

Hasana Sharp

Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization.

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Hasana Sharp opens her *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* by listing that philosopher's 'many posthumous births' (1) as atheist, theist, pantheist, rationalist, and so on. In this slender volume, Spinoza is born again. Sharp re-examines his thought in light of such recent figures as Althusser, Balibar, Butler, Deleuze, Frye, and Naess, thereby neatly troubling characterizations of him as a proto-liberal humanist. For Sharp, Spinoza's naturalistic ontology runs through and informs his epistemology, ethics and politics, and importantly anticipates post-humanism.

Sharp reconceives Spinoza's famous naturalism as 'renaturalization'. Some early modern figures, such as Descartes and Kant, she argues, sought to hive off humanity from the scientific revolution's mechanistic understanding of nature by treating such concepts as *mind*, *idea*, and *reason* as somehow removed from nature. Sharp terms this tendency 'scientific spiritualization' (5). For such thinkers, human beings have a share in both the natural and the supernatural. By contrast, Montaigne and others held up the natural world of 'beasts' as an ideal which corrupt human beings fail to attain. Sharp's Spinoza is as vexed by the 'subnaturalism' (3) of the latter view as the supernaturalism of the former. He rejects both in favour of a distinctive conception of practical wisdom that both challenges the apparent distinctiveness of the human and resists raising nature to the status of a norm. Sharp writes, 'Spinoza's naturalism aims to engender enabling self-love in humanity by eroding those models of man that animate hatred, albeit indirectly, by suggesting that we are, at one extreme, defective gods or, at the other, corrupt animals who need to be restored to our natural condition' (5).

On Sharp's account, Spinoza avoids such extremes by emphasizing relations over individuals, and by conceiving those relations as horizontal rather than vertical. For Sharp's Spinoza, our existences are all at bottom relational. Individuals come into and pass out of existence – and in between, hang tenuously between generation and corruption – in and through ecosystems constituted by intersections of competing forces. Nothing exists on its own. Rather, for a time, like beings hang together, together resisting the external forces that would dissolve them. For Spinoza, the whole natural world occupies a single plane, and there is nothing beyond the natural world. The forces that, in one way or another, keep us together or pull us apart are on the same plane as we are, argues Sharp; they are neither ideals that transcend us, nor baser forces that tug us downward below the human. There simply *is* nothing above or below the human, but there is a nonhuman world all around us.

Sharp devotes the first half of the volume to a careful interpretation of Spinoza's thought that is both attentive to Spinoza's own words and thoughtfully informed by contemporary scholarship. On Sharp's account, Spinoza renaturalized the human mind and its functions – and

hence human beings in general – by redefining ‘affect’, ‘idea’, and ‘reason’ according to their roles in large natural systems.

Sharp follows Deleuze and Guattari in rejecting individualistic conceptions of affect. Her Spinoza understands affects – increases or diminutions in a body’s power – as occurring within a broader system. One body’s increase in power corresponds to the diminution of it in another body. Indeed, the mutual interplay of many helpful (to us) or harmful (to us) powers makes us who or what we are. Individuals are not prior to their affects, but are constituted by them. In this respect, Sharp reads Spinoza as importantly anticipating philosopher Gilbert Simondon’s transindividualism. For Spinoza as for Simondon, she argues, human beings are best understood not as parts of a larger whole to which they are subject nor as irreducible atoms, but as transindividuals – forever in the process of individuating themselves within a complex, changing ecosystem, in a process that is never finalized. Thus, Sharp’s Spinoza is neither an atomist nor a holist. Moreover, he offers a radical rejection of the Cartesian view of the body as, at least when things go well, within the control of the mind. For Spinoza, all of our ideas reflect the affects of the body, with adequate ideas corresponding to increases in the body’s power relative to other bodies while inadequate ideas correspond to relative diminution of bodily power.

Sharp’s interpretation of “idea” in Spinoza similarly rests on the renaturalized conception of human beings as situated on – and interacting on – a horizontal plane with other beings. For Spinoza, argues Sharp, ideas are expressions of our natural power. Like other finite beings, similar ideas are mutually supporting against the force of opposing ideas. Thus, Spinoza’s epistemology is grounded not in truth and falsity, but in force and vitality. We most effectively resist the force of bad ideas not by opposing them individually but by reorganizing the whole system of ideas. Sharp contends that this reading both challenges quietist interpretations of Spinoza and, more radically, ‘refigures ideology critique as a project of resistant reconstruction within an “ecosystem of ideas”’ (56). Within this ecosystem, if we wish adequate ideas to take hold, we must, quite simply, reorganize the environment within which those ideas are situated. Thus, writes Sharp, Spinoza ‘encourages us to consider which practices, associations, and relationships might strengthen and care for emerging, fragile, and challenging ideas that will not immediately find fertile soil’ (74). On this view, ideology critique is a kind of stewardship requiring both pruning and sustenance.

The final site of Sharp’s re-interpretation of Spinoza is the concept of *reason*. Here again, Sharp’s ecosystemic approach leads her to read “reason” not as a capacity (like intellect or will) possessed by an individual subject, but as “rationality” as it is understood and promulgated within a community. For Sharp, this conception of reason is tightly bound up with the notion of human nature. Sharp endorses ‘Filippo Del Lucchese’s claim that Spinoza’s “conception of human nature is crucial to his idea of politics”’ but denies that for Spinoza human nature would be reducible to a human essence. Instead, she argues that Spinoza uses the term rhetorically, to highlight both the finitude of individual persons and the limits of sovereign power and to emphasize that human beings’ positive affects and adequate ideas are best cultivated in cooperation with other human beings. This is the force of Spinoza’s E IV p18s claim that nothing is more useful to man than man. On Sharp’s reading, reason for Spinoza is local and constituted rather than universal and discovered.

The pay-off of the interpretive groundwork of the first half of the book is, in the second half, a wider and more radical deployment of Spinozism than was possible for Spinoza himself. Sharp argues that reading *affect*, *idea*, and *reason* within a politics of renaturalization reveals Spinoza's ethics to be an ethology rather than a system of morality. As opposed to morality, which assumes universality and is vertically enacted, ethology respects the particularity of ethical agents and their situation among other beings on the horizontal plane they all occupy. The kind of solidarity that emerges from a Spinozist ethology is grounded not in universalist claims to rights and representation but in 'an affective politics that seeks enabling relationships wherever they may be found' (183). Thus, 'the practical wisdom of renaturalization depends upon an affective orientation toward joy ... [in] encounters with other bodies and minds' (14).

The biggest challenge to Sharp's interpretation and deployment of Spinoza is the latter's anthropocentrism and androcentrism. Spinoza's opposition to gender equality in the political sphere is well known, as is his willingness to see non-human animals used for human ends. Both of these aspects of Spinoza's thought clearly occasion pain for Sharp, a feminist scholar who here and elsewhere demonstrates deep concern for the wellbeing of non-human animals. Sharp admits that Spinoza himself held objectionable views with respect to women and 'beasts', but urges that we can use Spinoza's own approach to push for political change much more radical than he ever contemplated: 'Spinoza's ontology is broad enough to support many new figures of the human, some of which will certainly be counter to his own vision' (54).

Make no mistake. This book is audacious. Many readers will be taken aback by an account of Spinoza that seems deeply at odds with conventional understandings of the character of 17th-century rationalism and of Spinoza as an important proto-liberal. Moreover, throughout the volume Sharp more often and more closely engages with the work of deep ecologists, feminists, critical race theorists, and posthumanists than with other historians of philosophy. However, the historiography and textual analysis are careful, rigorous and, in the end, highly plausible. Of the recent spate of work on Spinoza's political philosophy, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* is the most novel, the most ambitious, and quite possibly the most important contribution.

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