Hasana Sharp's *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, Feminism, and Embodiment

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I first picked up *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* for my feminist reading group last year. While a book about Spinoza was not the most obvious choice for a feminist reading group, we found ourselves enthusiastically delving into Spinoza's weird and wonderful universe. Sharp presents Spinoza's ideas in such a way that they spoke to the group's widely varied philosophical and political concerns and interests, leading to some of our most engaging and thought-provoking discussions of the term. It is this wide appeal that I wish to focus on in my comments here; rather than evaluate this book on the basis of its Spinoza scholarship—something to which others in this symposium are better suited—I'd like to consider what *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* has to offer to non-Spinozists. More specifically, I want to consider what Sharp's work can offer to feminist readers.

Throughout *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, Sharp uses her Spinozist framework to provide a unique perspective on current feminist debates. She dedicates Chapter Four, for example, to an exploration of Judith Butler's neo-Hegelian politics of recognition, which Sharp takes to be "the best expression of normative political thought today, especially from a feminist perspective" (12). This is followed by a consideration of Elisabeth Grosz's call for feminists to abandon a politics of recognition in favour of a "politics of imperceptibility" (155-84). In addition to participating in these recent discussions, *Spinoza and the Politics of*

Renaturalization engages in a more basic feminist philosophical struggle. The key to this engagement is the recognition that both Spinoza and contemporary feminists share a common philosophical opponent: Cartesian dualism, broadly defined. Combating this sort of dualism has been an important task for feminist philosophers, and Sharp's work makes an important contribution to this endeavour. In particular, I will focus on the ways in which dualist understandings of embodiment have been a problem for feminists and consider the resources that Sharp gives us to address them.

The primary target of Spinoza's critical work is Cartesian dualism, a philosophical view which was growing in popularity during Spinoza's time (Sharp 5). According to Sharp, Spinoza's metaphysical, ethical, and political objections to dualism are centered around the "self-hatred" engendered by an understanding of humans as distinct from nature, uniquely endowed with free will and moral responsibility. Sharp explains that such a view "inflames hatred, as we expect ourselves and one another to exhibit powers of infinite self-control, acting in radical contradiction to our circumstances" (5). Spinoza was concerned about the destructive consequences of such self-hatred and put forward his own radical naturalism in response.

Early in her introduction, Sharp remarks that, "importantly, for his time and ours, [Spinoza's] attack on supernatural models of man refuses every dualism between mind and body, where mind and body are imagined to play by different rules" (2). This is important for our time because, despite the hundreds of years separating us from Spinoza, there are ongoing concerns about the pervasive and negative influence of dualism.¹ Sharp is especially concerned with the influence of dualism on contemporary political and moral theory. She argues that mainstream theories take for granted "that the world we live in is an artefact of human agency" (23). This view is a consequence of the dualist principle that humans are distinct from all other natural beings

insofar as they have free will, and thus we must understand the world as a product of the whims of human agents rather than as the result of natural laws or causal processes. Sharp argues that this informs a compatibilist view in contemporary moral theory, which she believes is held by most contemporary philosophers (2). She offers her politics of renaturalization as a “supplemen[t] and challeng[e]” to these views (11).

Dualism has been identified by feminist scholars as being highly influential on the ways we understand and experience bodies in contemporary Western society and has been linked to (or blamed for) notably destructive consequences for women, people of colour, non-human animals, and nature, among others. Susan Bordo argues that Western mind-body dualism, culminating with Descartes’s philosophy, generates experiences of the body as alien, confinement or limitation, enemy, and “the locus of *all that threatens our attempts at control*” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 144-145 [original emphasis]). She links this to the prevalence of antagonistic relations between women and their bodies, from which patriarchy and capitalism profit, and to eating disorders in particular. Genevieve Lloyd argues that because Descartes posits reason as an activity of the mind alone, particular to the natural constitution of the mind (74), the body is understood as the “chief impediment” to the objectivity needed to access truth (Bordo, “Selections” 59). Entities closely associated with body—such as women, people of colour, non-human animals—are therefore unable to gain the objectivity needed to reason properly—a claim which has been used to justify oppressions and injustices of many kinds. Ladelle McWhorter also notes the pervasive influence of Cartesian dualism in contemporary discourses invoking the justified and expected control of body by mind, and points to contemporary institutions that use this logic to justify the utter domination of individuals who do not or cannot control their bodies as they “should” (139-140).

Thus Sharp, Spinoza, and other feminists share concerns about the pernicious effects of dualism on our lives.² Sharp's main concern is, following Spinoza, to erode the self-hatred that dualism may generate and "engender enabling self-love in humanity" (5). The question is: can writing, reading, and/or proselytizing non-dualist philosophies really ameliorate self-hatred and encourage love? Sharp seems to think that it can, and I believe that her book goes some ways toward accomplishing this. Sharp's presentation of Spinoza not only gives us a theoretically rich and decidedly non-dualist location from which to criticize dualist understandings of embodiment, but provides resources to undercut the personally and politically incapacitating frustration and guilt that even politically progressive critiques of embodiment can create. In other words, this book works to problematize thinking, acting, and feeling in ways that might be informed by dualist "implicit understandings" (cf. Shotwell). This is an important and under-recognized aspect of the fight against the harmful influence of dualisms.

First and foremost, by presenting Spinoza's monistic metaphysics, Sharp provides a coherent theoretical place from which to engage and critique dualism with a reduced risk of falling back on dualistic assumptions. Sharp does a capable job of explaining this metaphysics to those new to Spinoza, and I will try to parse some of it here. According to Spinoza, everything is Nature, or God, which is expressed in various attributes, which have different modes. Body and mind or matter and ideas are two among many modes of Nature. This means that there are no grounds to differentiate between body and mind in any substantial way. Further, both body and mind are situated within causal webs, as is all of Nature. Crucially, this means that ideas are causally determined: reason or mind or will are not free. Truth is a function of power or force; Sharp writes, "one affirms or negates an idea based on the force it exerts within one's mind and not based on a neutral observation of its veracity" (246). This means that failing to accept certain things as true or

to live out what one conceptually agrees with cannot be read as the failure of one's reason or will, but rather as the result of a confluence of certain forces.

Spinoza's doctrine of parallelism derives from his monism. According to this view, bodies only affect other bodies; ideas other ideas. There is no causal relation between the two modes. Denying any sort of causal relation between ideas and bodies importantly prevents us from seeing ourselves as our minds which succeed or fail to realize our wills or ideas on or through our bodies. One consequence of this view is that we can no longer make sense of body versus mind conflicts. Experiences of conflict must be understood as conflicts between ideas of varying power and "the subject's impotence to determine their causal history" (Sharp 45). Our bodies do not impede or limit our freedom; they are not the enemy of our will, or something to be overcome.

As I mentioned, feminists like Lloyd are concerned with the ways that dualism presents bodies as getting in the way of the proper use of reason. This entails that one must try to minimize the impact of one's bodily needs and the impact of other bodies on oneself in order to be rational and fully human. On the Spinozan view, the urge to minimize the impact of bodies on one's mind so that one may reason freely is nonsensical. Bodies and minds are not causally related, and reason is in no way free. Further, Spinoza's account of affect entails that vulnerability or the capacity to be affected—that is, for bodies to affect bodies and ideas ideas—is an essential feature of being (Sharp 41). Our capacity to think and to act is actually enhanced by our capacity to be affected. The aim is thus not to steel oneself against other bodies or ideas, but to be attentive to and cultivate those relationships that affect us in positive, enabling ways; to "expand and diversify" our relations, "in order to become more powerful thinkers and actors" (Sharp 33).

These are fascinating, though difficult, ideas, and Sharp is insistent that following through with this Spinozan logic will help us make better practical strategies for change. She writes, "only

when we consider ourselves to be constituted by our constellations of relationships and community of affects can we hope to transform the forces that shape our actions and characters” (8). One of the questions raised in my reading group was whether or not Sharp’s framework would engender personal or political strategies different from those produced by more traditional feminist models. It seems that this model will likely support many traditional forms of resistant action: Sharp mentions working against oppressive and harmful beauty norms by cultivating counter-images of beauty as one example (80). Crucially, however, Sharp’s attention to affect reproblematises these acts of resistance in at least one way: it undermines the self-hatred that can result from the challenges and frustrations of taking up feminist practices.

Many critics of dualism implicitly presuppose a so-called Cartesian view of the self; they aim to provide new knowledge with which we might better judge our dualist commitments, more rationally decide whether or not we should continue to hold beliefs, values, or even identities informed by dualisms (Alcoff 53-54). By so doing, these critiques can contribute to the self-hatred that Spinoza and Sharp renounce. Ostensibly progressive discourses about embodiment certainly play on one’s Cartesian sensibilities—Love your body! Accept yourself! After all, you were born this way!—as if we could simply will ourselves to do so now that we know our bodies are “socially constructed” or recognize that despising ourselves helps capitalism and patriarchy thrive. As Elspeth Probyn and Michelle Meagher point out, the conflict between progressive discourses about embodiment and persistent feelings of disgust can generate feelings of guilt and frustration, perhaps especially in socially conscious people who may feel like imposters or failures for claiming to reject patriarchal body standards while nonetheless finding themselves judging bodies against them. As Sharp so helpfully emphasizes, it is a dualist view of the self—the view that humans have free will and radical agency in opposition to the rest of nature—that generates

self-hatred, guilt, and frustration in the face of such conflict. These feelings individualize and isolate us, discouraging effective political action and engagement, and thus, as Sharp's makes clear, this affect must be taken seriously by those working for change.

Spinoza recognized the affective consequences of dualism and by bringing attention to this invaluable insight, Sharp does something that sets her work apart from other feminist critiques. By presenting Spinoza's positive monistic account, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* not only offers a comprehensive theoretical framework from which to critique dualist theory and practice without reiterating problematic dualisms, but problematizes the guilt and frustration or self-hatred which results from dualism and from well-meaning critiques that may trade on aspects of dualism and preclude effective political action. *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* gives us resources to distance ourselves from feelings of guilt and failure if we continue to find ourselves thinking, acting, or feeling along dualist lines. We will not be weak-willed or irrational if encounters with fashion magazines or diet talk make us feel badly about ourselves; rather, it is a matter of being in a causal web where these ideas have great affective power. Knowing this, we would be best off to avoid them, and to reduce their prevalence in society in general. If we "fail" to embody our critical feminist values—by body snarking others or becoming preoccupied with the size of our thighs—we do not need more willpower or self-control, but more power in general, more enabling relationships that encourage feminist ideas to grow, and sexist ones to die. This is a helpful reinterpretation of traditional feminist projects, and one that has the potential for real, personal consequences in everyday feminist struggles.

In my opinion, one of the more powerful effects of feminist critique is the transformation of what was experienced as a personal weakness or failure into a broader problem linked to sexist, patriarchal, or hegemonic forms of power and ways of understanding. Insofar as Sharp's book goes

some ways toward this, it is an excellent resource for those interested in undermining the influence of dualism on their own thought and action, especially in the form of guilt or frustration arising from our supposed “failures” to properly embody progressive, considered, philosophically sophisticated beliefs. This being said, given the continuing presence of dualism in our lives despite a multitude of critiques, the elaboration of a non- or anti-dualist framework is unlikely to have the power that we need to counter its pernicious effects. I am reluctantly skeptical of the effectiveness of philosophy on a broad scale, especially when it is a critical philosophy that challenges dominant views and practices. We are up against a great deal. I am curious about how far Sharp believes her book can go toward the political project she has set up. In any case, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* is an important contribution to the literature criticizing dualism, not to mention a pleasure to read, and has plenty of interest to those from any philosophical camp. To use the Spinozist terms I’ve learned from Sharp: feminists are likely to find reading *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* to be an enabling, joyful encounter of the impersonal kind.

Notes

¹ I believe that there is an important distinction to be made between the dualism Descartes actually presents and the dualisms that are attributed to him and which remain influential today. While acknowledging that Cartesian dualism’s influence in contemporary life takes “various forms,” Sharp uses “Cartesian dualism” or “dualism” without differentiation (5).

² Sharp self-identifies as feminist (79).

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