The Madeline Renee Turkeltaub Memorial Symposium on Ethics

*Spinoza: Feminist Perspectives/Aspects of Embodiment*

Monday, February 7, 2011
Butler Board Room
Butler Pavilion 6th Floor
American University
9:00 am to 5:15 pm

Co-sponsored by
The Turkeltaub Family Charitable Foundation
Washington Spinoza Society
Department of Philosophy and Religion
College of Arts and Sciences, American University
Hasana Sharp, McGill University

“Eve’s Perfection: Spinoza on Sexual (In)equality”

This paper demonstrates that Spinoza presents two diametrically opposed views on the question of sexual equality. In the Political Treatise, he contends that women are by nature, and not by convention, inferior to men. He further argues that women ought to be excluded from political office due to what amounts to their inability to practice virtue. The fact that women remain under the authority of men prevents them from being able to apprehend and desire their own good, and, by extension, the good of others. Spinoza presents an antithetical portrait of Eve in his peculiar retelling of the Fall in the Ethics. There, Eve’s nature accords perfectly with Adam’s, and their relationship was such that it might have enabled each to desire their own good, and thereby enjoy genuine freedom. Indeed, the perfection that was lost in the episode of the Fall, Spinoza suggests implicitly, was not proper to man, but lay between man and woman. Attention to Spinoza’s version of the story of the garden of Eden reveals the profound importance of the human bond for the enjoyment of freedom, and the possibility that women are not categorically excluded from Spinoza’s vision of virtue.

Claire Raymond, University of Virginia

“The Eternal Feminine: Spinoza/Goethe”

This presentation will be divided into three parts: an account of Goethe’s reading of Spinoza; the rising and working of the concept of God-Nature in Goethe’s poetical, dramatical and autobiographical production; and Faust’s “eternal feminine/feminal” interpreted in a spinozistic key. Goethe’s Second Faust ends with a quite enigmatic reference to the Eternal Feminine. The Ewig-Weibliche (literally, the “eternal feminal/feminine”) seems not to be meant in the anthropological sense of the Mediterranean Feminine, nor in the sense of a mysterious-esoteric reference. The delightful, but transforming, reading of Spinoza infuses in Goethe’s poetics—that is, an autobiography as well as the building of a philosophy—the seed of what will get the name of God-Nature—that is, the psychological as well as the dramatic version of a Substance, whose modes are momentarily “appearances.”

James Stam, American University

Respondent: Claire Raymond, University of Virginia
Moderator: Colin Marshall, New York University

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Lauren Weis is an Assistant Professor at American University. Her research focuses on critiques of the Western metaphysical tradition articulated by feminist theorists, as well as how the philosophical approach of twentieth century thinker Bernard Lonergan helps to clarify the relevance of metaphysical thinking to feminist theory. She is also interested in the notion of epistemic authority and the ethical challenges related to questions of belief, trust, and judgment.
Karen Houle is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Guelph, specializing in ethics and in social and political philosophy. She has authored articles on philosophical figures such as Foucault, Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Butler, and Irigaray; and on topics such as friendship, animal perception, abortion, surrogacy, intellectual property, feminism and ownership, politics and pedagogy, and standpoint epistemology. She has been nationally-recognized for her poetry: Ballast (House of Anansi Press, 2001) and During (Gaspereau Press, 2008). She is a also member of the Canadian “Community of Practice in Ecosystem Approaches to Health.”

Jean Johnson, PhD, RN, FAAN, is the Senior Associate Dean for Health Sciences at George Washington University and is responsible for developing numerous health professions programs, including programs for the nurse practitioner, emergency health services and physical therapy. She has provided leadership on national nurse practitioner issues as President of the National Organization of Nurse Practitioners as well as President of the American College of Nurse Practitioners. Dr. Johnson has served on national committees such as the Institute of Medicine’s Future of Primary Care Committee, the Pew-Fetzer Patient Centered Advisory Group, the Health Sector Assembly, The National Capital Area Health Care Coalition, and the Pew Health Professions Commission.

Colin Marshall is Assistant Professor and Faculty Fellow at New York University, where he received his Ph.D. in 2010. His research focuses on Kant, Spinoza and metaethics, and he has recently published in the British Journal for the History of Philosophy and in Philosophers’ Imprint.

Heidi Ravven is Professor of Religious Studies at Hamilton College. Her specialization is the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza and the medieval Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides. She has also published on Jewish feminism and on the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. Her work on Spinoza has led her to explore how contemporary neuroscience, especially the neuroscience of the emotions, forces us to rethink what it means for a person to be ethical. Ravven received an unsolicited four-year grant of $500,000 from the Ford Foundation to write a book titled, Searching for Ethics. In it, she is investigating the history of the way standard philosophy and Western culture in general approaches ethics, what is wrong about this approach, and how it could be set right. A major focus of the book is to rethink moral agency in the light of the new brain sciences. Spinoza's prescient approach to ethics is at the heart of this book. Searching for Ethics will be published by The New Press in 2011.

11:20 am – 12:05 pm  Sarah Donovan, Wagner College

“Spinoza’s Materialism: Resources for Feminist Philosophers”

Contemporary feminists have taken an interest in materialist readings of Spinoza’s work that demonstrate how he values the body against the seventeenth century norm of prioritizing the mind—without reversing the hierarchy. Feminists have long been interested in debunking the norm that would not only devalue the body, but also associate men with the mind and women with the body. Drawing on my book chapter “Rereading Irigaray’s Spinoza,” I will explain why certain materialist readings of Spinoza ought to be of interest to contemporary feminist philosophers, such as Luce Irigaray, as a reassessment of the value of the body (and, thereby, of the women associated with the body). Irigaray’s rationalist interpretation of Spinoza’s work prevented her from seeing his work as a resource for her own, and I argued that this interpretation is unproductive to her goals. I will extend my analysis here to demonstrate a way in which Spinoza’s work, understood in a materialist vein, will also advance Irigaray’s analysis of how to promote ethical relationships.

12:05 pm – 12:30 pm  Respondent: Lauren Weis, American University

Moderator: Colin Marshall, New York University

12:30 pm – 1:30 pm  LUNCH BREAK

1:30 pm – 2:15 pm  James Blair, National Institute of Mental Health

“The Neurobiologies of Morality”

In this paper, I will consider moral reasoning from a neurobiological perspective. I will consider two main issues: First, the importance of the amygdala and orbital frontal cortex in moral judgment and their functional roles; Second, the importance of systems engaged in “Theory of Mind” in moral reasoning. With respect to both, work with patient populations, individuals with psychopathy, neurological lesions, and individuals with autism will be cited to further understand the specificity of forms of moral reasoning and how they may break down.

2:15 pm – 2:35 pm  Respondent: TBA

Moderator: Jean Johnson, George Washington University
2:45 pm – 3:30 pm    Heidi Ravven, Hamilton College

“Did Spinoza Get Moral Psychology Right?”

After summarizing the new evidence from the brain sciences that is challenging the standard notion of free will agency, I argue two main points. First, I provide historical evidence that the free will model of moral agency that is still culturally dominant today has its origins in an Augustinian Christian theological anthropology that was secularized (but not fundamentally changed or relinquished) within the course of the standard history of philosophical ethics. Second, building upon what I argue is Maimonides’ radical naturalism, Spinoza’s philosophical anthropology anticipated a biological and systems model of the human person that is only now being confirmed and extended by the neuro- and cognitive sciences. It provides the resources for a revised and scientifically plausible model of moral agency.

3:30 pm – 3:50 pm    Respondent: Emilie Connolly, Johns Hopkins University
Moderator: Daniel Spiro, Washington Spinoza Society

4:00 pm – 4:45 pm    Karen Houle, University of Guelph

“How Spinoza’s Metaphysics Subverts Environmental Ethics as an Exercise in the Extension of Moral Standing”

I will speak about the general trend in Environmental Ethics—the bulk of intellectual labour—to try to extend moral standing to non-human entities (animals, plants, ecosystems) and why this effort is fundamentally wrongheaded. It is intellectually self-serving and environmentally (pragmatically) bankrupt. I will make explicit the ontological premises that that recent work presumes, and then contrast those with Spinoza’s metaphysical premises. I will then show how the ethical and political moves or norms that follow from the former do not follow from a Spinozist conception of nature and reality. And I will say what moves or norms do follow from a Spinozist conception and why I think these are true and more environmentally promising.

4:45 pm – 5:05 pm    Respondent: TBA
Moderator: Evan Berry, American University

5:05 pm – 5:15 pm    Concluding Remarks

There will be 10 minute breaks interspersed.

PARTICIPANTS

Evan Berry is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion at American University and Co-Director of the Ethics, Peace, and Global Affairs master’s program. His research interests focus on ideas of nature in modern western culture, particularly the religious roots of contemporary environmental discourse. Trained in both social scientific and theoretical methodologies, his current scholarship includes an ethnographic study of intentional communities in the Pacific Northwest, a critique of the philosophical assumptions of climate change ethics, and a book project on the role of religious language in the birth of the American environmental movement.

James Blair is Chief of the Unit on Affective Cognitive Neuroscience at the National Institute of Mental Health. Dr Blair received his Ph.D. in Psychology from University College London in 1993. His primary research interest involves understanding the neuro-cognitive systems mediating affect in humans and how these become dysfunctional in mood and anxiety disorders. His primary clinical focus is in understanding the dysfunction of affect-related systems in youth with specific forms of conduct disorder. His research approach includes techniques employed in cognitive neuroscience (both neuropsychology and functional imaging), psychopharmacology and, more recently, molecular genetics.

Emilie Connolly is a graduate student in the Political Science department at the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. She studies Political Theory and is particularly interested in Marx and Spinoza. Her presentation is the product of collaboration with Yitzhak Melamed, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the Johns Hopkins University and a specialist in Early Modern Philosophy and German Idealism.

Sarah Donovan is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Wagner College. She received her Ph.D. from Villanova University. Her research interests include social philosophy, feminism, and psychoanalysis.

Paola Teresa Grassi is an Organizational Consultant for con_ISMO, where she conducts workshops on Practical Philosophy. She received her her Ph.D. at Università degli Studi di Padova. Her most recent publication is “Adam and the Serpent: Everyman and the Imagination” in Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza (Re-Reading the Canon) (Penn State University Press, 2009).