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

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Hasana Sharp's *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* is a major piece of scholarship on Spinoza. It undertakes to carefully and systematically make clear the Spinozist "technical view,"¹ the twittering machine of all his concepts (ontological, epistemic and political): substance (the universal power of Nature), cause, attribute, affect, freedom, adequate ideas, knowledge, modes (individuality and individuation), singularity, essence, Nature, power, conatus, virtue, common notions. Sharp's labours are painstaking. Not a single concept missing from the Spinoza thought-machine, and there isn't a single concept she handles perfunctorily. As a Spinoza scholar, I read this book with gratitude.

The book is not, however, merely an exhaustive exposition of a metaphysical landscape emanating from the early 17th century, from the mind of a Jewish-Dutch philosopher. Readers are alerted from the outset to the fact that they are getting an interpretation of Spinoza through, and motivated by, the frame of renaturalization; that is, the embedding of human thought and corporeality *in* relations of thought and corporeality of all other existent things: rocks, surfboards, and squirrels (Sharp 27).

Spinoza has certainly been a classical philosopher put to work in contemporary environmental philosophy, but often, as Sharp shows, without the application of the Spinozist system in its precision and completeness to the matters of rocks, surfboards and squirrels. Sharp

writes: “While a number of thinkers find ample resources in Spinoza for addressing current political concerns, their analyses often take the continuity of his concepts with our own for granted, neglecting the peculiarity of their meaning within his system” (15). Sharp’s scholarly care and comprehensiveness with Spinoza’s concepts supplies folks like me, interested in taking Spinozist thought into practical challenges like the environment, with a better understanding of the meaning and peculiarities of his concepts.

Sharp is also one of those folks, though. Fully in the spirit of a renaturalist embedding, Sharp tackles a range of political issues through the practical wisdom of renaturalization: how one might confront ideology, how and why a deliberative democracy *is* a better political form than others, how feminist concerns like plastic surgery, the beauty myth, and identity politics would shift under a renaturalized reconceptualization of oppression, truth and freedom, and finally, what new thoughts could be had for, or about, “the environment.”

In this work as a whole, these practical concerns seem to be in the service of demonstrating a higher claim: that Spinoza’s “naturalism provides the resources for a ‘philanthropic posthumanism,’ a collective project by which we can come to love ourselves and one another as parts of nature” (5). This claim strikes me as forming the heartwood of this text. I agree entirely with Sharp that, insofar as “Cartesian dualism (which) perseveres today in various forms” (5, 23), the best gains of modernism have been bought with a kind of deep *unfreedom*: the erosion of selves’ mental, emotional, material capacities to take on their lives, to love life as it is, and to love ourselves well, in the lives we make among ourselves as existents of thought and extension. There is resonance between this diagnosis and that of Nietzsche a few centuries later, on the corruption and perversion of the active forces of the *agon* through Christianity and modernity (which of course includes the Cartesian system), producing a turn in forces that

“results in a destructive battle against oneself that produces self-loathing and disgust.”
(Acampora 220)

And insofar as the Cartesian view of reality is the “primary target of Spinoza’s critique” (Sharp 5), then working with Spinozist thought *to put corrective lenses on Cartesian dualism* and install in its place a Spinozist theoretical horizon is not just a scholarly pursuit, but also the pursuit of an increase the capacity to *exist* Spinozistically. This labour is “ethical and political” work. *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* is, to my mind, an authentic ethical and political work in that it does not just lay out the premises and argue for *an ethics and politics* but undertakes to demonstrate the increase in freedom that is possible *through* that very activity. Sharp’s working definition of freedom is just that: “Freedom is a recomposition and reappropriation of what is given by the shared reality of historical, social and natural life” (77).

What, exactly, are the specifications of such *corrective lenses*? A Spinozist ontology claims that: a) the body is not an instrument and the site of the execution of our wills; b) the passions “cannot be overcome” (Sharp 32) by the powers of reason; c) truth is not a matter of veracity or correspondence but of the expression of the virtue, or power, of ideas; d) the self is neither the start of action, nor the human the centre of cosmos; e) reason is the power of a particular mind to generate ideas from its idiosyncratic, singular nature, the ideational expression of a mind’s virtue, rather than housing a set of stable, objective, eternal ideas.

If dualism is a part of the impoverishment of joyful thinking and can be damaging to our ability to preserve in our being “in terms that better accord with our singular strivings” (Sharp 80) at the individual level and at the cultural level, then introducing a major challenger to that system of thought—the premises listed above—soon and widely, seems like critical work. But what constitutes an effective *pedagogical* project, here? One of the practical matters that Sharp’s

analysis prompted me to wonder was how deep intellectual change to received thoughts and ways of thinking takes place? I confess that, having studied metaphysics formally and carefully, and from the perspective of a thinking being and from the perspective of an extended being, I find it hard to take anything other than these premises *as true*. But I also know from considering the path of my particular embodied and intellectual history that this is a view of Reality that was very hard won against a veritable brickwall of Catholic, liberal, and Cartesian truths that I was immersed in from birth through to about age 30. As a Spinozist I ask this because I wonder about whether and how such ideas might be more widely introduced as *thinkable*. Does such a change happen on Spinozist terms: the acquisition of alternative truths and then the subsequent tenaciousness of the usurper ideas? Not everyone has the luxury of studying metaphysics and spending decades considering the relative truth of various systems. Not everyone has the skills, time, or money to read and consider a text like *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*. How might Spinozist ontology get wider uptake through our current habits and ways of existence besides such obvious strategies as the inclusion of Spinoza in a wider number of philosophy courses?

Sharp offers a template for a way to think about the growth, transfer, and death of ideas through the second chapter “Renaturalizing Ideology” (especially pages 72-84). In Spinoza’s terms: what is required for a true idea (in the sense of an idea that correctly explains a series of causes) actually to enjoy uptake, for it to live among us and in us as the ideational reality that it carries and expresses? Ideas thrive or fail to thrive just as bodies do. To illustrate this, Sharp uses the example of the protracted non-uptake of a speech given by the son at the sixtieth birthday celebration of a family patriarch in the Thomas Wintner film, *Festen*. The inability of the family to hear a certain truth illustrates the Spinozist claim that ideas, if they thrive at all, live in and

through ecosystems and thus, that a change in thinking from received ideas (habit, prejudice) is a matter of the “reorganization of the local environment” such that the other “compatible ideas” needed to sustain the new ones, are available and active. “The image of the ecosystem highlights the fact that ideas, like all natural things, desire to persevere in being and survive only in a favourable environment” (73). Whatever the particular environment, an effective pedagogical project for correcting Cartesian lenses with Spinozist ones would have to think through an ecological approach.

And yet, no.

There is a leg-hold trap in the book, and that very line of thinking springs it.

As a critical theorist, nothing permits me to bracket the standing challenge of ideological critique to which Sharp devotes her second chapter. This chapter raises a subterranean worry that it neither spies nor dispenses with. Ideological critique demands not that we undertake through whatever means to arrive at a true system of truths but that we never let pass, *uncritically*, nor rest on the comfortable laurels of any and all ideas. A nod to Foucault: especially the ideas that feel most natural, right, or unsurpassably solid, or the ones that serve me best, ought to be the target of my efforts at critique. (Sound of trap snapping): This includes Spinozism, and not just patriarchy, racism and tyrannical government.

In Spinozist terms: “true ideas do not ‘take hold of’ or exert themselves upon subjectivities any more forcefully than do absurdities” (72). That is because truth is more than just a matter of facts, or even a matter of the conviction one has about one’s ideas: it is a matter of the very *conatus* of ideas themselves, of local force and affect, and (to use a Deleuzian term) a diagrammatics among other ideas. Absurdities, dangerous plans, grotesque ideas, ugly metaphysical systems and beautiful notions, all have their natures, and in these natures, have

their capacities to affect and be affected. Ideological critique renaturalized cannot be simply a matter of “recognizing pernicious or damaging ideas” (74) and affects circulating in one’s environment. Relying on the same ecological analogy, it is not easy to determine that there are, pernicious and damaging parts (bodies or ideas) in circulation, let alone which ones are responsible for which sad affects. Sharp goes on to say that “emerging, fragile and challenging ideas... will not immediately find fertile soil” and that cultivating and sustaining these requires “an ongoing practice of sustenance and attention to new insights, promising ideas, and counterhypotheses, seeking amenable ambient forces that might allow them to take root and become adequate for increasingly many thinking powers” (74). Does she mean to be telling us here that this is the fate of new and strange ideas, and the right way to proceed when faced with them: Spinozism against the backdrop of Catholicism-liberalism-Cartesianism, but also the *Festen* gagged-truth that the Dad raped the now-suicided sister, but also ideas like the ones Norwegian killer Anders Breivik held about immigrants wrecking the quality of life in the North countries? The sense of being an antagonized outsider in the world of Philosophy, and my plea for a stewardship and nurturing of Spinozism is a sentiment shared by right-wing nuts. And my confession above (that I find it very hard to have any other thought *after Spinoza thoughts*) actually adds to my anxiety here, rather than allays it.

A question that springs forth, then, is whether or not there are resources in a Spinozist system itself for being able to differentiate, ontologically and politically, these kinds of “fragile ideas.” Or, whether to do that kind of heavy normative lifting we need with some other kind of framing than an ecological one? I ask this of Sharp from a position of investment in, and shared sympathy for, the extreme difficulty here.

Notes

¹ There is little on the “geometric method.”

Works Cited

Acampora, Ralph and Christa Davis. “Nietzsche’s Agonal Wisdom.” *International Studies in Philosophy* 35(3 (2003): 205-222.

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