

# **Spinoza's Radical Naturalism**

**Fall 2019**

by Eva Perez de Vega

# ***Spinoza's Radical Naturalism***

*by*  
***Eva Perez de Vega***

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>p.1</b>
<b>I. THE NATURE OF SPINOZA'S NATURE</b>	<b>p.2</b>
1.1 Naturing and natured nature	
1.2 God or Nature: God is Nature and Nature is God	
1.3 Spinoza's anti-humanism: human but not anthropocentric	
<b>II. THE RADICALITY OF SPINOZA'S NATURE</b>	<b>p.9</b>
2.1 Ecology: non-anthropocentric nature of Spinoza's human nature	
2.2 Neuroscience: naturalistic theory of mind, affects and conatus	
2.3 Feminism: implications of Spinoza's mind-body for feminists	
<b>III. SPINOZA'S RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY LIFE</b>	<b>p.18</b>
3.1 Summary of main points	
3.2 Some objections	
3.3 Concluding remarks	
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>p.22</b>

## ABSTRACT

This paper is a brief exploration into Benedict de Spinoza's fascinating conceptualization of human-nature relations. Using his posthumous magnum opus, the *Ethics*, as primary source, I will aim to show how Spinoza's non-anthropocentric thinking raises important implications for today's way of being in the world from an ecological point of view. My claim is that within the overall project of the *Ethics* there is an embedded radically ecological account of nature.

In part one, I will focus on Spinoza's principle of nature as providing an original non-anthropocentric mode of rational thinking about humans and our relationship with the environment. To give some grounding to the claim of radical naturalism, in part two I will touch on some Spinozistic influences in ecology, neuroscience and feminism— areas of research that are very much in flux today, and yet can be seen to have a novel grounding in Spinoza's Ethics.

I will, as much as possible, aim to stay within the text of the *Ethics*, as venturing into his other texts, or the richness of his letters, would possibly muddy the main goal of the paper. Similarly, I will only tangentially refer to secondary texts, and again refrain from using the point of view of others to draw the interpretations outlined in the paper. However, in the third part, I will address some possible objections to the paper's topic, and aim to provide a feasible response.

## I. THE NATURE OF SPINOZA'S NATURE

In this part I will address Spinoza's conception of nature, and aim to support the claim that within the overall project of the *Ethics* there is an embedded radically ecological account of nature.

Firstly, it may be necessary to clarify what I mean by an 'ecological account' and further, what makes Spinoza's account 'radical' in the light of it being ecological. To put it very succinctly, ecology deals with relationships between non-human and human entities on equal terms. In and of itself the word holds no hierarchy, no implicit supremacy of one species dominating another, no "*dominion within a dominion*"<sup>1</sup>; ecology is just one - unless further disambiguated by adding another term to it, such as urban ecology, dark ecology, deep ecology, to name a few. It may seem awkward to use a term that did not even exist in Spinoza's time<sup>2</sup> which is why I will often use the term 'naturalism' rather than ecology, that makes reference to the Latin term used so profusely by Spinoza himself: *Natura*. In this paper I will use the term 'naturalism' as synonymous of what today we understand as an ecological point of view.

The term 'radical' refers to the root, from its Latin origin *radicalis*. The radical nature of Spinoza's conception of nature, or how deep it goes into the root of the term will hopefully unfold in the next few pages.

### 1.1 Naturing and natured nature

Two of the well-known and much discussed terms relating to Spinoza's conception of nature are *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*, which could be translated as "nature naturing" and "nature natured" respectively. These are notions Spinoza uses to "*divide the whole of Nature*"<sup>3</sup>. The first, *Natura*

---

<sup>1</sup> Here I am making reference to Spinoza's critique of humans assuming they are a "*dominion within a dominion*" with respect to Nature, believing our laws to be outside of nature rather than "*following the common laws of Nature*". The Ethics, III. Preface. P.152  
assumption that we are

<sup>2</sup> Ecology it is a late 19th century word that emerges etymologically from the Greek *oikos* or house, and *logos*, study.

<sup>3</sup> I am placing Spinoza's quotes here, as translated by Curley, because I believe that it should not be understood as dividing in parts and I want to make it explicit despite the word "divide" appearing here. Spinoza's Nature is not divisible in parts- and he discusses

*naturans* is conceived, or constructed, entirely through itself, which Spinoza refers to as “*a being that we conceive clearly and distinctly through itself, without needing anything other than itself, (...) that is, God.*”<sup>4</sup> The second, *Natura naturata* is further divided by Spinoza into two aspects, universal and particular.<sup>5</sup> Universals, are those modes that depend on God immediately while the particular are singular things which are produced *by* the universal modes.<sup>6</sup> Nature is a substance, a unique and infinite substance, which by definition cannot be produced by anything else since a substance is conceived through itself and is in itself: “*In Nature there is nothing except substances and their affections.*”<sup>7</sup> Affection being something that is conceived through something other than itself: *natura naturata*.

One might be tempted here to claim that this division places these terms in opposition to one another, and indeed some scholars have seen it this way, but I would tend to side with the understanding of these being aspects of a single thing, not in opposition, even though the term “divide” is used in the draft, Spinoza did not believe that Nature, or God, can be divided into parts- and indeed uses this to critique human tendency to see everything in anthropomorphic terms.

Spinoza’s discussion of human prejudice with regards to nature is particularly important to give us an insight into his account of the human misconception of nature. He severely critiques the assumption held by most people that everything in nature acts on account of an end, just like humans do: humans act toward a goal, an end, and they do it to seek their own advantage. Even further, humans assume that everything in nature has a purpose that is fully human centric: “*they consider all natural things as a means to their own advantage.*”<sup>8</sup> It seems impossible for humans, who consider everything to be a means to an end -a human-centric end- to observe things in Nature and not assume that they

---

this elsewhere in the Ethics as a fallacy constructed by of human kind. Nature is an infinite substance and as such cannot be divided. See the Appendix to Part I of The Ethics.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*. Preliminaries. 57

<sup>5</sup> While these definitions are sourced from the “Non-geometrical draft” he returns to them in part I of the Ethics, when discussing substances and intellect The Ethics. I. 29 & P31 respectively

<sup>6</sup> In Spinoza’s words: “*Particular things are nothing but affections of God’s attributes, or modes by which God’s attributes are expressed in a certain an determinate way.*”

<sup>7</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*. I. P6C. page87

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, I. Appendix. P110

are there constructed for their own use, and further infer that there is a ruler, or rulers of Nature “*who had taken care of all things for them, and made all things for their use.*”

This critique of an anthropomorphized supreme being, or beings, endowed with human freedom, and ruling nature for human advantage is peppered throughout the text and made quite vivid when he mocks human belief that the worship of God is directed towards the goal of being loved by God<sup>9</sup>:

*So it has happened that each of them has thought up from his own temperament different ways of worshiping God, so that God might love him above all the rest, and direct the whole of Nature according to the needs of their blind desire and insatiable greed<sup>10</sup>*

Even the inconveniences of nature such as earthquakes, storms, diseases, are skewed into being thought of as acts by angry gods for sins committed by humans in their worship. This is the “whole construction” of belief and superstition, that Spinoza rejected in his life and in his writing, and that is rooted in his radical conception of nature as the infinite substance of which we, humans, are but a mode - an *affection of Nature*.

## 1.2 God or Nature: God is Nature and Nature is God

The expression “*Deus sive Natura*” -God or Nature- appears four times in the *Ethics*, implying that Spinoza equates the notion of God with notion of Nature. Indeed, the Latin word *sive*, as well as its English translation “or” can mean “either or” and can also mean “that is”, equating the two terms it separates and making them interchangeable. The *Ethics* is seen by some scholars as beginning with God but leaving us with the idea of Nature.<sup>11</sup> However, while some have only wanted to assume that

---

<sup>9</sup> Spinoza’s God can only love it(him)self

<sup>10</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*. I. Appendix. P111

<sup>11</sup> Etienne Balibar asserted this in his lecture to New School Philosophy students on December eleventh 2019, also mentioning Daniel Dennet’s rejection of Part 5 of the Ethics, where Spinoza seems to return to the notion of God. Balibar also speculated on performative effect of the phrase “*Deus sive Natura*” and on the possible reciprocal nature of the claim.

the movement is one-directional, meaning that by God we should understand nothing other than Nature, others have speculated on the possibility of the movement going both ways. In other words, that we could substitute the term 'Nature' in the *Ethics* whenever we see 'God', and also vice versa, we can place the word 'God' wherever there is 'Nature'. This of course creates some conflict in the text, and while it is outside of the goals of this paper to claim the validity of this claim, I introduce it briefly here to point to the metaphysical nature of Spinoza's Nature; which is not mere physical matter but rather an immanent metaphysical substance.<sup>12</sup>

Spinoza's Nature, is a substance or *a being* that is conceived only through itself. Spinoza uses the singularly unique term *substance* -infinite substance- to describe God or Nature, which gives Nature its metaphysical status of Nature-as-God or God-as-Nature:

*By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed.*<sup>13</sup>

However, while Nature is an immanent infinite substance it also encompasses earthquakes and disease and other materialist aspects. For Spinoza everything that exists is an aspect of nature, a mode of the infinite substance that is Nature, and everything follows the same basic laws of Nature. As such, human beings are also modes of Nature, and hence they can be explained and understood in the same way as everything else is explained and understood in Nature.

This aspect of Spinoza's philosophy is his radical naturalism. It is radical in the forwardness of the claim not just at the time when he was making it, but even today. This is the radically ecological view of the world which I referred to at the beginning of the paper; one that humans are still not really able to come to terms with, as we still see ourselves as the supreme species with moral superiority over others and over our own environment. For Spinoza, God or Nature—being one and the same thing—

---

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in his letter to Oldenburg he criticizes materialism.

<sup>13</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*. I.D3

is the whole, infinite, eternal, necessarily existing, active system of the universe within which absolutely everything exists. This is the fundamental principle of the *Ethics* and his radical naturalism, where humans are just a Spinozist mode.

### 1.3 Spinoza's anti-humanism: human but not anthropocentric

Spinoza is very critical with what he observes as the human inability to believe that things in Nature are not made to satisfy a human goal or to give human life meaning. He seems almost amused at the fact that humans cannot believe that things make themselves for no human purpose at all:

*I believe that, if a triangle could speak, it would say, in like manner, that God is eminently triangular, while a circle would say that the divine nature is eminently circular. Thus each would ascribe to God its own attributes, would assume itself to be like God, and look on everything else as ill-shaped.<sup>14</sup>*

In the Preface to Part three Spinoza mocks human notion of being in Nature as a “*dominion within a dominion*”, with its three-fold implications that he denies: firstly, that humans are determined by themselves and have free will<sup>15</sup>; secondly that Nature does things for a cause; and thirdly, that God can be anthropomorphized and given human attributes. These three points which Spinoza mocks in human nature are the basis of what could be conceived as his anti-humanist perspective; one which is very human but not anthropocentric.

*Hence it happens that one who seeks the true causes of miracles, and is eager, like an educated man to understand natural things, not to wonder at them, like a fool, is generally considered an impious heretic and denounced as such by those whom the people honor as interpreters of Nature and the gods.<sup>16</sup>*

---

<sup>14</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, Letter 56, to Hugo Boxel

<sup>15</sup> Importantly, in Spinoza there is no transcendent freewill; everything is causally determined through natural causation

<sup>16</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*. I. Appendix. P113

If humanism is characterized by the belief that humans become the measure of all things, the image of the Vitruvian man by DaVinci as perfect example of this supremacy, anti-humanism at a very basic level rejects this assumption. However, Spinoza's anti-humanism, is not limited to his critique of human belief of superiority over other animals. But the directions of anti-humanists could be two-fold; on the one hand believing that humans are not the supreme species because they claim that God is, on the other there is no supremacy to be had at all. Spinoza may fit paradoxically into both anti-humanist definitions, depending on your reading of his work. I do not wish to make arguments for one or the other here, merely to claim that his anti-humanism is key into understanding his relevance in today's world. Beyond labels, the strength and fascinating power of Spinoza's philosophy is exemplified in quotes such as the following, where he unabashedly shows us his non-anthropomorphic and anti-humanist thinking:

*"I shall treat the nature and power of the affects, and the power of the Mind over them, by the same method by which, in the preceding parts, I treated God and the mind, and I shall consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies."*<sup>17</sup>

This is considered a typically a rationalist quote, and it certainly is given that human affects and follies are being treated dispassionately, as one would treat geometric entities. However, it is also a radically naturalist approach, because human affects are being equated to any other singular thing in Nature. Affects have causes and properties, just as any other entity in Nature, and as such they are just "*as worthy of our knowledge as the properties of any other thing*". Thus, affects such as hate, anger, envy, and the like, follow the same necessity and force of Nature as any other thing; there is no hierarchy of importance here between the properties of a mathematical entity such as a plane, and the properties of a human affect such as anger.

---

<sup>17</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*. III. Preface

The significance of Spinoza's *Ethics* today, is also rightly expressed by Spinoza himself at the end of part II, in four points of timeless advice of which I will highlight the following:

*This doctrine 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; and also insofar as it teaches that each of us should be content with his own things, and should be helpful to his neighbor, not from unmanly compassion, partiality, or superstition, but from the guidance of reason.*<sup>18</sup>

One cannot overestimate the relevance of these words in today's world. It teaches us to not attach unduly human meaning to things that happen which are not in our power to change. Things that do not follow from our nature are not in our power so we must deal with them in the same way that a triangle deals with its three angles equaling two right angles. However, we do have the power to change the quality of our affects through self-reflection and reason, and transform negative affects, such as sorrow and pain, into positive affects by understanding their cause. Only knowledge of the affects can replace the fiction of free will and allow us to transform the quality of the affects from passive to active, and thus move towards ethical liberation.

In this first part of the paper I aimed to show that according to Spinoza there exists only one substance *God or Nature* which can be used interchangeably: God is Nature and Nature is God - a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Nature is an all-encompassing substance, which is immanent and also able to generate all finite singular things, which are not treated any differently than divine attributes: finite and infinite are on equal plane of importance, there is no substantive difference between God-Nature and its-his modes. Spinoza's is a philosophy of affirmation and positivity, which is also why his work is of great relevance and influence on different areas of study, some of which I will touch on in the next part of this paper.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Part II. P152. Further reference: "For all things follow from God's eternal decree with the same necessity as from the essence of a triangle it follows that three angles are equal to two right angles"

<sup>19</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*. I. D6

## II. THE RADICALITY OF SPINOZA'S NATURE

In this part I will touch on a couple contemporary interpretations of Spinoza, to help support the claim of his radical naturalism. Recalling however that the term 'radical' holds an almost contradictory meaning in its etymology, which is curiously mirrored in the interpretation of Spinoza's own radicalism; from its original Latin derivation of 'root' we extract the meaning of digging deeply in order to get to the root, or return to the origins, so to speak, but at the same time and almost paradoxically, this return will push us into the more progressive interpretations of the word implying social and political change.<sup>20</sup>

Here I will touch on three fields that I find to be particularly important to contemporary life, and which I believe can be -and have been- radicalized under the guidance of Spinoza's *Ethics*: Ecology, Neuroscience, and Feminism. All three areas of research rely on a non-dualistic approach to the mind and body, as well as a non-hierarchical and non-anthropocentric notion of the human shown through Spinoza's radically naturalistic concept of nature and his unique concept of *conatus*. As I have focused on Spinoza's concept of Nature in the first part of this paper, here I will briefly introduce his notion of *conatus* in order to refer to it throughout this second part.

*Conatus*, which many see as the core of Spinoza's philosophy<sup>21</sup> is difficult to translate from its Latin origin, however we can loosely claim that it is a 'power of acting' or a striving to persevere in our existence. It is one's innate inclination to persevere and enhance one's being in order to exist and keep existing, but also to exist *well*, to be healthy and happy. We do this through what he identifies as our 'internal power of acting'. By *power*, however, Spinoza is not referring to the power that one can exercise over others, rather to one's own internal power of being. So *striving* is a mode of being that defines the very being, and it is a dynamic principal that involves internal action. Spinoza's concept of

---

<sup>20</sup> These however will not be part of this paper given the vastness of the topic, suffice it to say that these implications have been further developed in secondary literature

<sup>21</sup> See Yirmiyahu Yovel "Transcending Mere Survival: From Conatus to Conatus Intelligendi" in *Desire and Affect. Spinoza as Psychologist*.

desire<sup>22</sup>, as it relates to *conatus*, is also key to understand his radical naturalism within the affects, which I will discuss further in the context of neuroscience.

## 2.1 Ecology: non-anthropocentric nature of Spinoza's human nature

A self-proclaimed Spinozist philosopher and mountaineer from Norway, Arne Naess, coined the term *deep ecology*<sup>23</sup>, largely supported by his interpretation of Spinoza's naturalism. Like Spinoza, Naess critiques human tendency to see everything in nature as existing for human advantage which is a form of objectifying nature for human subjects. This objectification of nature is termed 'shallow ecology' and placed in sharp opposition to 'deep ecology' that Naess is proponent of. He distinguishes *deep ecology* from *shallow ecology* which he saw as being focused primarily on the health and affluence of people, as opposed to a supposedly 'deeper' ecology which views humanity as an inseparable part of nature.<sup>24</sup> Thus, in shallow ecology pollutants might be banned on the premise that they are harmful to humans, whereas in deep ecology the concern is whether they are harmful to nature. Naess dedicated his life to what he formulates as *ecosophy*<sup>25</sup> a conception for life whose term is derived from the word *ecology* "the study interrelationships," and *sophia*, "wisdom." There is a large following of this movement, that assumes ecology is a kind of metaphysical naturalism whereby humans are natural entities. However, somewhat paradoxically, while humankind is an integral part of its natural environment, humans are also seen as a threat to nature.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in his writings Naess shows a clear preference for natural values over cultural values, particularly western ones.

Deep ecology has been criticized for invoking modernist notions of nature and retained the

---

<sup>22</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*. III. P9. Schol. desire is defined as an appetite together with the consciousness of that appetite, and since appetite is a striving of the mind and body, desire is also of the mind and body.

<sup>23</sup> Together with George Sessions, Naess put forth eight principals from which the 'deep ecology platform/movement' (DEP) emerged. The points were published in "Deep Ecology; Living as if Nature Mattered" by Sessions and Gibbs.

<sup>24</sup> Eddy De Jonge. *Spinoza And Deep Ecology: Challenging Traditional Approaches To Environmentalism*. p1

<sup>25</sup> Naess defined ecosophy in the following way: "By an ecosophy I mean a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy as a kind of sofia (or) wisdom, is openly normative, it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe. Wisdom is policy wisdom, prescription, not only scientific description and prediction. The details of an ecosophy will show many variations due to significant differences concerning not only the 'facts' of pollution, resources, population, etc. but also value priorities.

<sup>26</sup> As we have become accustomed to hearing humankind is indeed a threat to itself because it is a threat to its own environment.

very conceptual binary it wishes to dispel. For all its good intentions, there is an inherent dualism in the way that his deep ecology asserts itself as the ‘true’ way of thinking about nature; where anything in the form of culture or non-pure-nature, is tainted by human hand and isthus proof of ecological damage. Paradoxically, the more we venerate a pristine concept of nature as the place we need to appreciate and respect, the more we set up rules and principals that keep us separated from it. In an era where the technological and the cultural are an inseparable part of our being, deep ecology appears to be a puritanist and reactionary vision. Under this conception, nature is thought of as something pristine, pure, wild, and immediate; something that we can look at, sometimes touch, and almost always end up destroying.

Naess’ concept of deep ecology makes nature into a being of which humans are outside of, and in so doing it subjectifies nature. Those who critique Naess do so on the basis of precisely this. According to the author of the influential book *Ecology Without Nature*, deep ecology is paradoxically opposed to a truly profound ecological view. Timothy Morton contends that a really deep ecology would let go of the idea of nature because it marks the difference between ‘us’ and ‘it’. He argues that the chief stumbling block to environmental thinking is the idea of nature itself, and sets out to expose that, paradoxically, in order to have a proper ecological view, one must relinquish the ‘idea’ of nature. In other words, our way of thinking about it needs to be structurally realigned so as to assume the inexistence of nature as such because: “*the ultimate obstacle to protecting nature is the very notion of nature we rely on.*” This ecology without the concept of nature therefore rejects the term nature to favor an ecology which claims to takes the catastrophic and ‘dark’ parts of nature into account. This is coined by Morton as *dark ecology*, rejects the concept of nature used by Naess and the like.

My claim is that Spinoza is much more radical than these contemporary thinkers. I would agree that if shallow ecology objectifies nature, deep ecology to some important degree subjectifies nature, and is thus it is no less dualistic, which is contrary to Spinoza’s philosophy that Naess relies on to build his *ecosophy*. But the relatively recent term *dark ecology* which offers itself as a counterpart to

Naess' deep ecology, seems to be nothing more than a re-packaged Spinozistic Nature, despite the complete absence of Spinoza as a reference in these texts.<sup>27</sup>

Effectively, the mere fact of using the term “dark” to describe their re-conceptualization of nature as non-andromorphic, is already making it much more human-centric as it is projecting a negative (dark) term to ecology which in itself (from a non-human perspective) is just a transformation of matter. So dark ecology is claiming to be non-anthropocentric by using terms that already qualify nature under purely anthropocentric terms. While Naess isn't exactly being Spinozistic (even though he is indebted to Spinoza) because his deep ecology does imply certain dualism, which contradicts Spinoza; the proponents of dark ecology and that line of thinking<sup>28</sup> who omit Spinoza from their writings entirely, I see as an unreferenced repackaging of Spinoza's concept of Nature.

Spinoza's is an ecology that *intensifies* and *expresses* nature though all things on equal terms. Nature as One, in Nature or God, in considering all things, humans, and other bodies, stones, trees, tables, as modes of the attribute of Nature, we arrive at a comprehensive ontology of complex systems defined not by their identifying properties, not by whether they have natural or artificial essences, but by their process of production and their *conatus*. This we could label as ‘flat ecology’ which turns ecology into a complex transdisciplinary project that dissipates all hierarchy and notions of species superiority.

## 2.2 Neuroscience: naturalistic theory of mind, affects and conatus

The foundational ideas that compose Spinoza's non-anthropocentric conception of the human, as mentioned earlier, are his conception of Nature and of *conatus*, from which his theory of mind-body and affects emerges. Under the umbrella of Neuroscience, and supported by the work of Antonio Damasio, the claim here is that Spinoza provides a naturalistic account of the mind, premised on the

---

<sup>27</sup> As far as I know Morton and those who use the term “dark ecology” do not reference Spinoza, although I could be wrong and would welcome any reference that I may have missed.

<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately labeled as *Object Oriented Ontology*

thesis that mind encompasses the body, that at the root of life there is a striving to persevere, and that our activities are related to this *conatus* which is the very essence of our being. To recall, *conatus* is the striving to persevere in one's existence.<sup>29</sup> Spinoza's concept of desire, as it relates to *conatus*, is also key to understand his radical naturalism within the affects. Desire is one of the three primary affects defined in Part III of the *Ethics*, together with Joy and Sadness, from which Spinoza derives all other affects. However, it plays a key role not only as a generator of other affects within the following pages of the text, but also as a way for us, modern readers, to question assumptions embedded in our way of thinking about human affects; how we humans implicitly believe ourselves to be distinct from nature and a superior species, and our dualistic way of framing the world.

By definition<sup>30</sup> *desire* is our natural striving to preserve and enhance our being, and importantly, it encompasses an awareness of this striving. Insofar as it is an awareness of the striving to continue to exist, it is also the end for which humans do things, so in that sense it is our essence, or that which defines our existence. Importantly, for Spinoza we don't desire something because we think it to be good, rather, it is good because we desire it and because it is consistent with our nature. This, which might sound odd from our contemporary viewpoint, works brilliantly within Spinoza's ontology, and I would claim it also liberates the contemporary reader to relate to these terms anew. Human desire for Spinoza does not hold the negative conceptions that we implicitly hold, and that have been handed to us from religious doctrines<sup>31</sup>. Spinoza's *desire* is a positive affect, insofar as it agrees with our nature. From this we can see how *desire* is also a term which illustrates Spinoza's radical naturalism.<sup>32</sup>

As neuroscientist Antonio Damasio notes in his crisply written book homage to our philosopher, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*, Spinoza was among the first to develop a genuinely naturalistic theory of mind, emotion, feeling, and value. At the heart of Spinoza's

---

<sup>29</sup> Spinoza defines *conatus* as “the power of anything (...) by which it endeavors to persist in its own being.” The *Ethics*, III. p. 108.

<sup>30</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*. III Definition of the Affects I.

<sup>31</sup> Here, and in other parts where I mention *religion*, I am referring specifically to Christian and Jewish traditions dominant in the West.

<sup>32</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*. IV P18: *A desire which arises from joy is stronger, other things equal, than one which arises from sadness*

understanding of the mind is the thesis that the mind is an ‘idea’ of the body. In Spinoza’s world, the mind and body are one and the same thing, just seen from different viewpoints; one is the attribute of extension the other attribute of thought. In his words: “*The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body*”<sup>33</sup>. Further, the *affects* are states of the mind and body by which our power of acting is increased or diminished.<sup>34</sup> In other words, mind is not something separated from the body, it is not a faculty of reason detached from the body and governing the body, but rather there is a parallelism between mind and body in which mental states are reflections of bodily states. These bodily states are what Damasio calls *emotion* and which Spinoza called *affects*. For Damasio emotions are automatic and innate physiological reactions which become *feelings* through self-awareness and self-reflection. This is precisely Spinoza’s doctrine of self-reflection to understand the causes of affects, now backed by a neuroscientist’s empirical observation of multiple subjects under his practice. Spinoza criticizes those who confuse the divine with the human, and in so doing ascribe human affects to God, because they are ignorance of the cause of human affects. To free ourselves from the bondage of human affects, and increase our power, we can make efforts to understand our affects and have adequate ideas. Affects that emerge from adequate ideas are active, those that are inadequate are passive and they hold us hostage, thus also decreasing our power of active in, or *conatus*.<sup>35</sup>

Damasio himself has come to see his work and also the general thrust of the field of neuroscience as having been anticipated by Spinoza. Damasio's own neurobiological account of the emotions and of the origin of value captures and confirms the basic thrust of Spinoza's conatus theory, namely, his conjecture that we have basic biological homeodynamic survival and enhancement mechanisms and that they are at the root of our capacity for valuing external objects and states of affairs and especially other people insofar as the latter contribute to or interfere with survival and its enhancement.

---

<sup>33</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*. II.P13

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., III. D3: “By affect I understand the affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., *The Ethics*. V P2 & P4

### 2.3 Feminism: implications of Spinoza's mind-body for feminists<sup>36</sup>

In the *Ethics* Spinoza rejects and argues against a number of established dualisms; most notably the mind- body dichotomy and the dialectic between nature and culture, both of which are associations that have helped deepen the dualistic view of what is male and what is female. While Spinoza does not address the male-female duality explicitly, his ontology of the individual has much to teach us regarding dualities and separates him substantially from Cartesian philosophy. Descartes' dualist view maintains that the mental and the physical have completely different, almost opposing and irreconcilable properties, where the mind is dominant and in control of the body, giving it instructions on what to do. In this view the mind is a non-physical entity so its faculties cannot be explained in terms of the physical body.<sup>37</sup> There is a clear relationship of domination between the mind and the body in the Cartesian view, which parallels the male-female structure of domination, described in many feminist texts such as Simone de Beauvoir's seminal book *The Second Sex*.

Spinoza's philosophy of the mind completely reverses this dualist view, and puts into question the structure of domination of the mind over the body. In his monism there exist no fundamental divisions between the mind and the body, they are both part of one single substance.<sup>38</sup>

Spinoza's body is not the same body, or rather, it is not *solely* a body; it is a body in a broader materialist conception. For Spinoza the body and the mind are the same thing, a single substance, just seen from different points of view: extension and thought: "*The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body.*"<sup>39</sup> Pointing further into his anti-dualistic view, for Spinoza the mind is not a spiritual God-given thing but rather something generated from nature and as naturally derived as the body.<sup>40</sup> For him the

---

<sup>36</sup> For more on this topic please see the publication of Public Seminar by the author, Spinoza and Feminism *Questioning the Structures of Domination*: <https://publicseminar.org/2018/04/spinoza-and-feminism-question-the-structures-of-domination/>

<sup>37</sup> See Damasio's " *The Feeling of What Happens*

<sup>38</sup> Spinoza's ontology also lack the distinction made by Descartes between the creator and the created, which again parallels the biblical view of the woman as created by the male body.

<sup>39</sup> Benedict de Spinoza. *The Ethics*. II, L1

<sup>40</sup> This view, with its atheist implications, was particularly radical considering the time and circumstances in which Spinoza lived.

mind and the body are two attributes of one same reality which can be seen from different viewpoints but are ontologically the same thing. In his words:

*the mind and the body are one and the same individual, which is conceived now  
under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension.*<sup>41</sup>

From this proposition we can see that for Spinoza anything that occurs in the mind happens in the body. Thus, neither the body nor the mind prevail over the other, neither one is dependent or dominant over the other; the body cannot command the mind to think and the mind cannot make the body be in motion or rest.

In making the mind and body one and the same thing, the capacity of the body is mirrored in the capacity of the mind. Furthermore, the more complex the mechanisms of the body, the more complex the mechanisms of thought in the mind.<sup>42</sup> From this it would follow that a more complex body is a more complex mind. In other words, the more the body is capable of, the more the mind is also be capable of. Without aiming to claim superiority of one over the other, I am tempted to say that female bodies are more complex, and capable of much more than male bodies. Granted they are both complex organisms, even without any medical knowledge of human bodies, one could certainly say that due to female reproductive organs, the female body is inherently more complex and capable of *doing* much more. It has the capacity for more complexity, even if this capacity (say, reproduction) is not instantiated.

Spinoza's ontology is completely subverting the structure of gender domination, which is built on the belief that men are more capable of complex abstract thinking, and women are more *intuitive* thinkers devoted to the more 'natural' issues related to the body, such as caregiving and child-rearing. His work in the *Ethics* offers an alternative to Cartesian dualism, which has permeated into multiple aspects of society and contributed to justify the structures of domination on which society is built. It

---

<sup>41</sup> Benedict de Spinoza. *The Ethics*. II P.21 Schol.

<sup>42</sup> Spinoza, in Curley's translation, doesn't use "complex" but "composite". However, the Postulates on page 128 contribute to making the point synthesized above.

is easy to see how Spinoza's mind-body conception is able to reduce these beliefs into ridicule. Further, it is curious and fascinating for a philosopher who is labeled as a 'rationalist' to affirm that the highest form of knowledge is *intuition*, one that has been associated to be a more feminine than masculine trait.<sup>43</sup> Highest forms of knowledge in Spinoza are derived from a strictly immanent and natural source, which one of the main aspects that makes his ontology so welcoming to feminist thinkers.

I will conclude this part with a quote from the preface to Part III of the *Ethics*, *Of the Affects*, which I believe illustrates very eloquently why Spinoza is still so influential in what may appear to a contemporary reader as three desperate fields -ecology, neuroscience, and feminism- but that are unified under Spinoza's conception of Nature:

*nothing happens in Nature which can be attributed to any defect in it, Nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same, that is, the laws and rules of Nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same. So the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, namely, through the universal laws and rules of Nature.*<sup>44</sup>

Spinoza's Nature is radical at multiple levels. One level is its affirmative force, free of the negative connotations heavy in western religion, while still encompassing what we humans perceive as negative forces in nature; or events we describe as 'natural disasters' and Spinoza calls "*inconveniences of nature*." Another level is its non-dualistic, monistic whole-ness, that makes no distinction between the material and the spiritual while still encompassing the two as aspects of the same thing. Spinoza's Nature is as much practical as it is metaphysical; concerning the everyday finite world as well as the divine and infinite -*Natura naturans* & *Natura naturata*.

---

<sup>43</sup> In II P.40 Scol.2 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza distinguishes between three kinds of knowledge of which the body may be capable: first, *opinion or imagination*, which provides only inadequate ideas; second, *reason*, which is built on simple adequate ideas moving us toward awareness of their more causes; third, *intuition*, which is the highest form of knowledge as it is a great source of adequate ideas.

<sup>44</sup> Benedict de Spinoza. The *Ethics*. III. Preface, p.153

### III. SPINOZA'S RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY LIFE

Despite the apparent clarity of its geometric structure, it is no secret that Spinoza's *Ethics* is a deeply complex text. In this paper, I have aimed to follow the spirit of the class for which it is written, namely, to stay close to the text itself and avoid using secondary sources, or even other texts by Spinoza unless it is to make explicit points that are developed from a close reading of the *Ethics*. I believe this has allowed me to inject some contemporary topics and personal interests into the paper, that I believe are, paradoxically, made more relevant through the reading of this seventeenth century text. My hope is that by focusing on what I claim is Spinoza's radical naturalism, I have illustrated how Spinoza's philosophy is of the human without it being anthropomorphic; of the individual without being individualistic; and most importantly that it is affirmative and inclusive, allowing us to rethink the present in novel ways.

#### 3.1 Summary of main points

To give a brief overview of the points made in this paper, in part one, I introduced the idea of *Nature* as a key concept in Spinoza's philosophy, that together with *conatus* will form the basis of Spinoza's radical naturalism. This part was further structured into three sections: in the first section I introduced the monistic conception of Spinoza's Nature known as *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*; in the second, I referred to the interchangeability of the terms God and Nature in Spinoza's ethical treatise; and in the third I used the terms introduced in the prior portions to make claims regarding what I consider to be Spinoza's deeply anti-anthropocentrism and anti-humanist philosophy. Overall, in part one I aimed to show that according to Spinoza there exists only one substance *God or Nature*, consisting of an infinity of attributes which is both immanent and material, able to generate all finite singular things. In the all-encompassing substance which is Nature there is no qualitative difference between the infinite and divine, or human and nonhuman modes of Nature.

In part two, I introduced the notion of *conatus*, also as central to Spinoza's ontology and built on Spinoza's radical naturalism through the introduction of three contemporary fields of study which have -and still do- draw deeply from Spinoza so as to understand the present anew. These fields considered, albeit briefly, are ecology, neuroscience and feminism. For ecology I stressed the non-hierarchical nature of Spinoza's Nature; for neuroscience I dealt mostly with the mind-body, the affects and conatus; and for feminism the focus was on the radical naturalism as it related to the mind-body, and intuition as a highest form of knowledge. My overall claim here is that Spinoza's work in the *Ethics* offers an alternative to Cartesian dualism, which has permeated into multiple aspects of society and contributed to justify the structures of domination on which society is built and to which our relationship with the environment is still anchored.

### 3.2 Some objections

There are many objections possible to the topics tackled in this paper. To address a few, one such objection could certainly come from the proponents of *dark ecology* and other recent movements claiming to have the strength to re-conceptualize our relationship to nature in order to create lasting, meaningful, change to the concept of ecology. These would claim Spinoza's work to be obsolete.

Having introduced contemporary conceptions of nature and ecology, such as shallow, deep and dark ecology, my claim was that Spinoza's concept of nature is much more radical than the followers of these self-proclaimed 'radical' contemporary notions. The relatively recent term *dark ecology* which emerges as a critique to deep ecology developed by Arne Naess, claims to be a non-nostalgic, non-hierarchical, non-dualistic, concept of ecology where nature as a pristine thing doesn't exist as it takes into account the indivisibility of the artificial and the natural but also the 'dark' aspects of nature. But Spinoza's Nature already took all this into account- and mocked humans for projecting meaning into earthquakes and the so-called 'darker' aspects of nature, claiming that these have no final cause or meaning from a human perspective. While deep ecology is openly indebted to Spinoza,

despite its obvious divergence, dark ecology does not make such claims. Instead it is self-proclaimed as a novel non-anthropocentric way of viewing the world. I can only reiterate that I see many of the recent accounts on ecology as a re-packaging of Spinoza's concept of Nature- of his *radical naturalism*.

Another objection could be that Spinoza's work has been interpreted in many different ways, and many different readings have been put forth of the *Ethics*. It is certainly true that in some areas of the *Ethics*, Spinoza is very succinct, which allows divergent interpretations and appropriations of his philosophy to be developed. For instance, the oneness of the mind-body could be interpreted differently when he argues that the existence of the body is what allows us to have an inseparable conception of body and mind; this can create different paths of interpretation that may even contradict one another. As a response here I will lean on, and agree with, Arne Naess' self-professed bias in his appropriation of Spinoza's Ethics:

*“my account of a philosophy, say that of Spinoza, will depend upon my own philosophy and my own general philosophy of history, my view of historical causality, and so on. As a philosopher, not a professional historian, I am not interested in hiding the dependence of my interpretation of the Ethics on my general philosophy, including my philosophy of history”*<sup>45</sup>

Lastly, the use of Spinoza's ontology as a framework to discuss feminism might be questioned and deemed inadequate by some, who might ask what the relevance of a white male from the seventeenth century is to contemporary feminist issues in the 21st century? I am certainly using his doctrine to support feminist ideals but will not deny that Spinoza is less than complimentary in the few mentions of women in the *Ethics*, who are otherwise completely omitted. Similarly, he writes surprising comments regarding children, equating them to fools and madmen. These are indeed oddities of the time in which he wrote, which is so far from ours that it is hard to judge him from our contemporary vantage. While I would agree with some of these critiques, the benefits of his philosophy applied to

---

<sup>45</sup> Arne Naess. “Spinoza and the Deep Ecology Movement” pg 396

our contemporary issues vastly outweigh the oddities mentioned. While Spinoza does not address the male-female duality explicitly, his ontology of the individual has much to teach us regarding dispelling dualities which are the foundation of structures of domination of all kinds, and as such should be a welcome inclusion in any reconceptualization of gendered relationships.

### 3.3 Concluding remarks

To conclude, the radical quality of Spinoza's ontology lies in it being a rich resource for understanding and reflecting on the present in new ways- in ways that may actually benefit the present itself. Spinoza's philosophy suggests that self-reflection and inspection can afford us new ways of being in the world which are inclusive of human and the non-human entities on equal terms. This is the persistent power of Spinoza's philosophy and of those, who like him, leave words for us to interpret and give new life to. I second the sentiment expressed in the quote below by Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari in their co-authored book *What is Philosophy*, who synthesize so eloquently the strength of Spinoza's philosophy from a contemporary viewpoint:

*If this book can be called 'Spinozist', we hope that this is, at least in part, because it engages Spinoza's thought in order to think our present differently. In putting Spinoza's philosophy to work we pay him the tribute of continuing an activity which is in the spirit of his own intellectual conatus – an activity of informed philosophical imagination, at the service of social critique.*

With this paper, I hope to continue the work of those who, like Spinoza, are no longer here but who continue to exist through their *intellectual conatus* and the words they have left us.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Damasio, Antonio *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling of the Brain*. New York: Random House, 2003

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage, 2011

Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Felix. *What is Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996

Deleuze, Gilles. *Expressionism in philosophy: Spinoza*. trans. Martin Joughin, New York: Zone Books, 1990

Devall, B., & Sessions, G. *Deep ecology: Living as if nature mattered*. Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith, 1985

Jonge, Eccy de. *Spinoza and Deep Ecology: Challenging Traditional Approaches to Environmentalism*, London & New York: Routledge, 2016

Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007

Naess, Arne. "Spinoza and the Deep Ecology Movement" in *The Selected Works of Arne Naess*, ed. A. Drengson. Dordrecht: Springer, 2005

Naess, Arne. *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*, eds by A.Drengson & B.Devall, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008

Perez de Vega, Eva. "Spinoza and Feminism Question the Structures of Domination"  
<https://publicseminar.org/2018/04/spinoza-and-feminism-question-the-structures-of-domination/>

Spinoza, Benedict d. "The Ethics" in *A Spinoza reader: the Ethics and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994

Spinoza, Benedict d. "Letter 56: To the highly esteemed and judicious Hugo Boxel from B.d.S." in *Spinoza: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. 2002

Yovel, Yirmiyahu. "Transcending Mere Survival: From Conatus to Conatus Intelligendi" in *Desire and Affect. Spinoza as Psychologist*, ed. Y. Yovel. New York: Little Room Press, 1999