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## 39

# Spinoza and Feminism

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Spinoza was generally silent on the topic of women. When he was not silent, feminists wish he had been. Nevertheless, despite Spinoza's sometimes noxious remarks on women, several feminist theorists have found resources and inspiration in his philosophy. What accounts for this unlikely companionship between Spinoza and (twentieth- and twenty-first-century) feminism? Why, despite Spinoza's anti-feminist position on the question of women's civic participation, for example, do several feminists find it useful and even empowering to think with him? The aim of this chapter is to propose an answer to these questions.

First, a few words about Spinoza's remarks on women. Throughout his *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*, Spinoza generally uses the generic term '*homo*,' which means human and can refer to woman (*femina* or *mulier*) or man (*vir*). Translators have generally rendered *homo* as 'man' rather than humanity, acknowledging the likely semantic context for which '*homo*' – and especially '*homo liber*' – refers to a (European, propertied) male person. When Spinoza refers to women in the *Ethics* (usually indirectly), his remarks are not exclusively negative. As several feminist commentators have noted, in his retelling of the story of creation, and in contrast to most of his

fellow non-feminist contemporaries, he treats Eve as the perfect equal to Adam (E4p68s) (Gatens 1996; Gullan-Wuhr 2008; Lloyd 1994; Lord 2011; Sharp 2012). Likewise, Spinoza maintains that marriage can agree perfectly with the life of reason and such a partnership can be an expression of freedom for both husband and wife (E4appXX). Heterosexual romantic partnership, according to Spinoza, can be egalitarian, proper to a virtuous life, empowering and liberating. Elsewhere in the *Ethics*, however, he refers to compassion toward non-human animals as ‘womanly’ (*mulieri*), invoking a commonplace but demeaning association of women with weakness and passion rather than strength and reason (E4p37s). He also invokes femininized stereotypes, such as the ‘gossip’ (*garrula*) (E3p2s) and the faithless mistress who “prostitutes herself to another” (E3p35s), which reinforces a disassociation of women from the idea of human virtue. In the *Ethics*, then, one could say that women are theoretically equal to men, but Spinoza’s exemplars of freedom and virtue appear male and some of his remarks reflect cultural stereotypes unfavorable to women.

In the *Political Treatise*, his views on women appear less ambivalent. He counsels, without offering an explanation, that daughters of kings should never be permitted to assume the throne (*TP*, 6.37). In several countries in seventeenth-century Europe women had inherited the throne, such as Christina of Sweden and Elizabeth I of England, and thus Spinoza’s view implicitly criticizes a (controversial) practice of his time that recognized the ability of women to rule. In the case of democracies as well, Spinoza insists that women, like servants or criminals, should not be able to share power with men, and should be excluded from civic participation in government (*TP*, 11.3–4). Although some feminists have understood his argument to maintain that social conditioning of women or the shared imaginary horizon of the seventeenth-century explains Spinoza’s exclusion of women from democratic participation, Spinoza’s reasoning is both more conservative and more unequivocal than these explanations suggest (Lloyd 1994; Lord 2011). He is less willing to entertain the political capabilities of women than several of his contemporaries, including Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes to whose work his philosophy expressly responds. Likewise, his reasoning in the *Political Treatise*, however at odds with his own principles, maintains women’s enduring inferiority and thus their perpetual inappropriateness for democratic rule (Gullan-Wuhr 2008; Sharp 2012).

Nevertheless, we need not excuse or explain away Spinoza’s views on women in order to find materials in his philosophy for feminism today. Even if Spinoza the man did not appear to regard women as equal companions in the co-constitution of freedom, his portrait of human existence is replete with conceptual resources for feminism. Thus, while this chapter is in no way an *apologia* for Spinoza’s views on women, it shows how feminist thinkers have made something of his philosophy that he could neither have anticipated nor (most likely) endorsed. The promising features feminist theorists have thus far identified in Spinoza’s philosophy can be placed into three major categories: (1) anti-individualism; (2) the conatus doctrine; (3) anti-dualism. I will discuss each of them briefly and I have little doubt that there is still more to be revealed by feminist research.

## 1. Spinoza’s Anti-Individualism

It must be noted that feminist thought is quite diverse. Although there are many feminist theories and widely diverging feminist politics, it would nevertheless be fair to say that twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminisms share an emphasis upon “structures” of domination or

oppression. Feminist theory and practice in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, could be described as an effort to reframe the idiosyncratic experience of individuals in terms of the structural conditions that gave rise to that experience. At the level of practice, this involved a technique of “consciousness raising” (Rowbotham 1969). Women would come together in groups and describe their feelings and experiences in detail. In these groups, women found that perfect strangers had similar descriptions of their struggles: feelings of inferiority; discontent with a life of domesticity; regular exposure to sexual violence; and finding it impossible to satisfy the conflicting demands of femininity, demands which varied depending on factors such as class, ethnicity, religion, and race. As Catherine MacKinnon put it, “what may have begun as a working assumption becomes a working discovery: women are a group” (MacKinnon 1989, p. 86). Consciousness raising aims to reveal that what feel like personal defects can be explained by larger patterns and structures. What feels like an anomaly – “what’s wrong with me?” – is better understood as the product of a pattern, as the predictable outcome of a rigged system (Frye 1983, p. 34). The history of feminist theory and politics involves significant dispute over the generality of patterns that have been identified, and the extent to which they vary for women in different times and places, and with different relationships to other forms of social stratification. Likewise, feminists disagree about the appropriate political responses to patterns of domination based on sex and gender, in part because the response ought to vary depending on how they intersect with disadvantage based upon race, class, ability, sexuality, and so on (Crenshaw 1991; Nash 2008). Nevertheless, if one could identify a shared theoretical-methodological premise of feminism, it would reside in its grasp of individual gendered experience in terms of larger webs of meaning as well as institutional, cultural, and political structures.

Spinoza’s philosophy might be understood as a unique and comprehensive form of structural analysis. His view of reality is such that we are connected by a web of causal relationships governed by natural laws from which we cannot escape. What seems to be a property of my personal experience can only be explained by impersonal laws and my particular history of determinations. As will be familiar to many, Spinoza maintains that all of reality is expressed by a single substance, called God or Nature. Although beings appear to us as individual substances, they are in fact modes, or finite determinations, of one infinite substance. There is one infinite, extended power (or attribute) with infinitely many finite “expressions,” or modifications: octopus, book, blade of grass, baby, sensation of light, quickening of a heartbeat, pulse of electricity. A thought, like a body, may appear to be numerically individual, but it is, for Spinoza, a variable expression of a single natural power, whose ‘existence and action’ depends upon those of the infinitely many other thoughts to which it is invariably connected. In short, all ideas, like all bodies, are involved in a community of cause and effect (E1p28). Natural things (finite modes) cannot be explained in isolation. It may be obvious that the ‘existence and action’ of an organic body can only be explained by its relationship with other bodies. I breathe by virtue of the peculiar powers of my body but also due to my immersion in an elaborate carbon cycle affecting countless life forms in the biosphere. The powers of my body, of course, are partly owed to those of my biological parents, my many caregivers, and the social system of cooperation into which I was born. An exhaustive account of how a single human body persists would clearly be an interminable task. Ideas are likewise interdependent and rich with connections and determinations.

Even if it is impossible to know the complete order and connection of causes explaining any single phenomenon, the anti-isolationist perspective on reality entails, according to Spinoza, a kind

of liberation of our perception. Ceasing to explain things, especially human actions, by some sort of original spontaneity proper to individuals “contributes to social life, insofar as it teaches us to hate no one, to disesteem no one, to mock no one, to be angry at no one, to envy no one” (E2p49s). This shares something with the feminist argument that the grasp of individual experience as part of a causal pattern liberates the oppressed from self-hatred and self-punishment (theorists of other sorts of oppression, like colonialism, make similar claims). In addition to freeing up destructive energy, new explanations reveal new sites of intervention and new practices of transformative resistance.

According to Étienne Balibar, Spinoza’s “originality appears from the outset in the fact that for him ‘the mass’ is the principal object of investigation, reflection, and historical analysis” (Balibar 1989, p. 106). If minds and bodies exist and act within and by virtue of the “mass” of which they are a part, each of us knows and feels by virtue of, and not in spite of, that mass. Importantly, for Balibar, this is not holism, but a view of diverse masses with distinctive powers and laws (“complexions” or *ingenia*) (see also Moreau 1994, pp. 396–397). Spinoza’s neither individualist nor holist perspective (arguably) coheres with feminist insight and is not widely emphasized in the history of Western philosophy. One of the implications is that, if we want to fight domination, we cannot change ourselves independent of changing the character of the mass to which we belong. We need to act on what acts on us, in order to feel and live differently.

As Spinoza observes, “it is necessary to know both our nature’s power and its lack of power” in order to determine what we can do to become more powerful (E4p17s). This ‘nature’ of which he writes is not a universal, trans-historical human nature, or ‘nature’ conceived as an essence such as ‘man’ or ‘woman,’ but the nature of singular things such as you or me. This nature is embedded in a causal network, affected by infinitely many others singular natures, and affecting them in turn. But just as we do not exist except in a ‘mass,’ in a larger network of powers and counter-powers, there is no singular nature without some unique power of determination, some striving and freedom to be what one is. This singular striving that defines each and every being, which Spinoza calls the *conatus*, is another feature of Spinoza’s metaphysics that a number of feminists embrace.

## 2. The Conatus Doctrine

Many feminist thinkers aim not only to understand the external factors constitutive of domination, for example, how laws, systematic discrimination, and institutions prevent women from enjoying equality with men. Feminists are also keenly interested in how domination is interiorized, how it comes to form the first-person experience of individuals and/ or the psychology of groups. Thus, in addition to analyzing how power operates in the form of structural impediments or unevenly distributed advantages, feminists seek to examine how social and political forces constrain, animate, and direct the desires of agents. Feminists want to understand how gendered subjects desire with and against a patriarchal system. How do we desire in ways that reinforce or challenge dominant norms of gender, sexuality, ability, and race? Because of a widespread interest in what Judith Butler names “the psychic life of power” (Butler 1997), feminists draw upon thinkers attentive to the interplay between desire and social life.

Some feminist theorists declare that Spinoza is at the foundation of their own feminist theories owed to his conception of desire. Spinoza maintains that “the essence of anything whatsoever” is

its *conatus*, its striving to persevere in being (Ep6). In the case of humans, we apprehend an appetite, or desire, to live and to enhance our being to whatever extent we can (Ep9s). So, although each of us is ineluctably bound to others, part of a system of cause and effect that we can never hope to transcend, we are not reducible to the causes acting upon us. Each of us is also a cause, a 'certain and determinate' way in which nature exists and acts, which is not reducible to anything outside of us (E1p36). For Rosi Braidotti, this implies that each being is, at its base, a power of 'self-affirmation,' such that, as long as we live, we cannot be reduced to those powers that shape us, for better or for worse (Braidotti 2002, ch. 1). When considering people who have suffered profound domination, this metaphysical presupposition prompts the theorist to be suspicious of any analysis that would reduce them to the forces of their subjugation. Although any feminist account will be concerned with structures and institutions that produce domination, a desire-centered approach will seek to discern also how we animate, reinforce, and resist those structures. If an account of the servitude endured by a group or an individual apprehends only the seamless agency of the oppressors, it fails to appreciate how we are never mere effects of forces external to us.

Each of us is also, by natural necessity, an expression of some irreducible power of nature, however precarious or threatened by opposing forces. For Braidotti, feminists, with Spinoza, ought to presuppose a yearning to live a joyful and self-affirming life. We ought to seek out not only how we are complicit in our own oppression, or how we undermine our own flourishing through the internalization of oppressive norms. We ought also to interpret social and political life as a pursuit of self-affirmative powers and possibilities, animated by joy and desire. Spinoza, she suggests, supplies the metaphysical basis for a joyful militancy that always exceeds its oppressive determinations. She opposes this to a tendency in feminist critical theory toward a 'mournful' account of gender as the nearly inescapable and mortifying internalization of oppression.

Judith Butler also declares that the Spinozan *conatus* has always been 'at the core' of her work (Butler 2002, p. 31). Butler's well-known and highly influential feminist theory richly details how social norms regulate gender through excitation as well as censure. Her work illustrates how we are compelled to animate norms of gender and heterosexuality through our gestures, habits, and 'styles' of being (Butler 1993). In her analysis of how social regulation can be quite coercive and oppressive, she nevertheless presupposes some internal attraction to those norms. She insists that self-conscious, social beings such as ourselves, by desiring to live, cannot but desire to become socially intelligible and esteemed (Butler 2002, ch. 6). Thus, from the Spinozan desire to persevere in being necessarily follows, for Butler, a kind of Hegelian desire for recognition, a desire to be nourished and validated by the social body of which one is a part. In desiring life, which requires the care and cooperation of other living beings like us, she argues that we cannot escape negotiation with the demands to conform to the terms of membership proper to the social order in which we find ourselves. Some may not experience the idiom of gender recognition imposed upon us to be especially constraining, but perhaps most people struggle more or less with the rules specific to their race, ethnicity, class, religion, and social group, exhorting each of us to be this or that kind of man or woman. Much of childhood consists in learning and negotiating the rules about how we are supposed to appear, comport ourselves, and whom we are supposed to desire. For some, these demands are felt as unbearable, and the cost of conformity is so great that they abandon their natal ties and seek alternative forms of kinship or community. When none of the available options are tolerable, some would rather die than persist in a world so hostile to their desired modes of living and loving.

According to Butler and the Hegelian tradition upon which she draws, the desire for recognition is something that every social order presupposes, acts upon, and seeks to satisfy. Yet, the forms of recognition available liberate and satisfy some while inevitably excluding others. Butler interprets Spinoza's *conatus* as a prefiguration of the desire for recognition, and thus places him in a tradition of post-Hegelian critical theory that has been important for many feminist theorists. In his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza remarks that "all those things I have demonstrated follow from the most essential feature of human nature in whatever way it may be considered, namely, from the universal striving of all men to preserve themselves" (TP 3.18). Spinoza can be understood to deduce his political principles from a consideration of what necessarily follows from a universal striving for self-preservation. This striving is interpreted by Braidotti as self-affirmation and by Butler as a desire for recognition. For Butler (whose theory is at least as well supported by Hobbes), beings that are born fragile and dependent, but can only be preserved if others esteem them as worthy of life.

Traditional history of political philosophy emphasizes how, for Spinoza (and Hobbes), the state must be careful to appear to contribute to the protection of life, limb, and estate. For feminist theorists drawing on Spinoza, such as Butler, the universal striving for self-preservation serves also as a kind of natural pressure upon the State to satisfy the psychic needs of its constituents to belong, to be recognized as worthy of esteem, and thereby to find life livable. One might understand some remarks of Spinoza's in a similar vein. For example, his analysis in the *Political Treatise* suggests that the better a state can satisfy the desires of each not only to live but to enjoy their characteristically human powers and pleasures, the more stable and powerful that state is (TP 5.4). For his feminist readers, *conatus*-driven politics are inevitably characterized by a struggle among subjects over the terms of social belonging and the modes of self-affirmation that a particular social order makes available.

Several feminist thinkers are drawn to Spinoza's assertion that "desire is the essence of man," since he examines social and political relationships without presupposing the motive of reason (e.g. Gatens and Lloyd 1999, and Sharp 2011). Spinoza repeats throughout his political writings that he aims to provide an account that is valid regardless of the rational content of anyone's motives, rulers or ruled. To be useful, he maintains any political theory ought to assume that we are moved by passion most of the time. Spinoza's is not, first and foremost, a theory of the principles according to which a government would be just, but an analysis of the composition of passions and actions that makes it more or less stable, more or less powerful. Such an analysis is only possible when one apprehends both the structural forms of determination and the striving proper to individuals and groups to live in a way that allows them to express their powers and enjoy their lives. In short, Spinoza's is a political theory that reckons with subjection to external causes as proper to the human condition, but without losing sight of the desires that destabilize and transform our common conditions constantly. For some feminist political theorists thinking in the wake of Spinoza, he reminds us that, just as we are constrained by the political body of which we are necessarily but parts, the desires of subjects enable and constrain that body. Therefore, the *conatus* points to an irrepressible striving for freedom at the heart of each of us.

### 3. Anti-dualism

The feature of Spinoza's philosophy that has unquestioningly received the most attention from feminists is his rejection of dualism. Whereas Cartesianism has long been seen as objectionable (justifiably or not) by those feminists who seek to valorize the body as a site of knowledge and activity, Spinozism allows feminists to conceptualize bodies as inseparable from minds (Lloyd 1994), to recognize the passionate dimensions of reasoning (James 2012), and to understand culture not as an imposition upon inert nature but as something that nature does (Gatens 1996). The dualistic thinking that subordinates body to mind, passion to reason, and nature to culture, while coding one side of the duality as feminine and passive and the other as masculine and active is alien to Spinoza's monism. Against a dualistic cosmology that contrasts matter to spirit, is to ought, and immanence to transcendence, Spinoza offers an alternative metaphysical framework.

Spinoza maintains that the mind is the idea of its body (E2p13). The mind and body are one and the same thing, one certain and determinate way in which nature exists, but conceivable alternately as a mode of thought or as a mode of extension (Jaquet 2013). Without going into the details of his complex theory of mind and body, we can observe at least two consequences of this view that are important to feminist thinkers. First, in contrast to Descartes, the mind and body are active, and thus free, in precisely the same measure. Freedom is not the rule of the mind over its body. As Genevieve Lloyd maintains, in a symbolic order that associates femininity with corporeality and masculinity with thought, the model of freedom as the subordination of the body to the mind reinforces a view of women as incapable of self-determination (Lloyd 1984). Women are seen as creatures of passion whose bodily necessity somehow defines them to a greater extent than it does men. Even if a number of women thinkers in the seventeenth-century embraced Cartesian dualism insofar as it implies the autonomy of the mind from the body (Harth 1992), three hundred years later many feminists reject views that locate freedom in the mind and servitude in the body.

Second, in contrast to dualism, according to which the laws of cause and effect govern the realm of matter but not the realm of thought, an individual's mind and body are equally (and identically) constituted by its relationships. The mind no less than the body must be understood as 'relational,' as something we only come to know in and through our encounters with others. Although the Spinozistic mind is never free of external determination, it is also never alone. As Gatens remarks, "there is no possibility for solipsism" in Spinoza (Lloyd and Gatens, 2000, p. 47). If we are free, we are free together: we are free by virtue of the ability of our mind-bodies to combine and thereby produce enabling effects. If we are servile, it is not because of defects unique to each of us, but due to a disabling constellation of relationships within which we live, feel, act, and think. As Gatens emphasizes in her use of Spinoza to develop what she calls "a feminist theory of the body," the power of the mind-body is never given in advance. Because it is highly variable and responsive to its context, it is not self-identical over time. The body is "productive and creative," limited by others but also connected to them (Gatens 1996, p. 57).

Those feminists who have brought the most attention to Spinoza work in the tradition of "sexual difference" feminism. This tradition of feminism does not argue for women's mental or moral equality with men. Egalitarian feminism draws on the liberal feminist tradition, according to which there are no morally relevant differences between men and women. We are equal with respect to our humanity, which is typically grounded in a universal capacity to reason or exercise moral agency. One easily recognizes the Cartesian and Kantian resonance of this kind of argument, which has (understandably) had its feminist advocates throughout history. The tradition of sexual

difference feminism, however, does not argue from either the fact or the desirability of human sameness. They argue for a feminist theory that appreciates and reveals rather than subtracts differences. It sees more potential in an ethics and politics that highlights, explores, interrogates, and cultivates differences. Thus, rather than basing our ethics on some universally shared property in virtue of which each is owed equal respect, the ethics of sexual difference seeks an openness and responsiveness to how we are irreducible to one another. It is an ethics and politics that rejects the notion that we are fungible as ethical and political agents (see also Stone 2016). Instead, the only adequate ethics and politics is one that resists the assimilation of each individual to a single, hegemonic identity or value, such as personhood.

Sexual difference feminism is often misunderstood to assert an essential difference between women and men, to assert **to** importance of recognizing one axis of difference, the sexual difference between male and female. But those in this tradition who draw on Spinoza are attracted precisely to his presentation of differences as local and changeable. Differences between bodies and groups emerge through historical processes, in response to specific relationships and institutions, and will undergo constant transformation, such that they are, in the words of Gatens, “never decided *a priori* but recognized in the unfolding of shared (or conflicting) aims of groups or bodies” (Gatens 1996, p. 56). Lloyd notes appreciatively that, for Spinoza, it is not the case that the body is sexed while the mind is neutral. Rather, sexual difference “reaches into” the mind (Lloyd 1994, p. 161). If a body’s powers and affects are shaped in a context that varies significantly according to one’s socially determined sex, its mind will likewise be empowered or limited by those same determinations. Nevertheless, the powers and affects that differ by virtue of sex are not determined *a priori* by biology, even if the material specificity of bodies remains a focus of sexual difference feminism. Elizabeth Grosz, drawing indirectly on Spinoza’s rejection of the nature-culture binary and his insistence on the unique proportions of motion and rest that define each body, elaborates an ethics of sexual difference that asserts “a thousand tiny sexes” (Grosz 1993). From this point of view, sexual difference is real and irreducible but this does not mean that it is fixed, binary, or predictable. Spinoza’s conception of the body whose “openness is the condition of its life,” as Gatens puts it, serves a feminist ethics of sexual difference that envisions new modes of cultivating and responding to a proliferation of bodily and psychic differences.

## 4. Conclusion

It may seem strange that feminists single out both Spinoza’s monism and his embrace of local and myriad differences. But his denial of substantial individuality, it might be argued, forces us to say more rather than less about what makes each mode what it is. An individual in nature (it is, admittedly, not clear what all counts as such) is constituted by its diverse and changing relationships with others, impersonal laws governing its existence, its particular striving to persevere in being, and the various and changing sources of (and threats to) its power. This perspective lends support to thinking about macro-patterns of domination as any feminist theory must do. At the same time, the understanding of bodies and minds that are richly differentiated and variable lends itself to a non-reductive, non-binary, and creative feminist theory according to which, as the mantra goes, “nobody knows what a body can do” (a paraphrase of E2ps, made famous by Deleuze 1990, p. 226).



In this chapter, I have emphasized the features of Spinoza's metaphysics that align with feminism and which have been embraced by particular feminists. Feminist interpretations of Spinoza are in some ways surprising and at odds with non-feminist ones. In particular, whereas feminists find in Spinoza the possibility of an ethics sensitive to differences, desire, and passions, interpretations of Spinoza in the Anglo-American traditions often emphasize Spinoza's universalism and rationalism. Spinoza's philosophy contains a tension that is perhaps impossible to resolve between, to use his language, the common and the singular. It is perhaps the feminist motive interest in politics and the practices of collective transformation that places their accent on differences and particularities. The feminist perspective provides a useful corrective to the focus on the perfectionist and intellectualist aspects of Spinoza's ethical program and the formal character of his rationalism. Thus, while feminists have drawn a great deal upon Spinoza, feminist interpretation also brings a great deal to Spinozism.

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