

Moira Gatens, ed.

Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza.

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A new addition to the Pennsylvania State University Press series ‘Re-Reading the Canon’, this book brings together five newly commissioned essays as well as six reprints or revisions of previously published essays. As editor Gatens observes in her introduction, it may be surprising to some that feminist scholarship can reveal new perspectives on Spinoza’s thinking, or that Spinoza’s work might be a valuable resource for feminist thinkers. After all, the *Ethics* contains only passing references to women, and in the *Political Treatise* he says that women should not participate in government. Yet the essays in this book provide ample evidence that exploring the relations between Spinoza’s thinking and feminist thinking is well worthwhile.

The essays take what Gatens calls an ‘integrated approach’ (11), addressing not just the *Ethics* but also Spinoza’s political writings. They also engage with continental interpretations as well as Anglo-American readings. While the quality of the chapters is somewhat uneven, the book as a whole is nonetheless a useful and important contribution both to Spinoza studies and to feminist scholarship.

After Gatens’ ‘Introduction’, the book opens with a revised and shortened version of a chapter originally published in Genevieve Lloyd’s 1994 book *Part of Nature: Self-Knowledge in Spinoza’s Ethics*. Lloyd argues that while Descartes and Spinoza shared a belief in human superiority over the rest of the natural world, the distinctive basis of Spinoza’s account of dominance provides the resources to creatively rethink traditional views about sexual difference. Lloyd’s interpretation also allows for a more charitable explanation of Spinoza’s exclusion of women from government. This excellent essay, as well as Aurelia Armstrong’s equally insightful essay on how Spinoza’s views on individuality are relevant to feminist work on autonomy, reveal how productive it can be to bring a feminist perspective to a close, careful reading of Spinoza’s texts.

Three of the chapters focus on Spinoza’s views regarding love and sexuality. Amélie Rorty’s chapter uses a narrative about two lovers, Echo and Ariadne, to elucidate Spinoza’s comments on love in the *Ethics*. In an essay originally written in 1977, Alexandre Matheron reconsiders what was then the received view, that ‘Spinoza’s writings about sexual love were nothing more than lamentable platitudes’ (87). Listing ten passages which have seemed to many to be merely banal observations about sexuality, Matheron points out that in fact, ‘Spinoza is not in the habit of writing anything lightly’ (88). Instead, he says, we should ‘suppose, by way of a methodological hypothesis, that

the ten passages in question were very carefully thought through and see what their Spinozist significance can be' (88). This turns out to be a fruitful approach, as Matheron links the passages on sexuality with Spinoza's writings on love, desire and *conatus*, and shows how these passages illuminate Spinoza's sexual politics and sexual ethics.

While Matheron's chapter explicates Spinoza's comments on sexuality by situating them in the context of Spinoza's theory of the passions and *conatus* more generally, David West's paper locates Spinoza's views on sexuality and love in a still broader context. In some ways this context is *too* broad; West sweepingly characterizes all of Western 'philosophy, theology, and sexual morality' as having been 'distorted for more than two millennia by *either* an idealist conception of reason and the self with usually ascetic implications *or* a typically hedonist view of rationality as an instrument of the self's psychological and bodily satisfactions' (107, emphasis in original). These oversimplifications aside, West's analysis develops some interesting implications of Spinoza's views. For example, he shows that Spinoza's writings imply no restrictions on sexual behavior to heterosexual norms.

The next two chapters address the intersection of Spinoza's views with traditional theological positions. Heidi Morrison Ravven's chapter contains a lengthy description of her largely unsupported belief that 'all contemporary and modern philosophical schools of philosophy' are 'theologically driven' insofar as they all embrace 'the freedom of the will' (128). Ravven thinks that Spinoza offers a deeper critique of traditional ethical theory than does feminist ethics, which she claims (without argument) shares the Christian presupposition of free will (127). She suggests that Spinoza's ethical theory provides an alternative, naturalized ethics which feminists might find congenial, insofar as it focuses on a 'search for an embodied and situated kind of thinking, a nonreductive materialist perspective that can overcome dualisms' (127). This may be true, but Ravven's chapter contains little discussion of Spinoza's texts to support her claim. Furthermore, in charging that there is some kind of unspoken 'ban' on a Spinozistic approach to ethics (133), Ravven also seems unaware of recent work relevant to naturalizing ethics, by such philosophers as Joshua Knobe, Shaun Nichols, and Jesse Prinz.

Like Ravven, Paola Grassi focuses on Spinoza's rejection of certain theological assumptions. Grassi reflects on Spinoza's references to Adam and original sin in the *Ethics*, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, and in his correspondence with Willem van Blyenbergh. Grassi's thesis is that Spinoza reinterprets the Genesis story as 'a paradigm of a theory of knowledge' (146) and that he rethinks the role of the imagination in human life. The message that Grassi draws from Spinoza's references is that 'it is imagined rather than understood otherness that is at the root of discord between men' (152). While this is an interesting and creative suggestion, those looking for a close reading of Spinoza's texts to support Grassi's interpretation will be disappointed.

Continental thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Etienne Balibar have offered various interpretations of Spinoza's thinking, although they are cited by few Anglo-American Spinoza scholars. This volume includes several essays that engage with or represent such continental approaches. For example, Moira Gatens' chapter, 'The Politics of the Imagination', takes as its point of departure a question posed by Deleuze about types of sociability in Spinoza. Gatens emphasizes that for Spinoza, human embodiment—a person's ability to act and be acted upon—depends not just on an individual's own natural constitution, but also on his or her social and political environment. Yet, Gatens points out, Spinoza seems blind to the fact that the lives of women (as well as members of other subordinate groups) are so shaped, a blindness that she notes is 'endemic' to political theorizing about domination and subordination (207). The connection between these points and Gatens' discussion of Spinoza's account of law earlier in the chapter is not entirely clear. Nevertheless, the chapter brings out some interesting points about Spinoza's views of individuality and social context, as well as the limitations of these views.

Another representative of the continental tradition is Luce Irigaray's chapter on Spinoza from the 1993 translation of her book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. This is accompanied by a valuable corrective to Irigaray's essay by Sarah Donovan. Donovan argues that Irigaray has overlooked some important aspects of Spinoza's thinking, and that attention to these points in fact reveals various commonalities between Irigaray's and Spinoza's projects. For example, Donovan points out that Irigaray interprets Spinoza's parallelism as a form of dualism; however, by emphasizing Spinoza's claim that mind and body are identical, and simply two expressions of the same substance, many scholars have concluded that Spinoza's views are nondualistic (167). This sort of interpretation considerably weakens Irigaray's critique of Spinoza, although Donovan stops short of actually endorsing the nondualist interpretation. Donovan also observes that because Spinoza's monistic system does not devalue the body, but treats the body as essential to thought, Spinoza's thinking resonates with Irigaray's own views in ways that Irigaray missed (173).

In the final chapter, Susan James raises some difficulties for those who—inspired largely by Deleuze—would attribute to Spinoza a 'politics of compromise' (213). James does not deny that Spinoza's political writings contains what she calls a 'consensual image of government' (212), but she also stresses the passages in which Spinoza argues that sovereigns should have absolute power in certain elements of their leadership. James' very clear analysis seeks—successfully, in my view—to reconcile these passages by attending to Spinoza's accounts of natural, moral, and divine law, and the role of human imagination in creating both ordinary and divine laws. The upshot is not a rejection of recent feminist interpretations of Spinoza's political philosophy so much as a more complex and nuanced version of it.

Despite weaknesses in some of the chapters, this volume is an excellent

contribution to Spinoza scholarship. Spinoza scholars will find that this book offers new angles from which to think through questions about Spinoza's metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Feminist researchers will find it provides additional, perhaps surprising resources for considering a range of issues, such as autonomy, individuality, political organization, ethics, and sexuality and gender.

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