

Feminism and Heterodoxy: Moira Gatens's Spinoza

HASANA SHARP

According to the influential narrative of Jonathan Israel, Spinoza introduced “the most decisive shift in the history of ideas in modern times.” Spinoza’s substance monism, on his sometimes sensational account, effectively demolished the bases of traditional authority, undermining every possible justification for human hierarchy.¹ Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* was excoriated as that “most pestilential book” by virtue of its unprecedented threat to clerical authority and the social divisions upheld by it.² Spinoza, on this narrative, exposed the various props and stays of abusive power that mar human history. Liberated from the illusory ideologies and cosmologies that preserve the power of the few against the many, Spinoza provides the theoretical basis as well as political arguments for the most uncompromising affirmation of Enlightenment values: “toleration, personal freedom, democracy, equality racial and sexual, freedom of expression, sexual emancipation, and the universal right to knowledge and ‘enlightenment.’”³

Israel’s is an unequivocal celebration of Spinoza as an iconoclast who broke decisively from the oppressive ideas of his day. Less emphatic versions of this narrative are common in Spinoza scholarship. Like Israel, Stephen Nadler delights in foregrounding the scandals Spinoza provoked. His *Theological-Political Treatise* was, indeed, denounced as “a book forged in hell . . . by the devil himself.”⁴ Nadler’s story does not so much emphasize Spinoza’s radical egalitarianism as his anticipation of secular morality. Others, like Yirmiyahu Yovel and Steven B. Smith, interpret Spinoza as the first “secular Jew,” anticipating the common-sense liberalism of today, which judiciously separates personal morality from public duties. What these narratives have in common is that Spinoza’s heresy and radicalism with respect to his own time is to be admired especially insofar as it supports the values that we (or at least authors such as these) share today. Spinoza was cast out and cursed by his own community, determined to stand against the widely held

views of his own time, but such heroism yielded the Enlightenment secularism that many of his adherents defend. The heterodoxy of yesterday has made possible the orthodoxy among right-thinking people today.

Several commentators have expressed their scepticism regarding the lionization of Spinoza as herald of the radical Enlightenment.⁵ Yitzhak Melamed doubts that Spinoza deserves to be credited even with moderate Enlightenment commitments. In particular, Melamed denies what Israel takes to be Spinoza's greatest achievement: the establishment of philosophical support for human equality. According to Melamed, "for the most part, [Spinoza] despises and fears the masses."⁶ Perhaps most damning for Spinoza's egalitarian credentials, Melamed suggests, is his maintenance of the natural inferiority of women, alongside his persistent contempt for what is "womanish."⁷ If Spinoza is regarded by some as an awkward figure in the history of Enlightenment ideas, his explicit denial of equality between men and women makes Spinozist feminism appear to be a paradox, if not an oxymoron. How could a philosopher who insists on the exclusion of women from citizenship and state office by virtue of their insuperable weakness be an inspiration for feminism?

The puzzles over Spinoza's egalitarian credentials pose a problem particularly if one understands feminism primarily or exclusively as a demand for equality with men. When feminism is seen as a subcategory of Enlightenment commitments, one may choose to see Spinoza's misogyny as superficial and as a betrayal of the radical potential of the egalitarianism yielded by his metaphysics. But if feminism is not understood exclusively as one strand of late modern orthodoxy, we might better understand the surprising companionship of Spinoza and feminism. Indeed, Moira Gatens finds the heterodoxy of Spinoza's thinking with respect to the ruling ideas today to be what is most valuable for feminism.⁸ Feminist Spinozism does not add to the chorus of praise for egalitarianism, secular politics, or the authority of reason in contrast to power. The Spinozist feminism pioneered by Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd finds resources precisely in Spinoza's challenges to late modern common sense, including perhaps especially an ethics and politics grounded in the givenness of human equality.

In what follows, I will proceed to outline two features of Spinoza's late modern heterodoxy that Gatens develops in the service of feminism throughout her corpus. In contrast to many of Spinoza's readers today, Gatens embraces and develops his affirmation of difference rather than equality. Equality is typically grounded in some morally relevant property that gives each of us the same value, but, for Spinoza, we are not beings divided by our morally relevant as opposed to our morally irrelevant properties. We are not equal by virtue of being equally capable of exercising moral agency. This results in another heterodoxy: Spinoza appears to deny the moral responsibility of individuals. Rather than criticizing Spinoza on this point, as his contemporaries as well as our own have done, Gatens find his

ontological framework promising for making possible an alternative consideration of responsibility. From Spinoza, then, Gatens draws a heterodox feminism that foregrounds difference rather than equality and moves away from individual liability in the consideration of gender-based violence. In so doing, her work yields not only an alternative framework for thinking about perennial feminist concerns but also another Spinoza. Hers is a Spinoza against the grain of our own common sense, and thus a fecund resource for various kinds of heterodoxy today.

1. SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

As Gatens shows in *Feminism and Philosophy*, several strands of feminism from Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Taylor to Beauvoir and Firestone depend upon a dualist foundation. Heretical in his day but orthodox in our own, Descartes establishes the metaphysical basis of a moral understanding of the person, according to which each of us is equally endowed with the power of reason and the free will to direct our judgments. The dualist model has attracted feminists since the seventeenth century, since it supports the intellectual and moral equality of all human beings. It means that whatever our differences may be with respect to physical strength or sexual reproduction, we are identical insofar as we have minds that transcend the mechanical operations of nature. The morally relevant feature of humanity is the same in all. And the metaphysical source of our equality is inalienable and universal. The task for egalitarians and feminists is to universalize how we treat and educate human beings, enabling each to exercise the given freedom that defines each of us as the kinds of beings we are. The Enlightenment vision entails social reformation in recognition of our moral sameness, establishing the conditions for each to cultivate the wisdom and self-moderation worthy of dignified beings. Or, from the Promethean perspective of someone like Firestone, the aim is to emancipate everyone, especially women, from the oppressive constraints of nature, making radical self-determination possible for the first time.

Whatever its problems may be, there is something deeply attractive about this model. If our equality is natural and inalienable, we ought to be able to reorder the social world in a way that respects what we collectively judge to be true and right. We ought to be able to let reason rule rather than the arbitrary domination of some humans over many others. But social and historical realities, it turns out, are not especially malleable. Just because something is a product of human history, it is not necessarily susceptible to the manipulations of human decisions. It is not so easy, for example, to view even ourselves as intrinsically valuable when thousands of years of human history code femininity as inferior to masculinity. And as Gatens, sometimes in collaboration with Genevieve Lloyd, shows throughout her work, the model to which women and other marginalized people must conform in order to be recognized as equal excludes them in advance: the

model is implicitly masculine, rational, and disembodied. She finds in Spinoza an alternative framework, able to support a feminism as something other than a demand for equality.

It is true that Spinoza denies the equality of women with men, but more generally he does not identify any property that is identical and equal in human beings. He does assert that certain “common notions” are the same in all minds and serve as the “foundations of our reasoning.”⁹ Our shared relationship to the foundations of reason, however, do not ground a special kind of agency that makes us uniquely free or morally responsible. Indeed, some common notions are predicable of any natural thing whatsoever. What the common notions guarantee is nothing but our equal determination by the eternal and necessary laws of nature. This is a source of commonality but it is not something that distinguishes us from the rest of nature, and is not a basis upon which we can be called responsible or free. While we are universally subject to the common laws of nature, each of us has an absolutely singular history of determinations, making us both, concomitantly, related to every other and unique.

Gatens emphasizes how we are necessarily related and dependent and so thus think, act, and desire with others. At the same time, each individual is irreducible and unique: her desire and imagination cannot be assimilated to that of anyone else. In Gatens’s articulation of a feminist theory of the body drawn from Spinoza, she explains that each and every body is a unique expression of natural power, radically open to the world, physically and psychically involved with many others. Because minds are nothing but ideas of their bodies, they are also plastic and variable, reflecting the quality and complexity of their affective environments.¹⁰ While we each have a unique affective complexion, we also must be understood as producer and product of a collective power. Each of us is enabled and constrained in variable and complex ways by those forces around us.

The politics of difference that emerges from the Spinozist feminism of Gatens is emphatically nonbinary and anti-individualistic. There is no foundational difference, such as sexual difference. In addition, while each of us is singular, none of us is thinkable on her own.¹¹ Gatens points to the multiplicity of differences between bodies and groups, which emerge through historical processes, in response to specific relationships and institutions. Each of us is conditioned by the forms of sociability in which we live, which will themselves undergo constant transformation. Rather than foregrounding our duty to respect one another as equals, this model foregrounds differences in power, targeting them for analysis, critique, and challenge. In the words of Gatens:

The kind of political practice envisaged here could not be decided *a priori* but recognized in the unfolding of shared (or conflicting) aims and objectives of groups of bodies. To seek to create a politico-ethical organization where all, in their own manner, seek to maximize the possibilities of their activity must

take into account different beings and their desires. . . . It is an unavoidable (and welcome) consequence of constructing an embodied ethics that ethics would no longer pretend to be universal.¹²

Importantly, the differences that come to be appreciated, interrogated, and transformed on Gatens's account are not anarchic. There are very discernible patterns. Although sexual difference is not binary on this model, neither are variations so infinitesimal that we cannot clearly discern, for example, that women are often the victims of violence and rarely the perpetrators. Likewise, we can see that different statuses of victims entail that some violent acts are seen as inevitable and others as eruptions of moral monstrosity. The differences at stake, on the Spinozist model, are differences in ability to persevere in being and enhance one's life. They are differences in power to survive and to secure the conditions of one's own physical, psychological, and intellectual vitality. The ethics and politics of difference, on Gatens's model, call attention to the causal forces marking, empowering, or depleting some bodies. And this kind of difference, to borrow out of context the phrase of Lloyd, "reaches into" those minds. The minds, modes of imagining, feeling, and desiring, and the power to persevere in being will reflect the larger context. We cannot resist or transcend our history of determination by an act of will. There is not some reservoir of freedom safeguarded from determination by the larger network of powers. Each of us has a desire to persevere and enhance our lives, but that desire is guided by ideas formed in and by a world of radically unequal powers. That vital inequality is not superficial but constitutive. As a result, certain differences of power that have been organized along axes of, for example, sex or race matter a great deal and we cannot easily displace them.

But these differences will have no determinate content given by biology, the symbolic, or anything else. Because bodies and minds are intrinsically open and variable, differences in capacity to survive and thrive can be re-determined. But since the existence and action of each, according to Spinoza, is radically dependent on our causal milieu,¹³ differences in power organized by, for example, sex, race, or ability cannot be altered in isolation. The necessarily collective practice of transformation is fraught with difficulty. As Gatens illustrates in her series of Spinoza lectures, the road to freedom is difficult and elusive.¹⁴ If Gatens's difference feminism does not foreground an ideal of equality through the social and political recognition of sameness, it does embrace the aspiration of freedom. I don't know if this is how Gatens sees her own work, but it strikes me that she often turns to the project of rethinking responsibility in light of the fact that freedom, for Spinoza and for her, is neither a property nor a project of an individual. Thus, it is to Spinoza's other late modern heresy that I now turn.

2. RESPONSIBILITY

Descartes anticipates the framework through which responsibility is often understood by philosophers today. In *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes represents “generosity” as the highest virtue. What generosity involves is not liberality or altruism, but a habit of distinguishing in oneself and others what truly belongs to a person and what does not. Much in life is the product of fortune, such as wealth, physical appearance, or even a certain measure of intellectual acuity. We are able to feel generosity when we appreciate that what depends on us alone is our ability to exercise our free will. Thus we ought to praise or blame ourselves and others not for the goods we do or do not enjoy—such as fame, looks, health, or cunning—but the cultivated capacity to exercise one’s will in accordance with deliberate and informed judgments.¹⁵ The Cartesian virtue of generosity anticipates respect as that form of regard that we owe to free agents. It is a form of respect to understand ourselves and others as capable of self-determination, which is what makes each of us both educable and punishable. We can learn and we can be held responsible because we are moral agents, equipped with inalienable and free will along with a perfectible power of judgment.¹⁶

Spinoza’s contemporaries no less than ours worried about the implications for morality of his emphasis on the limitations of finite modes: our lack of free will, our universal subjection to passions, and the inability of reason to contradict the power of affects. Spinoza, as far as I can tell, does not evince much concern over the problem of how to assign praise or blame or the question of moral agency.¹⁷ His neglect of any detailed discussion of crime or punishment is notable given his lengthy discussions of law as well as his preoccupation with the reality of violence.

Gatens astutely points out, however, that Spinoza articulates a kind of collective, or political responsibility for crime and violence:

[I]t is certain that rebellions, wars, and contempt for or violation of the laws are to be attributed not so much to the wickedness of subjects as to the faulty organization of the State. . . . [M]en’s passions are everywhere the same; so if wickedness is more prevalent and wrongdoing more frequent in one commonwealth than in another, one can be sure that this is because one has not done enough to promote harmony and has not framed its laws with sufficient forethought.¹⁸

Here Spinoza acknowledges a kind of equality, or sameness: “men’s passions are everywhere the same.” In several other places, he ridicules the idea—certainly common in his day—that “nature produce[s] different kinds of men.”¹⁹ There are no fixed, *a priori* differences. Our universal subjection to passions entails our unavoidable constitution by the larger body of laws, institutions, and forms of sociability responsible for our lives. These larger causal structures yield patterns of virtue and vice, power and weakness, vitality and suffering, support and harm.

In *Collective Imaginings*, Gatens and Lloyd advocate Spinoza's philosophy as a resource for re-imagining responsibility as the critical appropriation of our causal histories. They call for such a project in light of their own situation as members of the settler class in Australia. By virtue of having inherited the benefits of the settler colonialism, they urge others to assume collective responsibility not for specific deeds but for what they are. Inspired partly by Arendt, they identify the inheritance of the fruits of institutional violence as a distinctively political form of responsibility.²⁰ Rather than a personal debt that must be paid, this form of responsibility points toward the need for a different future. They suggest that Spinoza's understanding of human life as being necessarily and profoundly shaped by their histories and social structures yields responsibility that does not depend on blame or guilt. The assumption of responsibility by members of a collective does not require them to be causally connected to any particular acts of harm. If one's very existence is predicated on settler violence, one is responsible even if one's will plays no part. If someone wants to be something other than a beneficiary of settler violence, then that person needs to join forces with others to transform the whole context. Similar to the late work of Iris Marion Young, they interpret responsibility in a collective, distributed, and historical sense to encourage a future-oriented project more than a backward-looking accounting.²¹

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the late modern heresies that Gatens finds in Spinoza are more useful now than ever. In light of what is being called "the sixth extinction" and climate catastrophe, ethics and politics must operate increasingly on a terrain of radical differences. Different peoples, classes, and species are affected in radically different ways by the disruption of atmospheric and ecosystems. Grounding our duties, commitments, and projects in sameness—especially those properties that have historically guaranteed rights—is increasingly limited. Likewise, it is a time when becoming responsible for what we are in view of the need for a radically different future is especially pressing. While we can never be done accounting for past wrongs, the heterodox feminism of Moira Gatens encourages us to focus on what we can do. How can we engender shared power? How can we promote new forms of sociability? It also shows how difficult the project of social transformation is. We do not only need to *inform* ourselves and others in order to live a less destructive way of life. We do not need *an addition* to how we think, feel, and act, but a total re-ordering—and thus a liberation—of our existence.

NOTES

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1. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*.
2. Israel, "The early Dutch and German Reaction."
3. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 11.
4. Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*.
5. See, for example, Boehm's assessment in his review of Michael Mack, *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity*.
6. Melamed, "Charitable Interpretations and the Political Domestication of Spinoza," 270.
7. *Ibid.*, 269.
8. Perhaps ironically, this is precisely the approach to the history of philosophy that Melamed defends. While I share his suspicion toward a certain hagiographic narrative of Spinoza, study of feminist Spinozism could provide a different way to think about the question of sexual difference. *Ibid.*, 264.
9. See Spinoza, part II of *Ethics* (hereafter *E*), propositions (hereafter p) 38-39. Citations from Spinoza's *Ethics* will follow the standard convention: part will be represented by Roman numerals I-V; proposition by "p," followed by Arabic numerals; "d" for demonstration; "s" for scholium; etc. Citations of Spinoza's *Ethics* will be from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1.
10. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 111.
11. James, Lloyd, and Gatens. "The Power of Spinoza: Feminist Conjunctions."
12. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 56.
13. Spinoza, *E* 1p28.
14. Gatens, *Spinoza's Hard Path to Freedom*.
15. Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, articles 152-56.
16. For more on Descartes and generosity, see Shapiro, "Cartesian Generosity."
17. For a contrasting view, see Goldenbaum, "Spinoza's Evolutionary Foundation of Moral Values and their Objectivity."
18. Citations of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (hereafter *TTP*) and *Political Treatise* (hereafter *TP*) will indicate the chapter and paragraph numbers (for example, 5/3). Citations will be from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2. Spinoza, *TP*, 5/2.
19. Spinoza, *TTP*, 3/12.
20. Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*.
21. See Young, *Responsibility for Justice*.

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