
Response to Readers ***of Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization***

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First, I'd like to express to the panel my profound gratitude for having reflected so thoughtfully upon the ideas and aims of my book. Although thinking is irreducibly social, I have found writing to be rather solitary, so much so that it feels awkward to expose these creatures of solitude to the world. When writing, I am never sure whether my ideas are the products of mere idiosyncrasy or whether they will find some kind of life in being taken up by others. You have all shown me various anticipated and unanticipated directions these ideas might take. You have also helped me see how some ideas were malexpressed, or underdeveloped. For this I am also appreciative.

Second, I'd like to thank the organizers of the panel—especially Chloë Taylor without whose encouragement and unparalleled organizational powers I would not be here—and the societies (Society for Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture and the Canadian Philosophical Association) sponsoring it. We rely on not only individual willingness but also institutional support to frame public discussions. Without further ado, let's discuss.

With five rich commentaries, it will be impossible for me to address all of the questions raised. So, I have selected out some questions that spoke immediately to me, and some questions that express concerns common to multiple commentators. I will begin with a question of the former kind.

1. Skeaff wonders about the exclusive emphasis I place upon intercorporeal communication as the forum for challenging dominant ideology, given the significant and growing role that media plays in our lives. He asks: “What role, if any, do media (televisual, web-based, textual, etc.) play in the mobilization of counter-ideas and how might that role affect the co-presence requirement? Are media simply a tool for disseminating ideas that are first composed in an assembly setting or can media take on a more constitutive role in the generation of ideas?”

He asks further whether my focus on spoken language rather than the written word is justified. In his words, “The comprehension of spoken language might best be accomplished through an immersion experience with native speakers. However, one can learn a written language by relating one’s body to non-human bodies such as texts.”

On the one hand, it might seem delusional to deny or even to underplay the efficacy of media communications. The average person in North America spends many more hours a week encountering ideas from the web, television, and, albeit to a much lesser extent, written texts than in conversation with other people. Spinoza himself was deeply interested in the social and political effects of a particular set of holy writings. I do not mean to deny the kind of term-setting that media has the power to carry out, or the way that virtual or scholarly communities form pockets of resistance to the dominant ideology. Yet, I suspect that there is a kind of ontological and developmental primacy to intercorporeal communication, which is supported by Spinoza’s emphasis on the body’s increasing diversification as the basis for our cognitive powers. Let me say more about what I mean.

Although I certainly am not an expert in language acquisition or psychosocial development, a couple of studies support my intuition. It has been found that infants cannot learn

language through video (Kuhl). Although infants are typically incredibly adaptable and can learn any language through simple exposure to other speakers, the co-presence of actual human bodies is necessary for them to learn to dispose their bodies in the new ways required to learn a language. A study shows that infants can learn to make sounds in a language other than the one spoken by their parents very easily with face-to-face interaction. But if this supplementary language-learning is replaced by a video, the infant not only fails to learn to make the sounds, her acquired powers to understand and communicate are diminished.

Among adults, it has been shown that those condemned to solitary confinement very quickly, in the words of Lisa Guenther, become “unhinged” in the absence of intercorporeal contact (Guenther, forthcoming). Even when allowed television, books, and skype or telephone conversation with loved ones, they quickly lose any sense of time and suffer other radical perceptual distortions.

These two phenomena, along with my philosophical prejudices, suggest to me that there is something primary and fundamental about intercorporeal communication. It is fundamental in acquiring the powers to listen, understand, and express oneself. It is likewise fundamental, since the ongoing sustenance furnished by being among other human bodies is necessary for us to maintain basic perceptual functioning, like a sense of time passing, or not passing.

I venture, therefore, that, although media, including written text, *is* very powerful, it is only powerful by virtue of the dispositions and powers of discernment already developed *and* consistently sustained by concrete others with whom one experiences bodily co-presence. This or that book, article, televised speech, interview, status update, or tweet moves me because of how I am pre-disposed to be moved. I do not doubt that I can be transformed *to some extent* by these extrahuman forms of contact, but I doubt that I am anywhere near as permeable and responsive

to media as I am to the bodies and faces I can see and feel next to me. (This is why I am very skeptical about the virtues of “distance education.”) Thus, my emphasis is both anthropological and strategic: I hope that technologically mediated critique, deliberation, and mobilization will not replace lively, intercorporeal debates and actions. I suspect that technologically supported mobilizations, as with the Arab and the Maple Springs, will continue to be effective, but my hunch is that the personal and collective *transformations* take place in the street, side-by-side, and face-to-face.

I am very intrigued by Skeaff’s suggestion that representation might be effectively renaturalized, but I leave that problem for future research.

2. Karen Houle and Megan Dean are both interested in the project of overcoming the debilitating dualisms that continue to contour our received ways of thinking and speaking. They both press me on how the challenge to Cartesian dualism can be posed in terms other than those of the scholarly monograph, and fought on terrain other than that of philosophical disagreement. Houle encourages me to consider a wider pedagogical project. And Dean presses me on how far, in that wider realm, my framework extends into feminist political practice.

I certainly am interested in the wider pedagogical project of challenging dualism and, more generally, approaching change by addressing wider networks of cause and effect rather than individual wills and actors. I do hope that teaching, and speaking at public events—often but not exclusively in the university context—goes somewhat beyond the scholarly terrain, even if these activities are typically housed in an academic institution or an over-priced luxury hotel. But I am interested in challenging our received modes of analysis and critique in activist and journalistic contexts as well.

To take the area of feminist activism that Dean mentions, I offer a rather feeble example of a lively debate I had, not face-to-face, but on Facebook. A friend and former student posted a meme that was quite popular in my circles last fall. It was a feminist activist holding a sign that read: “What causes rape? A skirt? Drinking? Flirting?,” next to which there were empty check boxes. Below, the only checked box declared that the true cause was “Rapists.” I certainly recognize the appeal of the model of what Rebecca Tuvel calls “the responsible human” here. Women are not responsible for their own rapes, and nor should they bear the burden of rape prevention strategies. Women and girls are frequently taught constantly to anticipate attack, and to consider themselves “rapable,” lest they take appropriate self-protective measures. The impulse to direct rape prevention strategies at rapists rather than at rape victims is understandable and even laudable.

Nevertheless, I commented on the post, indicating that I far prefer the sign that says, Rape is caused by misogyny (check), rapists (check), institutional tolerance (check), and structural violence (check). I suggested adding something, for lack of a better term, like “rape culture.” Someone objected strongly to my preference saying that, although what I prefer might be *true*, it is not more effective, and is a poor strategy because it is both grand and vague. Such a critique is close to my heart, since, as Skeaff mentions, I don’t think we are best served by thumping against shared commonsense with the rather flaccid hammer of truth, without considering the power of the particular idea within its affective context. Isn’t it the case that more people will be moved by the straightforward and easily digested assertion that rapists cause rape? Isn’t it easier to identify and hold responsible rapists than an entire culture and its institutions for constituting women as rapable until proven otherwise?

Still, while my opponent said that my preferred sign wouldn't do anything, I objected to the impulse to be effective regardless of the particular effects. If rapists are the cause of rape, what should be done? The individual assailants should be identified and in some way neutralized. Feminist vigilantes for a long time have publicized the names of the accused, humiliated rapists, and sometimes attacked them. I, in fact, have some sympathy for this approach given the near futility of prosecuting rapists. Nevertheless, mobilizing people to stop individual actors identified as rapists is committing to a never-ending game of whack-a-mole. Wide education programs that target boys is something I would support, though I would worry about the form it would take. For example, I hope it would not suggest that they "just say no" to misogyny and rape, as though it were simply a matter of will-power, and as though they need to control their intrinsic ability to hurt girls, thereby reinforcing the notion that boys are powerful and dangerous and girls are vulnerable and in need of protection. Likewise, I hope it would somehow convey to them the joys they would be forfeiting, whether or not they are orthosexual, by failing to see girls and women as partners and agents. Of course, structural, critical analysis is a cornerstone of feminism and Marxism, the traditions closest to my heart. It is nonetheless easy, as Dean notes, to revert to dualist, individualist, and voluntarist models, especially in more activist contexts. Structural analyses, even my own, often still imply something like a collective will, and thus rely on an implicit humanism. I admit that it is very difficult—and perhaps not always strategically advisable—to fully renaturalize our political speech.

I will close discussion of this point by marking my appreciation of Dean's observation that Spinoza's is significantly a therapeutic philosophy, and that my joining Spinoza to feminism has a therapeutic impulse. It is aimed at reducing self-castigation and guilt to which I think a lot of feminists, myself included, are inclined. I do hope that critique and activism driven

fundamentally by an analysis of institutional and affective networks can allow us to forgive ourselves and even our enemies for failures and weaknesses, and to seek solutions in countering causes that sustain and amplify destructive forms of life.

3. This leads to the third question, posed both by Karen Houle and Rebecca Tuvel: Where does the “heavy normative lifting” come from that would allow us to call some things pernicious and affirm other things as worthy of cultivation?

Houle is concerned that the ecological framework I espouse lacks the resources for differentiating between those incipient, fragile ideas that deserve cultivation and those that should not. Likewise, Tuvel wonders about the normative ability of an ethological perspective “to discern between powerful or enabling affective connections to, not only animals, but likewise computers, landfills, or trash?”

Certainly, it can be very complicated to identify the actual source of sad passions and the precise causes of decreases in the vitality of an individual or groups. For one, the causes are usually many, and are easily misidentified. There are many wide-ranging theories, for example, as what causes certain cancers: candidates include environmental pollutants (and, if so, which ones, under which circumstances?), heredity, lifestyle, behavior, stress, pharmaceuticals, etc. Yet, I still don’t see that anything like “heavy normative lifting” is necessary in order to determine that cancer is a damaging mode of bodily transformation. Although it is true that, from the point of view of absolute nature, it makes no difference whether a new ice age obliterates most current forms of life and gives rise to a whole new infinitely complex network of relations, the finite perspective of practical reason has little difficulty determining that cancer or a new ice age is bad for human, canine, or rodent bodies. Moreover, as a particular kind of being, each of us by necessity desires to persevere in being, and thus each perceives threats to that perseverance

as pernicious. One would have to show that landfills, for example, are a genuine threat to that perseverance, but, having done so, one doesn't need an eternal standard or supernatural framework to advocate mobilizing against those finite assemblages we call landfills.

Moreover, Spinoza acknowledges not only a physiological but also a mental or psychic striving to be the kinds of beings we are. This is why he says that a populace will not tolerate the trampling of their freedoms, since we aspire, by necessity, to a life characterized by a kind of spiritual vitality, or, in his words, "a life of reason" (Spinoza, Chapter 5, paragraph 5). Thus, we strive for those ideas through which we feel ourselves to be powerful, and we resist those ideal assemblages that we identify—correctly or incorrectly—as sources of sadness and pain. The ethos of renaturalization is supported by prudential rather than moral rationality, but prudence is armed with plenty of evaluations. And those evaluations do not concern only the narrow domain of physical survival, but also the desire to exist and to enhance one's characteristic powers and pleasures, very much including those of the mind.

One of my aims, however, is to challenge some of Spinoza's own prudential evaluations. Such evaluations can always be mistaken, and my view is that he was profoundly mistaken about the powers and pleasures that emerge from companionship with nonhuman animals. Likewise, Spinoza was confused and conflicted about whether women and men could effectively combine to enhance one another's agency. All of these evaluations are open to challenge, and may be falsified by the consequences that follow from our actions. Indeed, they *are* the fruits of models for living well that issue from imagination as well as reason, and thus they have no truck with absolute figures of good and evil. Yet, as Deleuze points out, they are not, and nor could they hope to be, beyond good and bad (Deleuze, 22-25).

4. This leads to Tuvel's question about how to support ethical alliances with nonhuman animals, especially those that cannot immediately be identified as essential to human wellbeing. This relates, as well, to Fritsch's skepticism toward an "ethics of similitude."

First, I'll acknowledge that my embrace of the notion of "an ethics of similitude" has given rise to the greatest confusion and concern, especially among Continental philosophers and feminists, which suggests that I did not describe it well enough. I hope to begin to redress this weakness by underscoring two basic principles.

i. *The similitude in question is really quite broad:* For Spinoza, my concern for the requirements of my living a physically and mentally powerful life link to the concerns of a very diverse range of beings. Firstly, for Spinoza, this entails a concern with all beings—currently or potentially capable of reason—since my mind is more powerful to the extent that it is connected to other powerful minds. I admit that this is ethically narrow, and I am critical, for example, of animal rights movements that affirm our moral duties to animals only insofar as they, for example, exhibit certain forms of recognized intelligence. However, this most important aspect of human power on Spinoza's account certainly doesn't exclude, and indeed relies upon other powers. Of course, I cannot have a mentally fulfilling existence if I am not alive, and thus I ought to have common cause with polar bears, seals, walruses, and other arctic creatures and struggle against global warming, which ultimately threatens life on this planet. This logic of shared requirements implying shared concerns does not lead to "justice movement on behalf of animal flourishing for its own sake," and it does not overcome the secondary character of the strivings of other beings in the prudential framework of renaturalization. I just want to affirm that what is entailed by an adequate grasp of those requirements brings a lot of what may appear to be dissimilar beings into the sphere of concern.

ii. *An ethics of similitude does not preclude a profound importance placed upon diversity and, more specifically, diversification:* First, a principle: Spinoza says that the more a body can be disposed in a great variety of ways, the more perceptive is its mind (*Ethics* II, prop. 14). I take this to mean that, the more an individual undergoes a diverse range of experiences and a great many encounters with different kinds of bodies, the more powerful and perceptive is its mind. Thus, I am more thoughtful and powerful the more diverse the others beings are with whom I come into contact. Yet, for Spinoza, I change in response to these contacts and take on some shared ideas and affects as a result. Thus, whereas an ethics of difference emphasizes letting others be in their difference, and, in particular, resisting assimilating diverse others to the self, Spinoza's ethics of similitude describes and promotes the mutual transformations that diverse others provoke in one another so as to produce commonalities.

Thus, the second principle: the more a body has in common with other bodies, the more its mind is able to perceive them adequately (*Ethics* II, prop. 39, corollary). So, perhaps it would be better to say that Spinoza advocates *an ethics of becoming similar* through mutual transformation and affection. But this becoming similar to others only occurs by virtue of becoming increasingly different from oneself by diversifying one's body, affects, and experiences to the greatest extent that one's nature allows. This ethics certainly is not without serious risks, but my hunch is that it has greater potential than an ethics of difference to support a politics of collective mobilization and radical transformation.

Notions of similarity suggest creating a community of "us" and thus also of "them," and legitimately raises worries about oppression and exclusion. I doubt that any philosophical program escapes worries that its principles for ethical connection or moral regard can justify unsavory exclusions. Yet, I want to suggest that an adequate reading of Spinoza's ethics of

similitude will not provide a moral justification for excluding and oppressing different others by virtue of sex, race, ability, etc.

On Spinoza's own account, the natures of men and women can agree so perfectly that they might combine to form an individual twice as powerful as each one (*Ethics* IV, prop. 68, scholium). Bodies that appear quite different morphologically, or phenotypically, are not thereby prevented from being the greatest sources of joy and power, among all other beings in nature. Thus, sexual difference is not a dissimilarity that would necessarily pose a problem to combining powers, or forming ethical bonds, although Spinoza does worry about the circumstances in which women and men meet, and how they may undermine the possibility for mutual empowerment (see *Political Treatise*, chapter 11, section 4). Ultimately, the very broad grounds for similarity suggest, *pace* Spinoza, that we need to look further and wider for alliances with others, beyond the parochial limits of the human, or the rational. We would likewise benefit from re-examining our ideas of meekness and strength and discovering diverse singular expressions of perfection. We might then discover less obvious ways of being powerful, and enjoy them not only as differences to be wondered at, as on Irigaray's model, but as differences that might rub off on us and enrich our lives.

5. Finally, Matthias Fritsch raises a number of knotty and difficult questions about the character of affirmation and negation, and presses me for unnecessarily assuming a Hegelian, developmental model of negativity. He doubts whether it is possible to promote an ethics of self-affirmation that is not also an ethics of self-negation, of affirming or self-overcoming and thus our externality, even in the form of death.

In essence, Fritsch is challenging Spinoza's logic of ethical alliance and ethical transformation, and thus urging me to be less faithful to Spinoza's express claims and, in his

view, truer to my own interpretation of his ontology, especially as it is laid out in the first chapter of the book in the section on “transindividuality.” Ultimately, his question could be expressed thus: Doesn’t reading modal life in terms of Simondon’s transindividuality commit me to affirming negation, otherness, and even the non-alien character of death as part of a self-affirming, self-aware ethical life? Aren’t Spinoza’s avowals that a “free man thinks of nothing less than death” (*Ethics* IV, prop. 67), and that what destroys me is always “external” to my essence or nature (*Ethics* III, prop. 6), in great tension or even contradiction with his claims that we only exist by virtue of the concurrent activity of others (*Ethics*, *ubique*), and that we must undergo constant mutation in order to remain ourselves (*Ethics* II, prop. 13, postulate IV)?

Ultimately, these questions pertain to a distinction that neither Spinoza nor I always make explicit between reasoning from two different metaphysical perspectives: essence versus existence. In the realm of essence, and thus when reasoning *sub specie aeternitatis*, Spinoza claims that what is “opposed” to me, what excludes my existence, does not belong to my essence, does not define my nature, and thus, insofar as I am free, or unlimited, I do not think at all of these features of the existing world. It would be too strong to say that I do not think of “others,” since Spinoza thinks that the concurrent forces upon which I depend, and without which I would not be, are not “external” to my nature even if they might be external to my body. Thus, this form of self-affirmation, Fritsch is right, properly involves affirming others, but these are particular kinds of others, others that allow me to be, sustain my perseverance in being, and enhance my power to think and act. Thus, neither oxygen nor God’s power as expressed in my own desire to live, nor my teachers nor my sympathetic interlocutors nor my animal and plant companions are external to me, even if they (except for God *qua* my *conatus*) have their own independent strivings, insofar as they nourish and concur with me. Yet, Fritsch observes that I

simply do not persevere in time without undoing what I was, and so mustn't I affirm, at the limit, my own death?

For Spinoza, my death and those forms of otherness that exclude my existence are real and necessary features of my existence (but not my essence), my being *sub specie durationis*, and thus part of my practical reasoning rather than, to use non-Spinozist vocabulary, my pure theoretical reasoning. In practical life, and thus in the realm of what most of us think of as ethics, the first axiom that undergirds my self-understanding is that there is always something more powerful than me, capable of destroying me (*Ethics* IV, axiom 1), and, indeed, the totality of other beings surpasses me infinitely in power (*Ethics* IV, prop. 3). To function in daily life, I cannot but think about what excludes my existence, the “common dangers” posed especially by other humans (*Ethics* V, prop. 10, scholium), and I must work hard not to be determined above all by my fear of pain, suffering, and death. Spinoza believes that most people are driven by their fear of pain, suffering, and death, and this is why we often make such foolish decisions, and establish such repressive societies. Building an ethics around the logic of existence rather than that of essence, he maintains, results in servility. This is an ethics that cannot pursue the good directly, but only as an afterthought.

Now, Fritsch is not advocating a servile ethics, which would be one built on the fear of death, but rather an ethics that affirms the necessity of death by virtue of our ineluctable implication in the beings of others. Yet, when he doubts the virtues of pursuing “the good” at the conclusion of his comments, the specter of scarcity and violent death emerge. Spinoza's wager, and I suspect he is right, is that when you start with the thought of death, with what threatens to exclude, harm, and mutilate us, you get an ethics of practical reason—a calculus of costs and benefits—that never reaches the therapeutic goals of Spinoza's ethics of radical affirmation. This

is not to say that a complete ethics (in which is included politics, for Spinoza) can leave aside the concerns with dangers, threats, and the many poisonous features of our life-worlds, but it cannot have these as their foundation. The order of reasoning requires that we first learn to regard ourselves as eternal expressions of nature's infinite power and then determine the practical limits of that power, and how best to live within them. Given the immense difficulty of thinking about ourselves as part of nature, and of considering our singular powers as perfect in their own right, I suspect that Spinoza is right. Yet, this is not to insist that Fritsch is wrong about the need to accept and ultimately affirm our own deaths, but to surmise that such acceptance of the volatility of this life can only come after feeling the thrill of life as such.

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