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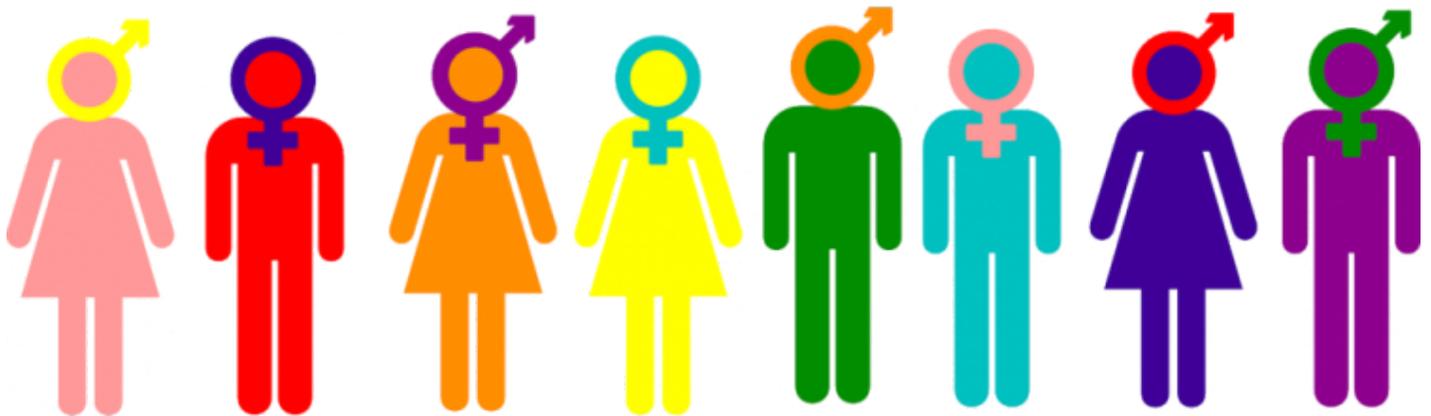


O.O.P.S. SEX & GENDER

Spinoza and Feminism Question the Structures of Domination

Is the mind-body problem a gender problem?

Eva Perez de Vega — April 30, 2018



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Traditional theory on the mind-body problem has been mostly conceptualized by men. The historical debate found its most heated moment in the seventeenth century between Rene Descartes and Benedict De Spinoza; the first advocating for the superiority of the mind over the body, and the latter with his characteristic Monist view framing the mind and body as one same substance. While it seemed that Descartes had won the debate, developments in neuroscience have been weighing towards the spinozistic conception. However, the feminine perspective had been largely ignored until Simone de Beauvoir published her seminal book in 1949. Feminists since then have had a conflicting relationship with the earlier debates, yet Spinoza's work, with its materialist framework, seems to be holding steady ground within the contemporary feminist movement. For instance, Spinoza's ontology is used as framework to discuss feminism (anarcha-feminism) in the text by Chiara Bottici, "[Bodies in Plural: Towards an anarcha-feminist manifesto.](#)" But this reliance on the dead white man as a means to parse through feminist issues poses some interesting questions, chief among them: can a white male from the seventeenth century provide any openings to thinking about the very contemporary problematics of women's issues in the twentyfirst century?

In *The Second Sex* De Beauvoir writes explicitly about the female body, about the physical cycles it undergoes: menstruation, pain, blood. De Beauvoir's body is intentionally physical. Her depiction exacerbates the materiality of female bodies, and in so doing brings into relief the dualistic conceptions of male and female bodies. The intensity of the writing illustrates her view that women have been thought of as the non-male (the other), associated with the body, nature, and instinct, as opposed to men who were deemed rational, intellectual beings of culture and mind; the creators from which woman is made as a sub-entity. Spinoza's body challenges this dualism. His is not the same body, or rather, it is not *solely* a body; it is a body in a broader materialist conception. It is an "eccentric materialism" that exceeds but nonetheless encompasses the physical body (See the work of neuroscientist Antonio Demasio, [on Spinoza](#) and [on Descartes](#)). For Spinoza the body and the mind are the same thing, a single substance, just seen from different points of view — extension and thought: as he writes in [his Ethics](#), "*The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body.*"

In the ontology put forth in his seminal work *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, which three

centuries later De Beauvoir would take explicitly to task. While Spinoza does not address the male-female duality, 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 (as can be seen from the illustration). In this view the mind is a non-physical entity so its faculties cannot be explained in terms of the physical body. 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 de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

Spinoza's philosophy of the mind reverses this dualist view and calls 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. Spinoza's ontology also lacks 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. 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 (This view, with its atheist implications, was particularly radical considering the time and circumstances in which Spinoza lived). For him the mind and the body are two attributes of one same substance which can be seen from different viewpoints but are ontologically identical. In his words: "*the mind and the body are one and the same thing, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension.*" 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. 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 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 more complex functions than are 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.

By re-integrating the mind and body, and situating complexity of the body as reflective of and equal to the complexity of the mind, Spinoza offers an alternative to Cartesian Dualism, which has permeated multiple aspects of society and contributed to justifying the structures of domination on which patriarchal society is built. Further, Spinoza's ontology may be said to invert 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 more *naturally* to issues of the body, such as caregiving and child-rearing, for example. (It is notable too that for Spinoza, intuition — as distinct from opinion, imagination, and reason — was the highest form of knowledge, the ultimate guarantor of truth and greatest source of ideas.) Thus, while some feminists actually claim Spinoza to be enforcing dualistic conceptions (See for instance, the work of Luce Irigaray), I would side with Bottici who interprets Spinoza in a way that can be a rich source for thinking about feminism.

I conclude this commentary by claiming that Spinoza's ontology is absolutely key to questioning dualistic assumptions from which the structures of domination are built. The quote below from **Deleuze and Guattari** synthesizes 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.

The sentiment in these words by is echoed in the work of Bottici, most vividly in her article on anarcha-feminism which sparked the writing of this commentary. Avowing the term anarcha-feminist, Bottici uses the work of Spinoza as framework to completely rethink 'what it means to be a woman' beyond the individual body, in pluralistic terms.

Her work I believe is evidence of how this particular seventeenth century white male can be pivotal in the advancement contemporary feminist issues.

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