Commentary on Hasana Sharp's *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*

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Hasana Sharp's book, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, ingeniously argues for and performs Spinoza's call for what she terms a "radical transformation of thought" (Sharp 179). Sharp persuasively argues that a Spinozist politics of renaturalization has much to offer the ethics and politics of our day. Although she considers the implications of her project for various contemporary philosophical movements, I limit this discussion to some further implications and questions for a Spinozist ecological philosophy, since I believe Sharp offers a particularly fecund resource for this field.

Sharp's book reorients our focus in a manner indispensable for environmental thought. As I see it, much avowedly anti-humanist environmental philosophy is still caught up in identity politics, even while several strands of it argue for the importance of intersectional theorizing, which, in my opinion, should constitute at least an implicit challenge to identity politics. Sharp's politics of renaturalization can do much of this important work, in my estimation. Following Elizabeth Grosz, her Spinozist model jettisons a "regime of recognition... [that] cannot escape an investment in a humanistic politics of identity" (158). As an alternative, fusing Grosz with Spinoza, Sharp recommends that we affirm an "'inhuman' ontology of forces" (158). In denying that there are any "special laws" that define human nature, Sharp's politics of renaturalization helps us diagnose our powers and limits in accordance with our own particular strivings, and in

so doing, paves the way toward a politics that attends to our actual possibilities and constraints. It is a politics attentive to force fields and powers of affectivity that render singular strivings friendly or hostile to an idiosyncratic set of modes. Sharp's project fruitfully transforms traditional political and normative terminology, moving us beyond static, falsely conceived identities toward a Spinozist materialist ontology that champions new models of aspiration.

As Sharp is well aware, such a transformative way of thinking raises many questions for ethics and politics. She asks, for instance, "what would it mean politically... to affirm our natural rather than human being?" (175) I think this is the central question for Sharp's project, so I invite Sharp to say more on this. My response is guided by two main questions. First, is a Spinozist ecological ethics ethical enough? Second, what if ecological philosophy requires a model of the responsible human for its success? I take each question in turn.

First, will a Spinozist environmental ethics be sufficiently ethical? I take it that this question echoes Sharp's own question in Chapter Three: namely, "if Spinoza's is an ethics of similitude, what are the consequences for those who do not appear to be 'like us?'" (111) Sharp anticipates the worry that Spinoza's ethics might be too concerned with the human to accommodate an ecological ethics. Even while Spinoza is anti-humanist, where humanism denotes human specialness, Spinoza still maintains, as Sharp puts it, "a commitment to human well-being over and against that of nonhuman animals" (190). Further, she firmly states "there is no room in Spinoza's philosophy for a justice movement on behalf of animal flourishing for its own sake" (192). For obvious reasons, this seems troubling to an environmental ethics of a posthuman variety, whose scope of concern wants to exceed the properly "human" being. Today, Sharp writes, it is likely that we are more disabled than enabled by "disavowing that we are who we are only by virtue of bacteria, nematodes, pacemakers, affections and labors of companion

animals, and so many other involvements with nonhumans” (218). Centering the politics of renaturalization on the contemporary stage then, Sharp argues that our politics may require a revised set of concepts that remains sensitive to the fact that we are enabled (and disabled) not only by human others, but by nonhuman others of all varieties as well (188, 218).

But even if this ethics moves us beyond the human, I wonder to what degree the politics of renaturalization entails ethical concern only after the fact. Drawing on Deleuze and championing what she calls “ethics as ethology,” Sharp writes that “action becomes an endeavor to cultivate a sensuous receptivity, in order better to determine the relations of composition that most enable one to think and thrive” (216). And elsewhere she adds: “we have reasons to amplify the power of nonhuman nature... Our agency depends upon affirming and nourishing the nonhuman in and outside ourselves” (10). I think these passages could be taken to suggest that a Spinozist concern with the striving of others is merely attendant to a primary concern with my singular striving. Put otherwise, even while these passages very clearly speak to the deeply relational model of the politics of renaturalization, which denies that it is only ever *my* particular modal striving that is enhanced by what Sharp calls “mutually beneficial affective compositions,” such a concern with the modal thriving of others still remains secondary to reason’s dictates that we “try to dedicate our energies to the preservation of any being that enhances our agency” (216, 192). Is it only via concern for my own modal striving, then, that I end up engaging and enhancing the modal strivings of others? If so, I wonder what a renaturalized Spinozist politics can say about beings that don’t help our striving, or with whom we don’t come into contact. If there is little to say about such beings, perhaps Spinoza (ironically) cannot take us far enough beyond narcissism for the ethics required by our day.

To sum up in the form of a question, where does Sharp's own account fall within the Levinasian critique she points to, namely that there is no room for the "Other" in Spinoza's account? Does philanthropy towards animals remain dependent upon a view of ethical egoism for a Spinozist politics of renaturalization? It remains unclear to me whether with her adjustment towards a Deleuzian "ethics as ethology," Sharp intends to make her own model friendly to a "justice movement on behalf of animal flourishing for its own sake" (192). I imagine the response to this question hinges primarily on what is meant by "our" in Sharp's text. At times, it seems to suggest personal thriving (as in the passage above – a being that enhances "our" agency), and at other times it is clearly meant to be more expansive. If the "our" is posthuman, then precisely who does Sharp mean by "our" here? In refashioning the "our" of community to include not only trees, rivers and animals, but likewise "computers, landfills, and consumer culture" (190), ought we to try to help further the flourishing of other thriving modes for their own sakes? If it is for their sakes, then which modal thrivings are of ethical concern? It seems that, as Spinoza's materialism deconstructs many traditional boundaries, including not only that of human versus animal, but likewise animate versus inanimate, organic versus inorganic, we might lose the ability to make relevant distinctions for ethics. Can a Spinozist environmental ethology discern between powerful or enabling affective connections to, not only animals, but likewise computers, landfills, or trash? (Perhaps "hoarders" are getting too much flak?) What ways do we have of distinguishing among these modal networks for ethical purposes? Can an environmental ethics defend concern with species thriving, as opposed to inanimate thriving, even the thriving of a landfill, for instance?

Perhaps, however, these questions are wrong-headed, since, in line with Sharp's affirmation that we are "but tiny parts of nature," they likely overstate our power to enable the

striving of many modes outside ourselves. These questions also may overstate the degree to which I can discern the “identities” or “needs” of other modes in the first place (not to mention that a critique of identity politics seems necessarily hostile to such representationalist questions). To believe that I can ethically impact the thriving of modes beyond my immediate environment is probably, for Sharp, to falsely imagine “that humans could voluntarily circumscribe the effects they have on nonhuman nature... a perfectly humanist ambition predicated on an empirically false human exceptionalism” (219). But I would like to hear more on precisely this point, since although we clearly do overestimate the degree of decision-making power we have, many humans daily engage in practices that exert much control over the lives of nonhuman animals, displaying if not a difference in kind, at least a relative degree of complexity and power over other modal kinds. Perhaps it is this relative complexity and power that can spark ethical obligation on a politics of renaturalization. Would it make sense to say that the more powerful we are, the more we might have to take care when we engage other modes? And if this is a plausible reading of the view, could it mean we have not only a singular but an *ethical* obligation to diversify ourselves as much as possible, so as to enhance better not only our own agency, but that of other modes as well? Perhaps this is one implication of Sharp’s alignment of the politics of renaturalization with a feminist ethics of care.

With these questions in mind, I turn now to my second, related question: What should we make of the concept of “responsibility” according to the politics of renaturalization? Is responsibility necessarily caught up in a politics of recognition, or can Sharp’s framework help us conceive it anew?

I take it that this question concerns the use of *models*, specifically which model will be most beneficial to a Spinozist-inspired ecological ethics. Sharp explains that, for Spinoza, all

uses of the term human nature are “rhetorical,” since there is no such thing as an essence that makes all humans human (87). We can only approximate each other in similarity or degree, but never in kind. This means, Sharp explains, that how we understand human nature is necessarily fictitious: we appeal to models because we have a “need for exemplars, what we would today call “norms,” to guide and measure our projects, aspirations, and institutions” (188). As noted already, Sharp is doubtful that the figure of the human currently in operation is most useful or beneficial to our mutual striving. Accordingly, she takes it upon herself in the final section of her book to “explore the limits and promises of an ethics and politics beyond the image of man” (188).

In line with this exploration, I am wondering about the promise of the posthumanist figure for environmental thought. Specifically, I wonder whether or not affirming posthuman exemplars might threaten the engenderment of collective power. In Sharp’s words, “the particular shape of the model matters,” and I am inclined to think that the model of the “responsible human” could be one that environmental ethics requires (106). To what degree might abandoning the exceptionally responsible human actually minimize our collective thriving? Ultimately I think this is a question about how we can know which models are going to be most helpful to us. Sharp notes both that models are fictitious imaginings intended to help us come together and increase communal power, but also that the farther away these models are from *modal* nature, the less helpful they will be. Put simply, the more our models lead us to forget that we are but modes of nature, the less able we will be to act. As I see it, Sharp’s model attempts to accomplish both the descriptive and the normative tasks of any model. She claims, for instance, that today, “an exclusionary paradigm of humanity that exiles dogs, plants and robots from our sphere of primary concern may be precisely a self-negation, a separation of

ourselves from our power” (218). Descriptively an exclusionary paradigm will deny that we only exist the way we do because of and in response to nonhuman others. Normatively, it will weaken our power.

One upshot of understanding ourselves on Sharp’s model, however, is the acknowledgment that we are “but a tiny part of nature” (74). My specific concern is that such a model could backfire on us, breeding apathy more than action. From my particular location and even with much understanding, it remains difficult to see how one action I perform has an effect on other modes in the environment (for instance, an individual act of throwing a wrapper on the ground has minimal moral significance, but everyone throwing a wrapper on the ground has great moral significance). And although individual responsibility is likely overstated in many discussions about the environment (often at the expense of corporate responsibility, for instance), the Spinozist insight seems to be precisely that in both acting and being acted upon, we affect other modes in ways we do not see. Furthermore, for an environmental agenda, we may have reason to overstate the impact of our individual action precisely because each individual cannot see how our individual actions added to the actions of many others spark a collective nexus of acts that, taken together, have negative effects. If our models are always “strategic and revisable, within certain limits,” (112) then which model can most aid environmental ethics? Is it a model that reminds us we are “but a tiny part of nature,” or a model that highlights our human responsibility with a view towards galvanizing us to collective action? And how do we judge such a model, if that model not only attempts to capture our nature but also comprises the norm according to which our natures respond and adjust?

Consider William James’ argument that we require belief, even without evidence, in order to act.¹ As he puts it, “If I refuse to bale out a boat because I am in doubt whether my

efforts will keep her afloat, I am really helping to sink her” (James 109). Similarly, might we require an alternative model where collective responsibility sparks us to jump? Is this a necessarily debilitating illusion? My hunch is that, on a Spinozist model, it is, but I can also envision ways in which an affect like collective guilt might galvanize certain groups of people to come together, and take responsibility for environmental devastation. Models of “shared responsibility” often stimulate movements, and bring people together into powerful assemblages. Sharp states that models of human moral responsibility most often inspire “hatred” and engender misunderstandings of ourselves. It is not clear to me, however, that all models of human responsibility necessarily engage in fictions so illusory that they miss our modal nature entirely. Might the politics of renaturalization devise a model of the responsible human that is not so contrary to our nature that it remains unhelpful? And if so, what would it look like?

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Andrew Forcehimes for bringing this example to my attention.

Works Cited

James, William. *The sentiment of rationality*. London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1905.

Sharp, Hasana. *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.