutes the thing's very essence. This doctrine is of considerable significance not only because it is the cornerstone of Spinoza's theory of human nature and virtue, but also because it is perhaps the most radical form of a theme commonly found throughout the history of philosophy. My talk focuses on one important component of this doctrine, that is, it is impossible that any thing should destroy itself or commit suicide, and on one enigmatically brief proposition (*Ethics* III, Proposition 4) that “demonstrates” this counter-intuitive claim. I first clarify the meaning of this proposition by considering Spinoza's intellectual context, in specific the Dutch-scholastic textbooks studied by Spinoza. I show that for Spinoza a *thing* is an individual whose nature consists in a fixed pattern of causal communications between its component parts, and the destruction of thing consists in the disruption of the pattern. I then argue that the main reason why Spinoza thinks that a thing cannot destroy itself is that its fixed pattern of causal communications cannot disrupt itself. I show that Spinoza's conception of a fixed pattern is informed by the scientific advances of his day, especially Huygens's works on the pendulum clocks. I end by discussing how my interpretation bears on our understanding of the Spinozistic striving for self-preservation.