

7. AFFECTION

IN E3DA (11/190), Spinoza presents affection (*affectio*) of an essence as a “constitution” of this essence – that is, it is a particular way in which the essence is modified. Two aspects are included in this notion: one, static, referring to the state of being obtained as the outcome of a change; the other, dynamic, referring to the very process through which this change occurs. As far as the modes of the two attributes we can know (Extension and Thought) are concerned, an affection of the body means the way this body is modified as a consequence of the mechanical laws of collision with another (external) body; and an affection of the mind means the way this mind is modified as a consequence of its having an idea which it did not have beforehand.

Several elements are worth considering in Spinoza’s understanding of affection:

1. Affection and mode:

“Affection” is not the object of a definition per se in the *Ethics*, but is used in the definition of “mode” (*modus*) and is presented as an equivalent of it: “By mode I understand the affections of a substance” (E1def5). “Affection” thus can be seen as a synonym for “mode” broadly speaking: “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). However, arguably, “mode” is usually used to refer to the particular being or thing (*res*) which is modified. The common use of the verb “to affect” (*affectare*, usually used in the passive form “to be affected by something”) suggests that “affection” would refer primarily to the *process* of being affected or modified, or to the specific result of this change in the thing considered.

2. Affection and *external* modal interaction:

An affection is almost always the result, for a mode, of its interaction with *other* modes. “Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause” (E1p28). Although it is clear that there are internally caused affections – presumably many empowering affections are internally caused – Spinoza seems to consider most changes as coming from the exterior for a given finite being, which implies that we are not “a dominion within a dominion” (E3pref).

3. Affection and *intra-attribute* modal interaction:

An affection is always the result, for a mode, of its causal interaction with other modes *of the same kind*, that is, within the same attribute. Arguably, this is the upshot of E1def2: “a thought is limited by another thought. But a body is not limited by a thought nor a thought by a body” (see also E2p7s, E3p2). As a result, a particular mode can only be affected by another of the same kind; affection can only occur within a given attribute.

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4. Affection and affect:

The term “affection” (*affectio*), referring to a modification in a finite being, must be distinguished from “affect” (*affectus*). According to E3def3, an affect refers to “the affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections.” From this, we can understand that all affects are affections, but not all affections are affects: only those that imply a change in the thing’s power of acting. Hence, we can make a distinction in Spinoza between the affections that change a thing’s essence (understanding that power and essence are one and the same thing) and those that don’t. For example, we can think of many slight changes that do not modify the general *ratio* of motion and rest constituting a body’s essence or form (E2pL4–6). Also, a mode a thinking (i.e., a mind) can exist without any affect (E2a3), when the idea it has does not modify its power of acting. See notably E3p52, which calls wonder (*admiratio*) “this affection of the mind, or this imagination of a singular thing, insofar as it is alone in the mind,” whereas it is called “consternation, veneration or dread when it implies an affect of fear, of esteem, anger, etc.” (it may be noted that wonder is excluded by Spinoza from the affects: see E3DA4exp).

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KEY PASSAGES

E1def5; E1p28; E2a3; E2p13L4; E3def3; E3p52s.

RECOMMENDED READING

Deleuze, G. (1990). *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Zone.

Giancotti, E. (1999). The theory of the affects in the strategy of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. In Y. Yovel (ed.), *Desire and Affect: Spinoza as Psychologist* (pp. 129–38). Little Room Press.

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Rice, L. C. (1999). Action in Spinoza’s account of affectivity. In Y. Yovel (ed.), *Desire and Affect: Spinoza as Psychologist* (pp. 155–68). Little Room Press.

RELATED TERMS

[Action and Passion](#); [Affect](#); [Determination](#); [Feeling](#); [Imagination](#); [Mode](#); [Substance](#)

8.

AFFIRMATION

AFFIRMATION (*AFFIRMATIO*; *BEVESTIGING*) is a doxastic attitude we exhibit when we accept something as true, or judge it to be true. It differs from other doxastic attitudes such as denial or negation [*negatio*] or doubt [*dubitatio*], which we adopt, respectively, when we reject something as false, or when we are undecided about its truth or falsity. In E2p49s, Spinoza

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