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Review of *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*
by Moira Gatens

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maintaining institutional facts is power” (103). Deontic powers either prompt people to do something or exclude people from doing something “without using force” (147). For example, to declare that “Obama is President” or “Locke is the property owner” is to acknowledge their rights and obligations in those roles, to prompt them to fulfill those roles, and to exclude others from exercising the powers that accompany those roles. Feminists have long been interested in institutional terms like “husband” and “wife,” perhaps in part because of the deontic powers that tend to accompany each. Feminists have also been interested in the phenomenon of collective recognition in the sense that acceptance and internalization of some social norms has hindered personal development. For example, if one accepted the traditional conception of “wife” with all of its deontic “powers,” one would be disinclined to go to college, pursue a career in film-making or drag racing, etc. Although Searle describes the social world and institutional facts from a broadly analytic perspective, and although many feminists are rooted in the continental tradition, his account reinforces feminist concerns with vocabulary as an instrument of power. His account is also remarkably empowering. It reaffirms the notion that current power structures can be dismantled if enough people choose to stop believing in, or choose to create new, institutions.

Searle’s layered argument, moving from mind and intentionality to language and society, is at once technical and full of common sense. Those who are not terribly familiar with Searle are likely to get the most from this text. Those who have been following Searle’s ongoing discussion of social ontology may not be surprised by much of what he offers here. One might allege that Searle’s account is too tidy and comprehensive, relying on the single linguistic construct of the Status Function Declaration to ground out and explain the entirety of human civilization. Nonetheless, Searle presents a solid point of departure for further questions about social ontology and rightly reminds us that institutional facts are dynamic human creations.

Endnotes

1. J.L. Austin. *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza

Moira Gatens. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2009. 239 pages. \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-271-03516-1.

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“More Feminist Spinozists Thinking More”

The purpose of this volume, according to the editor Moira Gatens, is to show that “Feminist scholarship can offer new interpretative insights into the notoriously difficult philosophy of Benedict Spinoza”(1). This book successfully achieves this aim, and more. The articles in this volume show us that viewing Spinoza’s work with a feminist lens reveals neglected aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy; further, focusing on these neglected aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy exposes unexamined dualisms in feminist philosophers’ own practices and presuppositions. That is not to say that there is a unitary feminist lens. One of the strengths of this collection is the variety of backgrounds and methods of the contributors and the debates to which their

commentaries belong. Liberal feminists, feminists from the psychoanalytic tradition, Marxist feminists, and those whose work bridges schools and traditions, all find in Spinoza’s work productive ideas with something to offer to the classic problems of feminist theory: the nature of social categories, sexuality, the fate of the passions and the imagination in philosophy.

Gatens’ introduction provides a good overview of Spinoza’s philosophy, highlighting those aspects that may be of particular interest to feminist theorists, which are taken up by contributors to the volume: the positive role of the imagination in Spinoza’s philosophy (Gatens, Lloyd, Grassi); Spinoza’s rejection of dualism (Gatens, Lloyd, Ravven, Strong, West, Donovan); Spinoza’s naturalistic but non-reductionist theory of the affects (Gatens, Ravven, Rorty, Matheron); Spinoza’s conception of relational freedom and the social self (Strong, Rorty, Lloyd, Ravven). Focusing particularly on aspects of Spinoza’s work that are neglected by mainstream scholarship, the articles collected here offer new and exciting interpretations of each. Amelie Rorty’s classic piece on Spinoza’s passions examines Spinoza’s understanding of how the passions can be reformed without thereby excising them, thus differentiating Spinoza from those who thought freedom involved being free of emotions. Rorty deftly performs spinozism by teaching us about love as first a passive and then an active affect through her example of the development of Ariadne’s love for Echo. Ariadne learns of the forces which caused her love for Echo, and learns what Echo is beyond her passionate love; thus, she is able to finally and actively love Echo not just as the object of her affection, but as a genuine individual, a singular part of nature.

Although Gatens admits that some Spinoza scholars may be surprised at what feminists can contribute to Spinoza scholarship, the bigger surprise may be that Spinoza has anything to offer contemporary feminists. How could Spinoza—an unapologetic metaphysician, a determinist, a rationalist, and a student of Hobbes’ political philosophy—have anything to say to the issues that matter to contemporary feminist philosophy? Alexandre Matheron, with his usual humor and facility with Spinoza’s texts, shows how Spinoza’s sole norm, “to understand,” can still lead us to radically rethink our present social conditions. Aurelia Strong proposes that Spinoza’s conception of the individual offers a way of capturing the insights both of liberalism and communitarianism without the drawbacks of either. Strong argues that Spinoza’s work thus offers a better framework for understanding the reciprocal relations between individuals and the social world, which provides the philosophical foundations for a notion of relational autonomy. Heidi Ravven and Genevieve Lloyd explore the ways in which Spinoza’s sometimes difficult philosophy sheds light on the extent to which feminist theorists’ own concepts and preconceptions work against them and contain traces of dualisms and religious traditions which feminists constantly critique.

One of the few new pieces for the collection, Ravven’s historical article argues that those feminists who reject determinism rely on a “magical” conception of the human person derived from Christianity. Ravven proposes that Spinoza’s understanding of individuals’ beliefs and desires as caused derives from a Judeo-Arabic tradition whereby individuals are understood as part of Nature, not outside of it. Ravven argues that Spinoza’s alternative conception of human nature enables us to see the way in which our conception of social reform is tied to a false picture of human freedom. Social reform does not require a “magical conception of the human persons” but rather requires understanding the actual forces, social, affective, and otherwise, that impinge upon each individual, causing their desires and shaping their self-conceptions. Reiterating the spinozist dictum to understand, Ravven proposes that Spinoza’s

method provides a route toward a mature non-moralistic ethics, one that would focus on what we are before telling us what we ought to do and be. Genevieve Lloyd, in a piece from her book *Part of Nature*, similarly shows that by focusing on Spinoza's genuine alternative to Cartesian dualism, we can see that feminists' critiques of dualism have been undermined by their adherence to the sex/gender distinction, which repeats the dualism of the sexed body and the gendered mind, the latter a "social construction" which, because not biological we are magically free to change.

Reservations

This is an essential book for any research library, and the best collection yet showing both what feminists have to say about Spinoza and what Spinoza has to offer contemporary feminism. While there is much to commend this volume, as someone familiar with the series and with the research area, I found it somewhat disappointing. First of all, and immediately recognizable to anyone who has ever handled the books in this series: it's a bit light. Weighing in at a mere 239 pages, *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza* has 119 pages less than the average for the series (358 pages) with some of the larger volumes near 500 pages. Is there half as much to say about feminism and Spinoza as there is about feminism and Ayn Rand? (432 pages) Is there less to say about Spinoza than Rousseau, one who took so much from Spinoza while publically offering him only insult? (480 pages) Is there less to say about Spinoza than Descartes, whose dualism Spinoza rejected so completely? (348 pages) While portability is an asset, I found myself wanting more.

Further, more than half of the articles in the book have been publically available for nearly 20 years. The paperback edition contains eleven articles, seven of which have been published elsewhere, most in the early-mid nineties. The impression this slight book gives is that there were once some philosophers writing about the intersections of feminism and Spinoza, but that this project is now over. As such the volume's diversity seems to suggest that the work on Spinoza and feminism is haphazard and disconnected, rather than as indicators of the vibrant and growing research program I believe it to be. Although I am indebted to Gatens' work philosophically, I am disappointed with this edited volume. Its brevity is evidence of a missed opportunity to showcase the brilliant work done by feminist spinozists in the last 15 years.

These articles, in their original forms, inspired a research program in spinozistic feminism, which offered a new way to approach the reality and power of bodies, a new way to understand how the path to reason can be approached only through understanding the affects, and a new way to understand the self as social. This new work on Spinoza and feminism, which was inspired by Gatens, Lloyd, Ravven, and Rorty, needs its own volume indicating the current and flourishing state of international work on Spinoza. Hasana Sharp ends her review of this book with the hope that it will be the prolegomenon for work yet to come. I'd like to second her suggestion with the caveat that perhaps the material conditions for such a volume need to come first: a conference, a society, or both for the burgeoning field of Spinoza studies taking seriously the problems of feminism, or rather the field of feminist philosophy taking up Spinoza's ideas.

Spinoza did not think that the sage, alone and separate from the rest of humanity, was the ideal or most powerful state for humans. Even the freest individual was weak when considered alone, disconnected from others; one's power was miniscule when compared to the whole of nature. Only through joining with others can the free individual increase his or her power. This is helpful advice for the as yet to be called into being society

of feminist spinozists, existing as we do in the often inhospitable universe of academic philosophy. So, I don't blame or excoriate Gatens for having disappointed specialists. The geographic distance and the linguistic and academic differences that separate feminist philosophers working on Spinoza today is daunting. Overcoming these obstacles requires the work of more than just one individual.

Conclusion

Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza offers us a glimpse of the possibilities of the intersections of Spinoza's philosophy and feminist theory, but only a glimpse. Readers looking for an introduction to the feminist interpretation of Spinoza should look to Lloyd and Gatens' previous work, *Collective Imaginings*, for a systematic elaboration of their ideas, including their view of the usefulness of Spinoza's conception of responsibility. For those feminist theorists who have already recognized the value of Spinoza's philosophy, this review is a call to action. Feminist spinozism is an extremely promising area of philosophical research. However, the brevity of this collection and the age of many of its articles tell us that those feminists working on Spinoza's philosophy today are not working together, and are not communicating their work to one another well enough. We need something that might link those feminist luminaries with young scholars, which might bring together the strands of Spinoza scholars with feminist inclinations from their varied locations around the globe. If there were such a group, such communication, this book would have been different, heftier at least. In conclusion: this is a good start, but we need more feminist spinozists thinking more!

Canon Fodder: Historical Women Political Thinkers

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Think of the chapters of Penny A. Weiss's slim book, *Canon Fodder: Historical Women Political Thinkers*, as a philosophical *dim sum* or *tapas*: small, varied, and intensely flavored morsels that can be consumed in any order, savored, and contemplated. Most of the chapters are independently satisfying, and each leaves one wondering where a more extensive treatment might lead. The book itself extends an invitation—even a demand—for philosophers to continue enriching the field by engaging with the contributions of historical women writers.

Weiss's essays address several authors stretching over one thousand years: Sei Shōnagon, Christine de Pizan, Mary Astell, Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Julia Cooper, Emma Goldman, and the authors of the *Declaration of Sentiments*. The framing principle is a desire to reshape radically the landscape of political theory, and this eclectic list possesses a kind of internal logic; each writer explores central but neglected concepts that could contribute significantly to transforming political philosophy. The concepts include a creative methodology for comprehending the world, musings on the politics of inclusion, marriage, and the state of nature, community and friendship, equality of gender within the polity, community and harmony, and children. Considering this list (lists are important in this book) the cluster of ideas could be loosely formed into a partial