

HASANA SHARP, *SPINOZA AND THE POLITICS OF RENATURALISATION*. UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2011

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In her recent book, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, Hasana Sharp carries out an important contribution to contemporary political philosophy. Building on her work in several recent articles,¹ Sharp thinks through the implications of Spinoza's naturalism to develop a "philanthropic posthumanism," defined as "a collective project by which we can come to love ourselves and one another as parts of nature" (4-5). Sharp founds her project on the basis of a thorough analysis of Spinoza's account of affect and his re-inscription of human freedom in such a way as to avoid a relocation of external standards within the human community or mind. This is a problem in many strains of humanism that nevertheless share a rejection of supernaturalism with Spinoza. Sharp's approach is thus posthuman to the extent that she follows Spinoza's critique of merely relocating supernatural power within the human, but it is decidedly not an attempt at articulating a nonhuman standpoint. This is the sense in which Sharp's politics of renaturalization is philanthropic; Spinoza focuses on the flourishing of human power in the *Ethics*, and both the smuggling in of supernaturalistic qualities and the valorization of the nonhuman are anathema for human power. According to Sharp, therefore, "Spinoza's naturalism aims to engender enabling self-love in humanity by eroding those models of man that animate hatred, albeit indirectly, by suggesting that we are, at one extreme, defective Gods or, at the other, corrupt animals who need to be restored to our natural condition" (5).²

Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization is not an exegesis of Spinoza with an eye towards politics and definitions of the human in the abstract. Sharp notes that, in various ways, the discourses of feminism, race theory, Marxism, phenomenology, and critical theory have rightly been concerned with philosophical accounts of nature, and a common strategy has been to denaturalize nature in order to undermine the authority of normative recourses to nature that have been wielded in the service of oppression. Sharp is sympathetic to the concerns of these traditions, noting that "we cannot advocate the naturalization of humanity without taking the naturalistic ideology seriously" (7). Although Sharp does not hubristically claim that her politics of renaturalization eliminates all ideology, she offers this work as an explicit contribution to a "less oppressive imagination" and engages extensively with contemporary political philosophy, especially through the discourses

of feminism and deep ecology (7).

The book is divided into two parts, each composed of three chapters. In part one, “Reconfiguring the Human,” Sharp puts forward her interpretation of Spinoza. She grounds this reading in an understanding of action as affect, which entails both a relational ontology and a brief engagement with transindividuality. Despite the long categorization of what might look like emotions to the modern reader at the end of part three of the *Ethics*, Spinoza’s understanding of affect is not simply a description of emotional life, which would already grant preference to humans and perhaps other “higher” animals. Instead, Sharp helpfully shows that affect is a universal power to affect and be affected, meaning that each finite being has some potential to affect another, either through an increase or decrease of another’s power and vice versa. Unlike many understandings of emotion as a reaction, Spinoza’s concept of affect is better defined as more thoroughly intertwined with his discussion of causes. Affect is thus “a qualitative change, equally corporeal and mental, in the intensity of a being’s power to persevere” (29).

This interpretation of affect as an event of causation is equally bound up with Spinoza’s so-called parallelism of mind and body in proposition seven of part two of the *Ethics*, where he writes that “[t]he order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.”³ Sharp succinctly shows that Spinoza’s parallelism indicates that actions of the mind (ideas) and actions of the body do not express one another, but rather one and the same order of causes. Affects allow us to understand changes in human power, and Spinoza identifies three primary affects: joy, sadness, and desire. Other affects are defined in terms of their capacity to increase or decrease joy and sadness, and desire acts as an always-underway individuation of each being.

Thus, Sharp contends that Spinoza’s account of human action as effecting affective changes necessitates a relational ontology wherein being is continually differentiating itself. Following the work of Étienne Balibar, Sharp briefly engages Gilbert Simondon’s theory of ontogenesis in order to sketch the transindividuality of Spinoza’s theory of affect, avoiding the characterization of Spinoza as either a proto-liberal who understands the independence of individuals as irreducible, or a proto-Hegelian for whom individuals are merely dialectically interdependent parts subjected to a totality, even if such a totality continues to develop. Simondon’s theory allows Sharp to strategically defer the affirmation of an individual reality in order to focus instead on “distinctive agencies but never as anything other than relational phenomena” (36). This relational ontology entails a blurring of the distinction between Being and beings, and transindividuality complicates the articulation of freedom that Sharp will begin to approach in the latter half of the book.

With her account of the place of affect in Spinoza’s ontology in place, Sharp turns to the role of ideology critique with respect to the politics of renaturalization. One of the consequences of Spinoza’s parallelism of mind and body is that, like all other natural things, ideas are able to grow in strength or shrink to the point of extinction. Sharp’s version of ideology critique examines ideas as forces of nature rather than only true or false representations of reality. Renaturalizing ideology helps to resist an anthropocentric psychology that remains narrowly focused on false consciousness, attending instead to the affective power of ideas.

Although the politics of renaturalization is, in line with Althusser and others, a materialist critique, Sharp is careful to note that renaturalizing ideas is not the same as reducing them to corporeal causes, which would violate the parallelism at the heart of her reading. By contrast, Sharp argues that “the ‘conditions’ of freedom and servitude are as ideal as they are corporeal” (69). Sharp emphasizes that there is a certain prerequisite of self-knowledge required to understand the mind and its dependency on various causal networks of ideas. As parts of causal networks within the affective plane of action that Sharp has developed, ideas can hold a power that extends beyond their truth and falsity, and thus, in addition to self-knowledge, displacing sad ideas requires attention to the systemic conditions that produce oppressive situations in order to develop effective strategies. “The only way to gain a critical purchase on Ideology is to affirm that one cannot be but in thought, in this determinate and infinite form of nature’s power” (70-71).⁴ Ideas survive when conditions favor them, and thus renaturalized ideology critique, developing out of an initial self-critique, seeks not only to name damaging

ideas that increase sadness, but also attempts to curate new, joyful ideas, hoping that they might take root.

Taken together, Spinoza's affective understanding of human action and ideas allows Sharp to present a renaturalized version of human agency that stays focused on human beings. Indeed, Sharp points out that Spinoza makes continual reference to human nature in his writings, even though such a term might seem completely at odds with the relational ontology and transindividuality of affect that she has underscored. In the concluding chapter of part one, "Man's Utility to Man: Reason and its Place in Nature," Sharp turns to Spinoza's references to human nature in order to find an account of the politics of renaturalization. She argues that there are three primary "rhetorical functions" of Spinoza's use of the term human nature: a humbling function, an admonishing function, and a unifying function. These do not contradict each other unless we fall back into the habit of a spiritualized understanding of rationality as expressive of an unchanging and universal moral law. Rather, these rhetorical functions have strategic roles in order to challenge certain human generalities.

Such challenges are not an attempt to eradicate weaker affects, which is a perfectionist temptation that would forget the prerequisite self-knowledge of ideology critique that we are in ideology. Sharp argues that we must continually account for weak affects so that we do not forget them, and claims that this works out politically as a certain kind of democracy. "Spinoza's remarks about human nature, even as they apply universally to any and all natural things, advocate democracy. Our desire to persevere in being, our opposition to those who threaten it, and our inability to survive alone make combination into the largest possible body the most enabling way of life" (91). Indeed, even our recourse to the term human nature and our need for models of human flourishing is an indication of our finitude. Sharp notes perceptively that in the *Ethics*, Spinoza's most systematic text, the references to human nature and the need for an exemplar are found only in part four, "Of human servitude." Spinoza's specific discussion of democracy in the *Political Treatise* was limited to a sexist conception of citizens as men. Sharp challenges this restriction by Spinoza, which is at odds with the major points she has extracted from his thought. Thus, in the conclusion to the first part of the book, Sharp questions whether we must only have recourse to human nature with respect to democracy, and in the second part of the book takes up this line of thinking in detail through an engagement of contemporary feminism and deep ecology.

In chapter four, "Desire for Recognition?: Butler, Hegel, and Spinoza," Sharp sets the agenda for her more detailed and contemporary engagements with political philosophy through a critique of the work of Judith Butler. As is well known, unlike many who see only a standoff between Spinoza and Hegel, Butler uses the two thinkers in a complementary fashion; Hegel grounds a theory of intersubjective recognition that is lacking in Spinoza, whom Butler finds useful as a thinker of desire, which she interprets as human fragility. Butler's unique approach offers a contemporary alternative to mainstream political liberalism, in continuity with the project that Sharp has laid out. If Spinoza and Hegel can offer such an alternative, however, Sharp argues that there is nonetheless a disjunction between Spinoza and Hegel, and convincingly demonstrates just how acute this divide is in the concluding chapters of the book.

Unlike many contemporary writers, Sharp claims that positing the difference between Spinoza and Hegel as one of affirmation and negation, respectively, misses the fundamental point of contrast for contemporary political thought. Even though this charge is often made by anti-Hegelian Spinozists, it casts the difference in terms that are Hegel's own in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.⁵ The principal difference between them, according to Sharp, is the way in which desire functions in their ontologies. Both think relationality in terms of desire, but "Hegel is concerned above all with relationships of representation, while Spinoza examines relationships of composition among human and nonhuman forces" (121). These opposed accounts of relationships are based on differing theories of power, agency, and politics, and it should be clear that any Hegelian politics of recognition will be a project that accords a special status within nature to humans.

This is a project to which Spinoza cannot be aligned, and Sharp argues further that Hegel's account of desire justifies the necessity of institutionalized domination as a means of socialization, and thus affirms these relationships as necessary even though a Hegelian political philosophy advocates their overcoming. By

contrast, Spinoza's understanding of desire as part of the *conatus* argument entails a certain illusory freedom of human exceptionalism that must be overcome in order to forge associations that are in line with the relational ontology Sharp develops in the first part of the book. Her constructive engagements with the work of Elizabeth Grosz and deep ecology, which make up the concluding two chapters of the book, are promising lines of thought in this direction.

Before turning to an examination of Grosz's work, Sharp offers a helpful characterization of her own project as one of strategic antihatred.

Spinoza frequently identifies his naturalism as a response to the psychic and corporeal damage entailed by the proliferation of hatred, which can be extended to misogyny and cultural imperialism. The politics of recognition rightly aims to respond to this damage, but renaturalization maintains that the cure for dehumanization cannot be achievement of "personhood," as long as personhood depends upon regarding one another as uniquely capable of transcending nature (159).

Sharp eventually advocates a much stronger position, in agreement with Grosz, that identifies the politics of recognition as "a self-hating endeavor" (173). The reason for this is that the project of recognition theory requires the perpetual deployment of respect, centered around the figure of the human, in order to "demarkate our sphere of moral concern" (172). Renaturalization, in line with Grosz, requires the displacement of this very drive for respect, opting instead for a liberating experience of one's own place as a constitutive force within nature. Grosz's criticism of recognition is fundamentally a rejection of both humanism and anthropocentrism as such, which she argues reinforce phallogocentric homogenization. Grosz turns to both Deleuze and Guattari and Nietzsche for a politics of imperceptibility, which Sharp affirms as moving beyond the model of recognition. Grosz's politics remain underdeveloped, and Sharp offers Spinoza's thought as "a notion of thought that acknowledges the imperceptible forces operative in our affective engagements with human and nonhuman beings" (180).

By tarrying with Grosz's arguments against recognition, Sharp is able to put forward a political framework that does not take the establishment of a humanistic utopia as its goal, but rather affirms our collective dependency in order to strategically enhance power. In her final chapter, "Nature, Norms, and Beasts," Sharp turns to the work of the deep ecologist Arne Naess to take up the topic of Spinoza and the nonhuman. Sharp's interjection into this debate shows that Spinoza's philosophy does emphasize that human interaction attenuates itself with the nonhuman, but stops short of subordination to nonhuman power either through submission or valorization. She demonstrates this through an analysis of Spinoza's references to animals in the *Ethics*, which deal with different valences of a moralizing tendency to treat animals as models for humanity. Such an admiration is melancholic, which is ultimate powerlessness according to the *Ethics*. "The transformation of our passionate disposition is as fundamental to our well-being as the basic factors of hydration and nutrition. Melancholy, applying as much to the soul as to the body, indicates a generalized impotence" (197). As such, Sharp clarifies that although the politics of renaturalization remains thoroughly critical of a recourse to humanism, it is equally suspicious of a "reactionary antihumanism," thus maintaining human liberation as its central focus (219).

Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization constructs a new, exciting terrain for contemporary political philosophy. Although she notes in her critique of Butler that she is uninterested in barring creative uses of Spinoza, Sharp's arguments against recognition theory strike at its lynchpin, presenting an either/or choice between a politics of renaturalization and a politics of mutual respect. However, it is worth noting that Sharp's continual emphasis on the importance of context and strategy for politics, which is a welcome contrast to weary rehearsals of language medicine that would declare the political utopia in advance, may leave open a role of some utility for representation, perhaps reformulated through further engagement with transindividuality rather than reciprocal self-certain consciousnesses. In addition, the constitutive aspect of Sharp's politics of renaturalization clears a promising pathway for future research, particularly in some of the traditions she mentions early on in the book as potential allies, such as race theory and Marxism. For the politics of

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renaturalization to grow and thrive, such encounters, among others, must proliferate.

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NOTES

1. See Hasana Sharp, "Why Spinoza Today? Or, A 'Strategy of Anti-Fear.'" *Rethinking Marxism* 17, no. 4 (2005): 591-608 and "The Force of Ideas in Spinoza." *Political Theory* 35 (2007): 732-55.
2. In her discussion of Spinoza's philosophy as it applies to humanity, Sharp notes that she preserves his sexist language in order to avoid a false implication that inclusive phrasing exists in Spinoza's work (1n1). She is able to wield Spinozist thought against this very tendency, such as when she turns Spinoza's sexist examples of women as gossipers on its head. Instead of reading Spinoza's sexist moments as somehow indicative of his otherwise great insights, she argues, "Spinoza's own examples might be seen as 'citations' of cultural norms and as consequences of having been affected by proximate bodies in his own environment" (47). Since this review considers Sharp's constructive use of Spinoza, I will use gender inclusive language when referring to human beings, unless I am quoting Sharp's citations that preserve Spinoza's wording.
3. See Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics and Other Works*. Trans. Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, 119.
4. Sharp follows Althusser in referring to ideology in the singular as a more general and neutral account, rather than the plural ideologies, which indicates a specific set of concerns within a particular discourse. See Sharp 57n7 and Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes toward and Investigation." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.
5. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Trans. E.S. Haldane. New York: Humanities Press, 1996, 477.