

Memoirs of an Aspiring Spinozist

Rosi Braidotti*

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Rules of Engagement

One engages with Spinoza's thought at one's risk and peril. This is not a philosopher one encounters flippantly or discards lightly—reading his texts requires *gravitas*, but also a touch of recklessness. Special attention to the mode of approach to his *corpus* is called for, or else one might disappear within the gravitational pull of Spinoza's massive conceptual apparatus. Nothing would be less worthy of Spinoza than to become a Spinozist without knowing why, and yet it happens all the time. Accounting for how one does it, how one gets “into” Spinoza in the first place, sets the first meta-methodological requirement for his readers. And it is such a complex phenomenon, so slow and speedy at the same time, that often one does not even get beyond it. One just keeps on trying to begin with Spinoza, and his texts are like a receding horizon. One aspires to become a Spinozist, over and over again. Those repeated attempts at making sense of an affect, a yearning, that is neither fully actualised, nor remotely virtual, end up shaping what I would call a life *in* and *with* philosophy. A life concerning the affirmation of the positivity of the desire to adequately understand the conditions that shape our ignorance, our half-truths, let alone the fake news we are surrounded by. “We” has entered the conversation by now, because one can only produce adequate knowledge relationally and collectively. *One* is always *we*.

To discuss Spinoza, we need to plunge into a relational web of materially-grounded variables and encounters. All of them are bound to the specificity of one's location, speed, and intensity, but none is individual as such. These variables are rather relational, transversal, and collective—they connect each of us to a nonlinear web of heterogeneous others. Deleuze is so right: it is always a

* Utrecht University; r.braidotti@uu.nl; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5922-2324>

case of “us in the middle of Spinoza.”¹ Becoming-Spinozist, as if in passing, yet meaning it very much.

My approach to Spinoza has always been that of a cartographer. I positioned myself according to the following coordinates: trained in the history of philosophy, with feminist lenses, mostly thanks to Genevieve Lloyd; raised in the context of the Australian philosophical tradition of critical materialism, which is open to Indigenous philosophical insights; working in Continental French philosophy, mostly on and with Gilles Deleuze; co-developing feminist neo-materialism, alongside many in my generation; deeply committed to democracy, social justice and solidarity as affirmative ethical passions.

Ultimately, the starting point is also the destination: to position philosophical thinking in and for love of the world. Just that, all of that.

Conceptual Hubs

My critical Spinozism is built around two sprawling conceptual hubs. The first is vital materialism and the rejection of the dualistic divides: mind/body, nature/culture and humans/non-humans. Also known as methodological naturalism, this concept is central to the Continental philosophical tradition of immanence. The second hub is the positivity of desire, that is to say, the ontological function of desire as the constitutive capacity to persist and endure in one’s existence in relation with others. That is the anti-Hegelian aspect, which I also take as the prompt for a critique of psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious.

These relatively simple insights generate unimaginable degrees of complexity, in the shape of a multitude of corollaries, rhizomatic growths, far-fetched and fast-moving consequences and unpredictable effects that unfold freely. These lines expand in non-linear, nomadic, tentacular ways from the main conceptual hubs, as variations on a continuum, that is, the non-deterministic vision of living and self-organizing matter. I could not possibly cover them all here, but I can design some of their patterns of becoming, that is to say, their spinning effects and resonances.

1 The Vital Materialist Hub

1.1 Spinozist materialist philosophy produces a careful renaturalization of subjectivity that challenges the reductive aspects of social constructivism. That shift proved inspirational for feminist materialism and posthuman feminism. Nature is a natural-cultural continuum, yet fully immersed in history and social structures and vice-versa, without dualistic oppositions. What shoots out from this is an environmentally integrated form of trans-individuality of all entities, human beings included. This stresses the common nature of humans and nonhumans, thereby rejecting the transcendental power of consciousness as the distinctive human trait. Immanence rules.

1 Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 122.

1.2 This shift is also helpful in decentering human exceptionalism and undoing anthropocentrism. A new materialist approach displaces the boundary between *bios*, the kind of life that has traditionally been reserved for *Anthropos*, and *zoe*, the wider range of non-human life, in its generative vitality. This allowed me to expand the materialist relational ontology to cover not only organic non-human life—*zoe*—, but the geological foundations of living matter—*geo*—and technological mediation, producing a notion of subjects as “*zoe-geo-techno- based*.”

1.3 It is simply extraordinary that, for Spinoza, the vitality of matter extends to manufactured and artificial entities. It can therefore be replicated by the technological apparatus, which today is capable of going “live,” producing “smart” things and self-correcting Artificial Intelligence networks, objects, and relations. This enlarged and dynamic—or vital—vision of materialism extends beyond the reductively natural, while it also avoids holistic organicism. It provides a media ontology *avant la lettre*.

1.4 Thinking becomes an extra-textual practice—a philosophy of the outside. Adequate understanding is rational, in the sense of being rigorously argued, and not ideological—superstitious, fanatical or delusional. But it is not a case of transcendental reason at work as much as immanent, situated, *zoe-geo-techno-mediated* thinking at play. Thinking and living-with others, including human, non-human and technological others, requires a collaborative and relational praxis. It aims at reaching an adequate understanding of the material conditions that structure our subjectivity and connect us to others, including non-humans.

1.5 Spinoza’s radical democratic politics is practically irresistible. His communitarianism has inspired critiques of despotism, authoritarianism and fascist politics, electing democracy as the only system capable of supporting our collective quest for adequate knowledge of our living conditions. An epistemological effort that is supported by affirmative ethics.

Spinozist politics stands at a critical distance from the liberal philosophies of social contract theory, such as Locke and Hobbes, and supports a more radical idea of democracy from below.

1.6 Spinoza’s grounded perspectivism sustains a critical engagement with Indigenous and Aboriginal epistemologies. Ancient forms of Indigenous vital materialism can intersect and dialogue with Western philosophical attempts to rethink the unity of matter without deterministic hierarchies. Indigenous approaches moreover foreground the critique of settler colonialism and its violent management of less-than-human and non-human others. They criticize specifically Western dualism and the instrumental use that European thought since the Enlightenment made of dualistic oppositions. Instead of human/non-human, nature/culture distinctions, they tend to posit instead a “perspectivism” that rests on a continuum across all species. In other words, they all partake of the same living principle or soul, as each living entity is differential and relational, grounded on the Earth as the basic element. The Earth as the element that contains all others, for instance in the Aboriginal tradition, allows us to think of “country” as a method as well as a ruling concept. Country is a multi-dimensional idea that includes humans, rocks, animals, and clouds, embedding human subjects into their environment. It is a moral value that imposes a duty of planetary care, as well as an epistemological notion. Environmental theory and policy could learn from this.

2 Positivity of Desire Hub

2.1 Desire as *conatus* is overflowing abundance: one gives what one did not even suspect one had. Desire is not lack but plenitude, not negative dialectics but generative excess. Spinoza injects heavy doses of generosity into the discussion of desire, uncoupling it from narcissism and paranoia—the pillars of Western individualism. By reconnecting desire to its ontological roots as the inexhaustible capacity to persist and endure in one's existence against all odds, a Spinozist approach also instills the critique of possessive individualism. Capitalism is a code and system that prioritizes the acquisition of commodities as the answer to the ultimate question of what we desire. Debunking this egotistic and negative mode of relation through an ethics of affirmation consequently supports a radical democratic politics.

2.2 Spinozist joy and affirmation are the flow of living energy that feeds upon and nurtures in return multiscale degrees of engagement with entities of all kinds and species. It is a relational system geared to the production of different degrees of relational challenges and pleasures. It expresses the constitutive sense of well-being that “we”—living entities—derive from the sheer fact of staying alive together. But although “we” are in this predicament together, “we” are not One and the Same. There is no flat ontology at work in Spinoza: his system is both materialist and differential. Affirmation as an ethical affect is directly proportional to our respective abilities to activate and increase our relational ability, as the fundamental shared value. This approach includes also encounters with and processes of transformation of pain and loss. Affirmation is not the denial of pain, just a different way of processing it, through a collective praxis of co-construction of sustainable and generative alternatives.

2.3 Relational ontology within a differential vision of materialism means that in the beginning, there is a relation to other entities, in so far as we are all endowed with embodied minds and embrained bodies. This supported my efforts to think beyond the dialectics of devalorized—sexualized, racialized, and naturalized—differences. It grounded the political in the affirmative ethics of the collective construction of alternative feminist, anti-racist, and ecological subject positions beyond western humanism and anthropocentrism.

2.4 The emphasis on desire as freedom from lack and possession, that is to say, as a positive, non-reactive activity driven by the relation ethics of affirmation, is the major source of inspiration. Affirmation is the force that endures and sustains, whereas sad passions bring about impotence and disaggregation of forces. Affirmative ethics is the affect that binds together the heterogeneous components of complex subject assemblages: we are all capable of affecting and being affected.

Affirmative ethics is the effort at achieving mutually empowering relationships based on collaboration and the combination of the specific powers of each entity. Again, it is an aspiration that guides our attempts at pursuing generative relations. The aim is to increase the capacity to preserve oneself against adverse forces. Entities and individuals grow thanks to a collaborative community. What binds us together, beyond transactional and contractual interests, is the common propensity to persevere in our existence and increase our relational capacities. An ethics of affirmative collaboration is our common factor.

2.5 Spinoza's thoughts on death have captivated me. The point about life, as an immanent non-human force—*zoe*—is its monstrous energy, which transforms entities and transposes timelines, destroying much in passing. An essential part of life processes consists in collapsing and breaking down. Because so many of these processes involve non-human agents and entities, both life & death are impersonal, or rather a-personal or incorporeal forces. To depersonalize death means to labour to transcend its negative connotations, thereby liberating new modes of understanding, delinked from the bound self.

The distinction between personal and impersonal death is crucial for Spinoza. The former is linked to the suppression of the individualized ego, the latter is beyond the ego: a death that is always beneath, before and beyond the self. It pushes to the furthest boundary the notion of resilience and endurance, stressing each entity's ability to become other or something else. Death is caught in the cycle of never-ending metamorphoses as the transversal force that flows across space and time. It does not mark the end of time, as much as its recurrence, the repetition of our unceasing power to become. This is the force of affirmation of the interconnection with an "outside" that is *zoe*-geo-techno-mediated, planetary, and cosmic, and thus infinite.

2.6 Eternity can only be experienced within time. Personal death means one ceases to be part of that vital flow of positive and negative interactions with others, which is life itself. But something in one's existence does go on after death, though it is delinked from the continued existence of the actual self. The mind's eternity rests on its ability to understand itself as part of a larger reflexive totality. Given that the existence of the mind, however, is parallel to that of the body, the mind does cease to exist with the death of the body. But that does not mean that the idea of the embodied and embedded entity gets wiped out with the disappearance of the body. Nothing can ever change what one has been, so the truth of what has been the case cannot be lost. The force or intensity of one's existence remains steadfast: in so far as the subject is able to understand itself as part of a continuum nature, it perceives itself as eternal, that is to say, both vulnerable and indestructible.

Death may be the radical disruption of personal consciousness through the destruction of the individual body and the embodied portion of *conatus* which that body actualizes. But consciousness is not only personal. All material entities can understand themselves as partaking of a larger totality, which is by definition eternal in its recurrence. Wisdom lies in the contemplation of the eternity of life forces, which can only take place in and within time. Eternity is not the same thing as immortality or "lasting forever," but rather the opposite: dying into the affective traces of our presence in the world.

Being dead does not reduce one to the status of a figment of other people's imaginations, but instead it dissolves the self into an interconnected continuum with living matter as constant becoming. Whatever happens—and death always does happen—we will have been and nothing can change that, not even death itself. The future perfect paves the road to the continuous present of affective relations: it will have been just *a* life, one which I can aspire truly to call 'my own' only after I have lost it to others.

Living a philosophical life with Spinoza implies the acceptance of mutual dependence on others, but also resolute detachment from the half-truths we seem prone to produce together, especially at times of unrest and political turmoil. The deep aspiration to achieve freedom through adequate understanding of the conditions of our bondage, however, is what endures as a bond between us.

References

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