

**re-visioning benedict de  
spinoza and george eliot  
through the work of moira  
gatens**

simone bignall

Moira Gatens is widely celebrated as a ground-breaking feminist theorist. More generally, she is a distinguished political philosopher, whose work on the imagination as a productive source of reasoned action and liberation—of active and ethical sociability—enjoys a fecund global influence. Drawing upon key aspects of her feminist and political philosophy, the purpose of this article is to outline, in general terms, the significance of the contribution Gatens additionally and correspondingly makes to Spinoza studies.<sup>1</sup> This is a sustained contribution made over decades, including her 1996 book *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* and the collaborative work with Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza Past and Present*, published in 1999. Gatens' edited collection, *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza* appeared in 2009, and likewise extends the contemporary reach and reception of Spinozan ideas. The impact of Gatens' Spinoza, and the high esteem in which her interpretation of Spinoza is regarded, is also evident in a number of important lectures and talks given during invited fellowships abroad. Amongst these, in 2010 she held the prestigious title of Spinoza Chair at the University of Amsterdam; the lectures resulting from this period were published in 2011 under the title *Spinoza's Hard Path to Freedom*.

Our discussion traverses three parts: the first section of the article considers the Spinozist ontology and ethology that Gatens mobilises in her work on 'imaginary bodies,' and explains how her reading of Spinoza's philosophical system also pro-

vides Gatens with a framework for new thinking about power, freedom and right in a feminist context; part 2 elaborates some consequences of this framework for conceiving the social roles and potentialities of institutions; and finally, the essay outlines some recent directions taken by Gatens towards expanding this theorisation, by refocussing her attention specifically on institutions of genre. Gatens has begun to articulate a Spinozan theory of art, which she elaborates in the context of the “philosophical literature” of George Eliot who, incidentally, also produced original translations of Spinoza’s works.

## 1. IMAGINARY BODIES: POWER, FREEDOM AND RIGHT

Gatens’ work is respected amongst scholars of Spinoza for its careful interpretation of the Spinozan system, and its feminist re-assessment of the political and transformative potential of a key ontological and epistemological commitment in Spinoza’s *Ethics*. This concerns his premise that the mind is the idea of the body, that mind and body are parallel attributes of a single Substance or Nature; and consequently, that particular ways of imagining, thinking and knowing are intimately woven together with particular modes of embodiment as ways of being in the world.<sup>2</sup> Gatens makes clear the ethical consequences of this ontological commitment, even if such consequences were confounding, to Europeans at least, in Spinoza’s own time.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Spinoza is designated a rationalist in view of the way he associates the imagination and the emotions with the “first kind of knowledge,” which is “a cause of falsity” and therefore is inferior and will gradually be superseded by the active exercise of reason in the “second” and “third kinds of knowledge”<sup>4</sup>, Gatens provides a challenging re-vision and revaluation of the central and productive role played by the imagination in Spinoza’s philosophy. In her view, Spinozan imagination is not simply a source of error but, more productively, functions as a necessary aid to reason.

One of Gatens’ signal achievements is to bring into sharper relief the possible kinds of freedom and right—and the corresponding potential for empowerment and liberation—that accompany Spinoza’s ethics.<sup>5</sup> She does this in consideration of Spinoza’s philosophical commitment to substance monism in the principle that the mind is the idea of the body (rather than a separate and distinctive substance). In this respect, her work is important in the context of Spinoza studies for showing how Spinoza’s critique of dogmatic theologies and despotic governments, and his treatment of ethics, is intrinsically linked to his views on the cognitive role of the imagination. Gatens’ work is furthermore innovative for

its original feminist application of Spinoza's 'ethology' in contemporary political contexts where dominant cultural norms often clash with more formal notions of justice and right. Like Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Macherey, Gatens asserts Spinoza's therapeutic approach to the problem of domination.<sup>6</sup> The concept of freedom in Spinoza does not correspond to the sovereign exercise of free will, but rather refers to the struggle through which an individual or a community strives to understand its sources of determination, endeavours to comprehend and so to orchestrate the relational causes of its being, and so to enhance its affective capacities and individual powers of existence.

Deleuze emphasises how, according to Spinoza's account in the scholia of Part IV of the *Ethics*, affects can be "joyful" if they produce an enriched or more complex state of being in which an individual's capacities or potentiality is enhanced; or they can be "sad," if an individual is impacted in a way that is demeaning, detrimental and weakening.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, affects can be either passive or active experiences of relationship. If affects are passive, they will be unbidden and unselected; they may bring a fortuitous joy, but equally may result in sadness. But if they are active, they will be the result of a developed understanding how bodies can combine or be combined in a joyful manner that enhances their affective potential.<sup>8</sup> In her explanation of the Spinozan system, Gatens provides a necessary correction to the predilection of a certain strain of contemporary Affect Theory that draws heavily from Deleuzian philosophy (and she targets the work of Brian Massumi especially).<sup>9</sup> She is critical of the autonomic theory of affect that claims Spinoza as its precursor, but which problematically reinstates an implied mind-body dualism completely at odds with Spinoza's ontology and epistemology and which, by extension, is incongruent with his ethics and politics (at least as these have been articulated by Gatens and other readers of Spinoza, including Deleuze himself). Massumi prioritises corporeal affect over mental cognition and conceives of affect as a-subjective, autonomic, and asocial in the sense that it is unbound by meaning or signification.<sup>10</sup> For Massumi, freedom is found in the limitless interconnectivity of affect and openness to the endless transformations that result from contact and affective sensation; but as Gatens emphasises, for Spinoza, freedom rather concerns the *reasoned* development of certain kinds of *joyful* affect through the constructive stimulus of the active imagination, rather than the free accommodation of all kinds of affective influence and creative transformation.<sup>11</sup> She thereby reasserts both Spinoza's particular kind of rationalism that allows a productive role for the emotions and imagination, and his political potential. She warns against the potential depoliticisation or passive nihilism that corresponds

with a simplistic philosophy of the social body conceived in terms of the circulation and passionate investment of affect: as principally material without corresponding ideational content, as non-conceptual, a-signifying, un-thought and irrational.

For Gatens, then, freedom from domination by relations that are felt as detrimental and demeaning involves the careful cultivation, through the affective imagination coupled with reasoned deliberation, of “joyful transitions.”<sup>12</sup> Rather than being subject to passive affects and the poorly formed or false ideas that accompany them, the free individual strives towards a more active understanding of the conditions enabling considered practices of self-formation and social constitution. Freedom here is much less a wilful state of being unfettered, than it is a developmental practice or an experimental process over time, through which the experiential imagination is actively directed towards coming to understand how complex social relations operate as natural causes of determination. Based on this understanding, the free individual endeavours, as much as is possible, actively to organise or to orchestrate these determining relations through practices of mindfulness and judicious affective comportment. Gatens elaborates how, in this process, the imagination can be a source of misapprehension and falsehood; but it can also (alternatively) be a source of invention and creative cognition that aids the development of adequate understanding.<sup>13</sup>

Writing on the subject of “imaginary bodies,” Gatens explains how a person’s image or idea of embodiment shapes their subjectivity and influences their potential for various kinds of sociability.<sup>14</sup> “For a Spinozist,” she writes, “to think differently is, by definition, to exist differently: one’s power of thinking is inseparable from one’s power of existing, and vice-versa.”<sup>15</sup> How I conceive myself as embodied culturally and historically, my conception of my humanity and that of others, my experiential comprehension of my body’s capacities or limitations for joining in sociable relations with other bodies or selves, and my forecasting of the impact of my actions upon those others and of their impact upon me, all will play a vital role in social comportment and the ethical quality of collective life. My capacity to imagine myself in diverse situations and relations with others is a primary resource for my processes of knowledge-formation, moral deliberation and eventual conduct. The adequacy of the embodied ideas I form, together with the adequacy of my affective image of other bodies I encounter, and of the character of the body politic in which we participate, directly influences the quality of my social contribution and my ability to engage others in behaviours that are

respectful.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, our collective imaginative efforts to comprehend and map the nature of our extensive inter-relations and the ways in which these can be supported by social institutions tempers individual and shared capacities for the predictive amelioration of those relations and institutions into the future, so that they potentially can find a more joyful expression as transparent causes bringing maximal benefit and minimal harm. Individual and collective bodies are, then, not “given” but rather “imagined”—and correspondingly, personal and social imaginaries are shaped by material realities experienced affectively as corporeal constraints and potentiality.

This Spinozist framework enables Gatens to think in a novel way about issues of feminist agency in contexts where women (and men) may experiment using corporeal strategies for transforming misogynist imaginaries. Writing on intimate violence, Gatens explains how acts such as rape rely upon a social context in which female bodies can be imagined as (permissibly) violable according to implicit cultural norms, even when principles of women’s corporeal integrity and human rights circulate as sanctioned and institutionalised knowledge in that same social structure.<sup>17</sup> A society’s effective resistance to such crimes against women’s humanity therefore requires intervention at the level of the social imaginary, just as much as it calls for robust enforcement of the institutions that ostensibly exist to safeguard all bodies from harm. Although women are not responsible for masculinist imaginaries, Gatens points to the activist consequences of the Spinozan principle that ways of being are braided together with ways of conceiving: feminists can make use of the constitutive dimension of the imagination to direct the incremental (or “molecular”) transformation of dominant social imaginaries and associated modes of affective comportment that historically and continually have been detrimental and damaging to women. By *imagining* and then *describing* oneself differently, one begins to *understand* oneself and one’s active capacities differently, and then to *feel* differently in relation to others. It becomes possible to create and direct alternate flows of affect and of affection in social relations, potentially also encouraging the emergence of alternative formations of power and knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Corporeal practices of affective and imaginative agency provide a crucial resource for collective processes of rational interrogation—and possible expansion—of the social limitations imposed when sexist and racist imaginaries prevail, for example when female or black bodies imagine (or are made to conceive) themselves as impermissible in certain spaces, including knowledge spaces. Relational and

systemic transformations can occur when gendered and racialised bodies who are systematically treated inequitably come to imagine alternative existences, and so to seek opportunities that enhance their capacities for becoming visible: appearing and mattering and being heard, in those same situations and locations where previously they have been made to *feel* they shouldn't appear or be taken into account.<sup>19</sup> Here, when realised through the self-conscious effort of creative imagination, the developing adequacy or activity of a reasoned understanding of corporeal right and agency—and a corresponding increase in potentiality or empowerment - triumphs over the passive experience of rightlessness and powerlessness, and possibly prompts a shift in relational capacities, a shift in relations of power. Ways of knowing and ways of being or acting in the world are, then, braided together in ways that are ethically *and politically* significant. Particularly in *Collective Imaginings*, co-authored with Genevieve Lloyd, we learn how a Spinozist theorisation of the complex role played by the imagination in social organisation and liberation implies a whole political theory of institutions and their good governance, which values art and everyday life as imaginative sources of institutional critique, creativity and flourishing just as much as it attends to the juridical and empirical sciences of human social order.

## 2. INSTITUTIONS AND THE GOVERNANCE OF IMAGINATION

We have seen how Gatens finds in Spinoza a political and an ethical process that turns on the development of active understanding from the productive power of imagination and corresponds with an increased potential for actively determining one's ways of being in associative relations with others. However, it is perhaps still somewhat unclear what Spinoza's intertwining of epistemology and ontology portends for the collective structures, institutions, and processes of political society. Spinoza's idea that "the right of the individual is co-extensive with its determinate power"<sup>20</sup> has influenced some prominent strains of contemporary political thought including Deleuze and Foucault, the Althusser School with Negri and Balibar as key contemporary thinkers, and socialist theology after Feuerbach. Nonetheless, the assertion of equivalence between rights and powers confounds classic conceptions of state sovereignty and political justice, among other things, and provides no apparent solution to some of our most pressing contemporary political problems. For some, this raises doubts about the adequacy of Spinoza's political philosophy.<sup>21</sup> For example, how is the protection of fragile bodies able to be secured, if the right to persevere is linked with a power of endurance? If the power of a sovereign state is aligned with its right, then how are we to think about

contested sovereignties after empire? Gatens, including in her collaboration with Lloyd, makes important inroads to Spinozist political philosophy by drawing out for us the normative philosophy of political community and collective responsibility we may discern in Spinoza's writings.<sup>22</sup> In so doing, she articulates crucial conceptual resources for tackling such troubling and prescient questions.

In her discussion of Spinoza's "hard path to freedom," Gatens highlights the problem of "collective social, political and theological imaginaries whose resistance to critique can be formidable."<sup>23</sup> This is because, for Spinoza, human beings are necessarily social and therefore the opportunities for an individual to actualise his or her power and virtue in becoming free are always socially conditioned. Gatens argues, just as Spinoza recommends individual bodies enact a therapeutic approach to the imagination in a quest for personal liberty through the pursuit of self-other understanding and knowledge of one's determining causes, he likewise encourages a remedial and ethological approach to the collective social, political and theological imaginaries that invest the body politic. "For Spinoza," Gatens writes, "it is the distinction between grasping law as arbitrary command and law as knowledge that marks the difference between human freedom and human bondage."<sup>24</sup> The flourishing of reason and the actualisation of human capacities—the capacity to understand, to be joyful—requires good governance towards collective liberation. Spinoza suggests democracy is the ideal form of government because "the true aim of government is liberty";<sup>25</sup> however, because the remedy of collective fantasies or falsehoods ingrained in a society takes time and general conditions of security and education, in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* he favours both a strong state and organised religion to combat the unruly passions of a multitude that does not have good understanding of its active capacities for self-determination. But at the same time, he urges a cultivated resistance to the monopoly of power by despotic governments and dogmatic theologies. To accommodate this ambivalence, Gatens draws from Spinoza a theory of institutional design. In doing so, she opens up a middle path between interpreters of Spinoza such as Toni Negri, who can seem over-optimistic about the self-generating rationality and revolutionary capacity of the multitude, and readers such as Yirmiyahu Yovel who considers the multitude is by its nature incapable of rising above the passionate imaginary.<sup>26</sup> Gatens argues that on Spinoza's account of good governance, "there should not be any *structural* barriers to prevent the passionate citizen from becoming more reasonable."<sup>27</sup> A secure state, and the rule of law, protected by effective and transparent institutions whose purpose and operation is not mystified but rather is well understood in society, are means by which "a reasonable government can

guarantee the consistency of cause and effect, act and consequence, in all social dealings.”<sup>28</sup>

According to Spinoza, belief cannot be compelled.<sup>29</sup> To avoid despotic rule, a state must be able to mediate ideological conflict without favouring a particular set of beliefs over the free exercise of others. Spinoza’s approach to this problem is to posit a universal set of organising principles that all citizens must abide by in a well-ordered state, even while each individual is free to interpret these freely and to live by them in whatever way suits.<sup>30</sup> Gatens elaborates:

The diversity of ways in which the seven principles [of Universal faith] may be interpreted acknowledges the power of the sovereign to dictate what shall count as permissible and impermissible action at the same time that it accommodates the different beliefs of citizens. Without a secure state and a stable moral code the development of human powers and knowledge is impossible.<sup>31</sup>

This Spinozist framework for conceiving the mediating and binding role of the state as it upholds individual freedoms in the exercise of diverse beliefs and supports the incremental and contextual evolution of reason according to differential individual capabilities, bears also upon Gatens’ own conceptualisations of political community and public responsibility, social transformation, and law.<sup>32</sup> In an interview published in 2011, she explains the perspective that enables her to sanction universal principles of human right, even while having reservations about the possibility of finding genuine universality in the context of real human diversity:

an abstract right can become particularised in its implementation... [just like a] musical score is realised, or particularised, every time a particular artist performs it. So there is a score that is written down and universally available, but each performance of it, or actualisation of it, is particular.<sup>33</sup>

In view of the Spinozan understanding that belief cannot be compelled and individuals cannot be *made* reasonable when they lack the kinds of affective capacity, imagination and cognitive framework necessary for active understanding and the pursuit of joyful affection, Gatens considers that social transformation towards more reasonable orders can be achieved only through educational opportunities that enable incremental shifts in belief structures:

Social change happens bit by bit. Individuals can't change until their social political context changes, and the social political context can't change until individuals change. The institutions might change a bit, and because the institutions have changed a bit then the way that individuals who are living under those institutions are formed will change a bit... Possibilities for change are inherent to the context and the powers of the individuals and the groups in that context.<sup>34</sup>

Although social development and the exercise of collective freedom relies upon individual and group capacities for directing transformation in specific contexts of action, the state nonetheless has a responsible role to play in the design of institutions that can effectively support and assist individuals to combine their powers harmoniously and sustain their critical capacities for rational deliberation.<sup>35</sup> Wise polities are those that exhibit a general understanding of the conditions and causes that determine citizens to act; the art of wise government involves demystifying the purposes and general utility of law and other institutions; and it involves building institutions that aim to maximise the rational powers of the multitude through education.<sup>36</sup> Importantly, education here is best conceived as a process of emendation through the use of constructed “exemplars,” and through exposure to the varied affective circumstances that constitute diverse (and sometimes conflicting) social imaginaries along with mixed understandings of the determining structures of possible action and of social purpose; its moral dimension consists in the opportunity such an education provides for the expansive development of the sympathetic imagination, when we learn how to take different perspectives and alternative reasons for action into account when deliberating upon our own conditions of determination and choices for action. In this context, one of the key responsibilities of the state concerns the generation and communication of appropriate narratives for the expression of the historical complexity and diversity of the social imaginary, especially as this “endures through time and so becomes increasingly embedded in all our institutions, our judicial systems, our national narratives, our founding fictions, our cultural traditions.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, the state is responsible not only for coordinating—and sometimes orchestrating - the regulatory norms that underpin and intersect with all other institutional settings, but also for endeavouring to make transparent to the citizenry that such norms are fabricated from original fictions that have come to exert a persuasive pull upon the social imaginary. These useful fictions are neither universal in their expression of social reality and value, nor essentially or naturally reasonable in themselves. If they are to continue to be accepted as reasonable

patterns for the warp and weft of our collective institutional fabric, they must be perpetually tested according to the experimental tools of adequate understanding furnished by the sympathetic imagination. Thus, Gatens and Lloyd write:

The social imaginary may be inescapable, but it is not, for all that, fixed. Its reiteration and repetition through time opens possibilities for it to be (re) constituted differently. The collective transformation of the social imaginary cannot be ‘thought’ voluntaristically or relativistically as pure (re) invention of the past. Rather, it must be thought collectively, which is to say it must be thought and negotiated with actually existing different others in historical time.<sup>38</sup>

This perspective on the embedded but dynamic nature of institutional design and reshaping informs significant aspects of Gatens’ political philosophy. For example, it is applied implicitly by Gatens and MacKinnon in their edited collection of critical feminist essays that examine the scope for ensuring that Australian institutions acknowledge gender difference and deliver more equitable outcomes.<sup>39</sup> It also appears in Gatens’ work on the connection between social imaginaries, cultural reformation, ‘embodied responsibility,’ and the potential for narrative transformation, particularly as these apply to exclusionary structures such as patriarchy and colonialism.<sup>40</sup> Throughout her writings, we see persistent evidence of her interest in the normative sway of political ideas that have simultaneous alternate powers: to subdue the passions of the multitude that receives them unthinkingly; or to liberate the rational multitude by revealing more adequate modes of understanding about the conditions and causes that determine social action.

Religion, too, is of interest to Gatens insofar as it can demonstrate an extraordinary normative influence upon individual minds and the collective imaginary. She finds in the works of Spinoza, Feuerbach and Eliot a view that religion is an illusion, but one able to reveal important truths about human fears, motives and aspirations. Though the dogmatic tendencies of religious power must be cause for permanent vigilance, Gatens notes that religion can provide organising principles for the egoistic imagination and the unruly passions. Spinoza insists on the affective (rather than rational) power of religion: it works by “moving men... its aim being to appeal to and engage men’s fantasy and imagination.”<sup>41</sup> Religion can supply compelling fictional narratives that ultimately can encourage sympathetic, reasonable and ethical conduct, leading to general social equity and harmony. But historical and contemporary evidence shows how religious fictions are charac-

teristically mystifying and typically diminish the active capacity of the multitude for exercising reasoned judgement through understanding the sources of their determination to act. For this reason, Spinoza holds that theology and philosophy are distinct domains of knowledge that have discrete objects, methodologies and aims.<sup>42</sup> In her consideration of human potential for social liberation through the rational organisation of constitutive affect approached through the sympathetic imagination, Gatens attends specifically to the *philosophical* role of “deliberative fictions,” including imaginative universal “exemplars” such as the “free man,” which she argues can effectively enhance the collective power of human beings to become free.<sup>43</sup> She describes these as fictions that, while affirming their fictive status, nevertheless work to demystify the confusions of the imagination about cause and effect, and means and ends.<sup>44</sup> Unlike religion, then, in which imaginary exemplars function as a substitute for reason, “the philosopher uses the imagination as an aid to reason.”<sup>45</sup>

Philosophy can therefore be a source of “deliberative fictions,” sometimes extending to state-sanctioned expressions of social purpose and reason in institutional forms, such as aspirational policy statements. In my own philosophical work I have aimed to construct a deliberative fiction around the notion of “excolonialism,” as a non-actual but potential form of society that departs imaginatively and qualitatively from the conditions of the colonial-type society that we continue to inhabit in Australia, and in many respects, falsely imagine as our natural or inevitable condition.<sup>46</sup> However, philosophy *per se* is not the only catalogue of “deliberative fictions”: in her more recent work Gatens turns to literature, and especially to the “philosophical novels” of George Eliot, to draw out a Spinozan conception of art—that is, a conception of art *as* philosophy - with a role to play in the enlargement of individual and collective freedoms.

### 3. THE DELIBERATIVE IMAGINATION: SPINOZA AND ELIOT

Throughout her professional career, Gatens has been notably devoted to better understanding the operation and effect of genre on the gendered formation and valuation of scientific, social and moral knowledge.<sup>47</sup> Over the past decade, her investigation of the imbricated epistemological relationship of science and art—of truth and imagination—has been trained closely upon the moral potential of a generative connection between philosophy and literature. Gatens focusses most particularly—though not exclusively<sup>48</sup>—upon the combination of these two genres evident in the writings of Marian Evans, whose fiction was published under the

masculine pseudonym of George Eliot. Gatens' project is not only to elaborate the influence upon the literary Eliot of philosophers including Spinoza and Feuerbach (whom Eliot translated, along with the works of David Strauss),<sup>49</sup> but also to read Eliot as a philosopher in her own right; and thereby to reframe and reconceive philosophy itself, as "a genre and a practice" of thought imbued with considerable methodological diversity.<sup>50</sup> In so doing, Gatens seeks to deepen an appreciation of philosophy's gendered status (thereby extending the feminist philosophical project begun early in her career), "in order to acknowledge the force of the full range of institutions and social conventions at work in genre allocation."<sup>51</sup>

George Eliot is widely celebrated as a "great realist novelist," but her realism has also opened her to charges of naivety in her presentation of a transparently self-evident reality, as well as allegations of bourgeois moralism as an effect of the partisan perspective she unavoidably brings to bear upon her literary observations and orchestrations.<sup>52</sup> Gatens seeks to counter both charges and re-vision Eliot as a naturalistic philosopher whose painstaking accounts of the details and events of ordinary life present everyday images of people confronting common moral problems, and responding creatively to them. Sometimes their responses are deliberately reasoned, in clear-sighted appreciation of the set of determining causes that have brought them to their current situation and the outcomes they hope will prevail; but most often Eliot depicts characters struggling with situations they do not well understand:

They are fleshy, imaginative and passionate beings who lack self-mastery, self-discipline and self-knowledge and have, at best, only a partial grasp of their context and the complex, interconnected chains of causes that animate both it and their own actions.<sup>53</sup>

This causes them to be affected and to affect others in ways they have not explicitly willed, with outcomes they cannot securely predict. Eliot's characters typically find there is no ready-made moral script to guide their actions. The reasoned solutions they may find will instead be developed through the gradual coming-to-awareness they exhibit in the course of their reflection upon the consequences of the choices they have made. According to Gatens, Eliot is "concerned, in the absence of a God, to give morality a naturalistic grounding. Imagination, sympathy and affect are the components from which she builds her ethical stance."<sup>54</sup> Gatens then considers Eliot's approach to realism as a "self-conscious narrative strategy" that draws on Spinoza's philosophy to "facilitate an understanding of

realism where the capacity to imagine is intrinsic to our apprehension of reality.”<sup>55</sup>

Gatens takes very seriously Eliot’s own assertion that her novels comprise “simply a set of experiments in life.”<sup>56</sup> She avers: “Knowledge is gained through reflecting on and organising our experience. It is this account of knowledge that gives rise to Eliot’s distinctive empiricism and her preference for the experimental method.”<sup>57</sup> Eliot’s approach to literature as experimental philosophy can be understood in two ways. First, her novels present fictional individuals dealing with real-world complex social problems—including anti-Semitism (*Daniel Deronda*), infanticide, sexual exploitation (*Adam Bede*), domestic violence, alcoholism (*Janet’s Redemption*), and the right of women to education (*Middlemarch*)—and trialing interventions to specific moral situations. In this respect, Eliot’s novels are an imaginative catalogue of moral and social experimentation concerning possible responses to real issues and a creative exploration of the potential benefits and pitfalls of responsive actions. At the same time, her novels reveal the affective motivations underscoring the deliberative processes embarked upon by characters as they struggle experimentally with the worldly situations in which they find themselves. Secondly, Gatens suggests Eliot deliberately sought to represent her moral philosophy through fiction, as a most effective way to engage her readers’ sympathetic imagination and provide them with conceptual resources having a potential application in their own real-world comprehensions of, and investigations with, complex social and moral problems. Identifying imaginatively and sympathetically with the characters in Eliot’s fictional situations may assist readers to better predict the various possible outcomes of their actions, as they come to better “understand human life and value through careful observation, reflection on experience, and sympathetic comparisons between self and others.”<sup>58</sup> Choices made prudently will arise in processes of moral experimentation that must, to a significant extent, proceed in accordance with careful analysis of the determining conditions and in the light of imagined outcomes. Moral decisions can be tempered by the rich resources of imagination afforded to readers capable of sympathising with the experiences of (fictional) others, as they endeavour to pursue favourable endings: the “ideal associations, characteristic of the artistic imagination, help create representations with the force to trigger memory, engage emotion, and provide fresh insight into the subtle interconnections between self, others, and the world.”<sup>59</sup> In this way, “the painstaking tasks of observing, collecting and reporting empirical facts” are combined with Eliot’s genius for “selection and recombination in order to create a work that shows the human condition in a new light,” and “Eliot’s ethical realism can be understood as offering her readers

a secular revelation that seeks to challenge the significance of common human experiences and promote love of one's neighbour."<sup>60</sup>

Far from being merely an especially fastidious recounting of the self-evident material world, then, Eliot's naturalism and empiricism is re-visioned by Gatens as thoroughly imbued with attention to that which is not obviously apparent to the casual observer. The intricate detail of Eliot's observations is then reconceived as part of a narrative strategy that encourages readers to look again "at what was thought to be ordinary, uneventful, or mundane, in order to appreciate the extraordinary intricacy of human interconnectedness, or the long chain of causal links between present and past conditions that connect the commonplace to momentous events."<sup>61</sup> This interpretation allows Eliot a significant critical impetus, and indeed Gatens presents Eliot as using her fiction for artfully and deliberately "unsettling and realigning the affective charge of traditional narratives in which moral feeling and action are embedded."<sup>62</sup> She sees this as a methodological consequence of Eliot's distinctive conception of truth in art since, for Eliot, truth does not inhere in the material correspondence of the representation with external reality, but in the adequacy of an understanding of the affective causes and conditions that shape the contexts of judgement and action. Art has a capacity to contribute to ethical judgement by making more visible, or apparent, what we need to see, to experience through the example of others, if we are to become more joyful—that is, more reasonable:

Art, for Eliot, always involves revelation and vision: seeing anew what was taken to be ordinary... Art is not discovered or found but vividly imagined, realised, materialised, through passion, memory and insight. It is this account of artistic creation that defines Eliot's distinctive realism—a realism that embraces passion, imagination and memory, as the material bases out of which we strive to know ourselves and refashion our contexts of action.<sup>63</sup>

This is the sense in which Gatens understands Eliot conceives her art *as* philosophy, in that it deliberately and self-consciously probes the scope and adequacy of philosophical concepts.

Key among these is the concept of imagination, which is typically sidelined in the history of philosophy as a source of error and falsity. However, for Eliot (as for Gatens), the imagination is central to morality, since the sympathetic imagi-

nation is what connects individuals to each other. Imagination and emotion are fundamental to processes of moral deliberation, because they constitute a basis for moral interaction and the incentive or drive to act ethically.<sup>64</sup> One of Gatens' ambitions is to demonstrate how Eliot's theory of imagination converges with the views of Spinoza and Feuerbach.<sup>65</sup> Eliot distinguishes two kinds of imagination: the first involves arbitrary combinations of observations drawn from fanciful imaginings without attention to reality; and the second involves the disciplined and discerning selection of ideal associations, directed towards expressing a truthful account of reality. Gatens argues, for Eliot, "the power of discerning the difference is the mark of a refined, disciplined imagination and is as important to gaining moral knowledge as it is to gaining scientific knowledge."<sup>66</sup> Accordingly, in direct contrast to frivolous art forms that merely "encourage false sympathies and shallow moral sensibilities,"<sup>67</sup> Gatens claims that, for Eliot, the fundamental purpose of literature is to evoke fellow feeling through the sympathetic imagination. Her novels thereby aspire to provide a conceptual ground for moral community, which relies firmly upon sympathy and aspires towards positive forms of conduct and relationship that express a solution to the key moral philosophical question: how ought we to live?

In the latest phase of her philosophical career, Gatens finds in Eliot an interpretation of Spinoza sympathetic to her own, in which the imagination plays a central role in social formations and in the advancement of moral knowledge. Gatens' philosophical reading of Eliot is both a contribution to Eliot studies, and a contribution to Spinoza studies. Commentators have hotly debated—and often strongly denied—the possibility of defining a Spinozan aesthetics. Yet, through her reading of the philosophical literature of George Eliot, and in the light of her argument that Eliot uses literature to express the Spinozan system in an alternate form, Gatens is able to draw out a theory of art implied in Spinoza's philosophy. However, at the same time, Gatens is careful to insist upon Eliot's unique and innovative philosophical contribution, which cannot be reduced to a mere application of Spinoza's or Feuerbach's insights through the (then) more socially sanctioned feminine form of literary expression. For Gatens, "Eliot's insistence on the importance of historical context to the development and character of morality and religion represents a philosophically significant advance on the views of Spinoza and Feuerbach."<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, for Gatens, Eliot does not simply re-present Spinoza's philosophy in literary form, but rather "develops notions latent in Spinoza's philosophy that open new paths for conceiving of the relation between ethics and art."<sup>69</sup> Gatens' turn to Eliot is, then, a continuation of her longer term

project of feminist philosophical historiography and her questioning of the role of gender in the ascription of genre.

In an interview published in 2011, Gatens remarks how, when bringing previously unconnected writers into association, “something strange happens, and the hope is this relation will engender new possibilities for thought. It allows one to think something new because these writers are not usually brought together or thought together.”<sup>70</sup> According to Gatens, Eliot’s novels are “exemplars of an interventionist practice that aims to transform the ethical frame of human action through a forceful revisioning of reality.”<sup>71</sup> The same could be said of Gatens’ philosophy, which is a formidable force for the emendation of the ethical intellect. As an *exemplary* feminist thinker, Gatens’ work shines with the careful integrity of someone who seeks to intuit, imagine and reason, as fully as possible, a truthful or adequate understanding of the nature of sexual difference, collective sexual imaginaries, and the complex system of power relations that are their determining causes. Additionally, as an *imaginative* philosopher whose associative methodology creates new possibilities for thought, Gatens presents a re-conception of philosophy as a genre and a practice that strives to exert a creative power capable of changing and reshaping reality itself.

SIMONE BIGNALL is Senior Lecturer in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Flinders University in Australia. She is the author of *Postcolonial Agency: Critique and Constructivism* (2010) and the forthcoming title *Exit Colonialism: Ethics After Enjoyment*. She has also co-edited *Deleuze and the Postcolonial* (with Paul Patton, 2010); *Agamben and Colonialism* (with Marcelo Svirsky, 2012); *Deleuze and Pragmatism* (with Sean Bowden and Paul Patton, 2014); and *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process After Deleuze* (with Rosi Braidotti, 2019).

## NOTES

1. An essay of this length cannot hope to canvas the full range of debates comprising the field of Spinoza Studies, nor can I ever hope to adequately convey the rich intricacy of Gatens' interpretation of Spinoza. My aim is, then, more modest and circumspect: to outline, generally, some of the shifts in the contemporary reception of Spinoza resulting from Gatens' re-interpretation of his theory of the imagination; and to consider her application of this theory in her thinking about politics, cultural and institutional reform, identity, and issues of gender and genre.
2. Edwin Curley, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*. Trans. E. Curley. Princeton University Press, 1994, 157: mind and body are 'one and the same thing, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension.'
3. The philosophical separation between mind and body is, of course, the product of a particular cultural milieu, associated especially with Western traditions of thought. Indigenous philosophies, for example, typically consider mind and body as parallel attributes of Nature, or Country, and some Indigenous perspectives on ontology, epistemology and ethics thus find a sympathetic echo in Spinoza's philosophy. See, for example, Simone Bignall, Daryle Rigney and Steve Hemming, "Three Ecosophies for the Anthropocene: Continental Posthumanism, Indigenous Expressivism and Environmental Governance," *Deleuze Studies* 10:4 (2016, 455-478).
4. See Spinoza's *Ethics*, part II, especially Propositions XL-XLI.
5. See especially Moira Gatens, *Spinoza's Hard Path to Freedom*. Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 2011, Lecture 1; and Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza Past and Present*. London: Routledge, 1999, chapter 2.
6. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Trans. Robert Hurley. San Francisco: City Light Books, 1988. Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Trans. Martin Joughin. New York: Zone Books, 1990; Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*. Trans. Susan Ruddick. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. See also Aurelia Armstrong, "Affective Therapy: Spinoza's Approach to Self-Cultivation" in *Ethics and Self-Cultivation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Eds., Mathew Dennis and Sander Werkhoven. London: Routledge, 2018, 30-46.
7. Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, 255-272.
8. Ibid.
9. Moira Gatens, "Affective Transitions and Spinoza's Art of Joyful Deliberation." *Timing of Affect: Epistemologies, Aesthetics, Politics*. Eds. M. Angerer, B. Bosel, M. Ott. Zurich: Diaphanes Verlag, 2014, 17-33.
10. Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995, 83-109); Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
11. Gatens, "Affective Transitions."
12. Gatens, "Affective Transitions."
13. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*. See esp. "Epilogue."
14. Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*. London: Routledge, 1996.
15. Moira Gatens, "Through a Spinozist Lens: Ethology, Difference, Power" *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*. Ed. P. Patton. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, 168.
16. On the constructed image of the body politic see, in particular, Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*. Chapter 1.
17. Moira Gatens, "Through a Spinozist Lens"; Gatens *Imaginary Bodies*. Chapter 8.
18. Gatens, "Through a Spinozist Lens," esp. 179-183.
19. The American civil rights movement, for example, owes much to the corporeal stubbornness

of Rosa Parkes, who in conceiving of herself as equal and rightful and so refusing to relinquish her seat, assisted the ascent of an alternate social imaginary of civil equality. For an embodied account of Indigenous experiences of anthropological knowledge, and of the potential for the decolonisation of such knowledge through the affective junctures of 'the cultural interface,' see Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007.

20. Benedict Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise*. Trans. R.H.M Elwes. New York: Dover, 1951, 231.
21. E.g. Edwin Curley, "Kissinger, Spinoza and Genghis Khan," *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*. Ed. Don Garrett. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
22. See especially Moira Gatens, "Spinoza's Disturbing Thesis: Power, Norms and Fiction in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*," *History of Political Thought* 30:3 (2009, 455-468); and Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*. Esp. chapters 3 and 4.
23. Gatens, *Spinoza's Hard Path*, 21.
24. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 115-116.
25. Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise*. 259.
26. Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*. Trans. M. Hardt. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press. Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason*. Princeton University Press, 1989. See also Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin, 2004.
27. Moira Gatens, *Spinoza's Hard Path*, 23.
28. Moira Gatens, *Spinoza's Hard Path*, 23.
29. Moira Gatens, "Compelling Fictions: Spinoza and George Eliot on Imagination and Belief," *European Journal of Philosophy* 20:1 (2012, 74-90).
30. Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise*, 162.
31. Gatens, "Compelling Fictions," 76.
32. See *Imaginary Bodies*. Esp. Chapter 8: "Spinoza, Law and Responsibility"; *Collective Imaginings*. Esp. chapters 4-6.
33. Stacy Douglas/Moira Gatens. "Revisiting the Continental Shelf: Moira Gatens on Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Eliot, Feuerbach and Spinoza" (An Interview), *Feminist Legal Studies* online version DOI 10.1007/s10691-011-9167-4 (2011, 4).
34. Stacy Douglas/Moira Gatens., 7-8.
35. Gatens "Spinoza's Disturbing Thesis."
36. Gatens and Lloyd, 117.
37. Gatens and Lloyd, 143.
38. Gatens and Lloyd, 147.
39. Gatens and Alison MacKinnon (eds), *Gender and Institutions: Welfare, Work and Citizenship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
40. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*. Esp. Chapters 8 and 9; Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*. Esp. chapter 6.
41. Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise*, 80.
42. Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise*, chapter XV.
43. See especially Gatens, "Spinoza's Disturbing Thesis," 465-468.
44. Ibid. and Gatens, *Spinoza's Hard Path*, 27.
45. Gatens, "Compelling Fictions," 78.
46. See Simone Bignall, "The Collaborative Struggle for Excolonialism," *Settler Colonial Studies*,

- 4:4 (2014, 340-356).
47. See, for example, Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991; "Polysemy, Atopia and Feminist Thought, or A woman's Place is Doing Philosophy," in *Michele Le Doeuff: Operative philosophy and imaginary practice*. Ed. Max Deutscher. New York: Humanity Books, 2000.
48. In questioning the relationship between gender and genre attribution, Gatens has also produced a series of works on the "philosophical literature" of Simone de Beauvoir and of Mary Shelley.
49. See Moira Gatens, "The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot," *Philosophy and Literature* 33 (2009, 73-90). Eliot translated Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* in 1849 and his *Ethics* in 1856. Her translation of the *Ethics* was not published until 1981.
50. Moira Gatens, "The 'Disciplined Imagination,'" *Australian Feminist Studies* 22:52 (2007, 25-34), 27.
51. "Disciplined Imagination," 28.
52. Moira Gatens, "Cloud-Borne Angels, Prophets and the Old Woman's Flower Pot: Reading George Eliot's Realism alongside Spinoza's 'Beings of the Imagination,'" *Australian Literary Studies*, 28:3 (2013, 1-14), 1.
53. Gatens, "Disciplined Imagination," 30.
54. Douglas/Gatens "Continental Shelf," 4.
55. Gatens, "Cloud-Borne Angels," 2.
56. George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*. Ed. Gordon Haight. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-1978, Volume 1, 162.
57. Moira Gatens, "The Curious Empiricism of George Eliot's Literary Experiments," *Philosophy Today*, 53 (2009, 19-27), 25.
58. Gatens, "Curious Empiricism," 23.
59. Gatens, "Curious empiricism," 24.
60. Gatens, "Curious Empiricism" 25; "Cloud-Borne Angels," 3.
61. Gatens, "Curious Empiricism," 24.
62. Gatens, "Cloud-Borne Angels," 3.
63. Gatens, "Cloud-Borne Angels," 3.
64. Douglas/Gatens, "Continental Shelf," 3.
65. Gatens, "Disciplined Imagination," 29.
66. Gatens, "Curious Empiricism," 24.
67. Gatens, "Curious Empiricism," 24.
68. Gatens, "Disciplined Imagination," 29.
69. Gatens, "Compelling Fictions," 75.
70. Douglas/Gatens "Continental Shelf," 6.
71. Gatens, "Cloud-Borne Angels," 13.