

Spinoza and Urban Cannibalism as the Promise of the City

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Abstract

In this paper, I introduce the idea of urban cannibalism and the promise of the city as a concept in relation to Spinoza's relational ontology. As philosophy of the city emerges as a unique subfield in philosophy, I intend to draw an approximation between Spinoza's immanent philosophy and urban cannibalism as a metaphorical signification that celebrates life in the urban environment. In this sense, I turn to the city which presents itself both as a promise and an illusion upon closer inspection. This is revealed by looking at the city and its determinations by invoking the dichotomy between culture-nature where the former tends to divorce itself from the latter. Here, Spinoza's philosophy offers a way to transform this thought by looking at culture and nature in terms of immanence, and that the idea of urban cannibalism disturbs the characteristics we ascribe to the culture as artificial and nature as harmonic. Ultimately, I argue that in terms of using the notion of urban cannibalism as a device in perceiving the city, its illusions transform into a promise in realizing that as city-dwellers, we participate in the ongoing affective transformation of a city which brings about its teleological determinations.

Keywords: Immanence, Philosophy of the City, Relationality, Spinoza, Urban Cannibalism

INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHY'S RETURN TO THE CITY

Philosophy of the city is emerging as a unique subfield in philosophy over the past decade.¹ Although philosophy has long since

¹ Shane Epting "Philosophy of the City and Transdisciplinary Possibilities" *Philosophy of the City*, Vol. 1, no. 1, 10–18.

been in the backburner in terms of understanding cities, the motivation of philosophical thinking still lies underneath its seemingly divorced method of historicizing, perceiving, and rationalizing its domain of inquiry – concepts. As philosophers in the ancient tradition of thought have a long history of contemplating what a good life is composed of, they were called upon to reflect what it means to have a good city and citizens.² Hence, the return of philosophy's commitment to cities is one that is not nostalgic, but rather a part of what it is all along – since philosophers and scholars commit to serve communities in making philosophy public.³ However, there is a certain conceptual baggage that comes with it when philosophizing about cities. Theorizing cities on a philosophical level means grasping it in terms of metaphysics – on defining each and every determination that comes with ontological significations. As argued by Hörcher, there is a misconception on the idea of the city that they refer to it as an abstract entity which could be grasped through metaphysical thought processes.⁴ This in turn divorces the idea of a city from what we really are – as existing, concrete, situated in time and space, confronting different challenges and difficulties, involved with the everyday social practices of various people with various thought-processes and differences propelled by their own cultures, histories, beliefs, and experiences. I stress in this paper that philosophy offers great insights in terms of thinking about cities. As the contemporary understanding on philosophy of the city flourishes in recent scholarship, I intend to demonstrate that it is essential in this endeavor, and its motivation from the ancient tradition never changed. Questions like “what makes a good city?” and “what constitutes to a good life to the citizens participating in it?” remain as the foundation of all the inquiries that are related to it. As such, I draw in this paper Spinoza's account of his philosophy – specifically his ontology of relations. Then, I

² Samantha Noll, Joseph Biehl, Sharon Meagher, “Transforming philosophy and the city” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of the City*, ed. S. Noll, J. Biehl, S. Meagher. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1-16.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ferenc Hörcher, “Philosophers and the city in early modern Europe” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of the City*, ed. Noll, S., Biehl J., Meagher, S. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 32-41.

demonstrate the idea of “Urban Cannibalism” as overgrowth, which can be seen as the ontological signification of what cities are, and variations happen in terms of its relations. Lastly, I conclude by relating Spinoza’s ontology of relations to urban cannibalism as the promise of the city.

Spinoza’s Relational Ontology

I present in this section Spinoza’s ontology as characterized by relationality. As one of the most controversial philosophies in the 17th century, the Dutch philosopher contends that nature is synonymous with God in the sense that everything that exists is an expression of its infinite attributes. However, one must be cautious to ground this univocity in the theological sense. As Smith writes, by naturalizing God against the backdrop of the Radical Enlightenment which looks at nature as mechanical and deterministic, one falls into the trap of perceiving Spinoza’s philosophy strictly as a philosophy of the whole.⁵ This is against Spinoza’s treatment of both the human and the non-human in their relations. As Spinoza writes in the E3praef, where he sought to lay down the definitions and relations of affects in its capacity to influence actions, “I shall consider human actions and appetites as if the subject were lines, surfaces, or solids.”⁶ Here, by having posited God as synonymous with nature, Spinoza nonetheless expresses his ontology as one that is immanent. By this, he seeks to turn the Cartesian understanding of the duality of thought and extension having distinct properties and principles to which they contrast one another by holding them in a hierarchical order, enabling thought to have a complete control over the body.⁷ What this means for Spinoza is that there comes a problem by which the mind becomes related to the body, as Descartes

⁵ Anthony Paul Smith, “The Ethical Relations of Bodies: Thinking with Spinoza Towards an Affective Ecology” in *Spinoza Beyond Philosophy*, ed. Beth Lord (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 48-65.

⁶ I use George Eliot’s translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics* in this paper. See Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. Clare Carlisle, trans. George Eliot (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁷ Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy” in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, 114-15.

also problematizes this significant missing link. As a result, Spinoza provides an ontological argument where he sees thought and body as the only two perceivable attributes of the substance, God or nature (E2p6). With this, he was able to break away from the Cartesian model and introduce in his philosophy an immanently relational ontology. This rich ontology – ranging from the nodes of various modes of existence viewed from the attributes of thought and extension to the networks of relations that enable affective affirmation or degradation through movement and varying degrees of composition – offers a great way to determine each and every facet of existence we encounter.

As such, I highlight Spinoza's philosophy significantly in terms of relations. That is, each mode contributes to the ongoing affective transformation of every other mode that are being continuously altered since they are immanently related to one another as each of them are characterized with their persistence to exist – or what Spinoza calls *conatus* (E3p6). Emphasizing this role of striving as an individuating and affective principle, a great deal of contemporary Spinozist scholarship gave this concept recognition due to its potency of perceiving modes in relation to another as well as to the respective attribute they are treated with. For example, Barbone contends that Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine presents itself as a unifying principle that which guarantees an individual's power to act “which follows only from the laws of its nature.”⁸ This thought would be difficult to align with Spinoza's when we consider the philosopher's trajectory in his *Ethics*. Merçon argues that the idea of an individual in Spinoza indicates an opening which pertains to the relational aspect that enables interaction among different modes of being.⁹ Viewing the individual this way suggests a dynamic process when it comes to its composition. Williams suggests that *conatus* can be seen as a site of conflict, since it is the field where thoughts and

⁸ Steven Barbone, “What counts as an individual for Spinoza?” in *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, ed. Olli I. Koistinen & John Biro (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 89.

⁹ Juliana Merçon, “Relationality and Individuality in Spinoza” in *Revista Conatus: Filosofia de Spinoza*, 1:2, 151

bodies differ according to their conative principle.¹⁰ In this sense, an individual as relational implies the idea that the conditions, or what Sharp indicates as an ecology of relations, to which modes are situated, continuously influence their affective constitution.¹¹

In understanding Spinoza's relational ontology as consisting of relations between nodes and networks means understanding it in such a way that there is a connection between modes and attributes where the appropriations to them might not be exact as strictly how reason requires them to be, but as how we perceive them in terms of their associations. As Spinoza writes in E2p7s, "the formal being of the idea... can be perceived only through another mode of thought as its proximate cause, and this again through another, and so on *ad infinitum*." In short, to understand the world in terms of immanence, we must understand the network of modes and their relations in terms of motion, velocity, and rest.

Urban Cannibalism

Spinoza paints a vivid picture in a letter to Oldenburg of a worm living in a vein in reference to the place human beings occupy in the universe. As he says, "that worm would be living in the blood as we are living in our part of the universe, and it would regard each individual particle of the blood as a whole."¹² Here, Spinoza alludes to the idea of our place in nature. The idea is that there is a similarity with us thinking of nature as a whole the same way the tiny worm living in the bloodstream of a vein, where it is seen, in the context of Spinoza's metaphysics, as an intricate whole. Additionally, as Armstrong argues, the perspective of seeing nature partially is inadequate, since we

¹⁰ Caroline Williams, "Unravelling the subject with Spinoza: Towards a morphological analysis of the scene of subjectivity" in *Contemporary Political Theory* 16, (2017), 1.

¹¹ Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1.

¹² Spinoza, "Letter 32" in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 848.

regard ourselves in isolationist, self-contained, terms.¹³ The antidote to this inadequate understanding of nature, for Spinoza, is to look into the “causes by which they are disposed to desire and will” (e1a). As thought and extension, being attributes of the same substance seen in two different ways, express themselves through modes which are constantly defined by their persistence to exist, it unveils a tendency for an idea (as a determination of thought) and a body (a determination of extension) to participate in a field of conflict, thereby pointing towards an aggressive, hostile principle to which I relate with the notion of cannibalism.

Gatens, with her feminist analysis of Spinozist imagination, incorporates the metaphysical representations of the body as it becomes immersed and reverberates at the level of epistemology, politics, and ethics to which it becomes embodied and effected in its materiality.¹⁴ When representations become absorbed into symbols, images, or metaphors, they become weaponized to propagate structural and systemic violence (i.e. sexism, racism). This is cannibalism at play. Thought cannibalizes thought, and likewise bodies cannibalize other bodies. As thoughts become determined, they precipitate and perpetuate an understanding, although partial and inadequate. This implies a violent tendency when it comes to our imaginaries, as they feed our perception toward the body, and vice versa. This image of thought, de Castro argues, becomes the foundational fragment of rational discourse, thus informing our affective constitution as it manifests in knowledge production and action.¹⁵ Furthermore, as Negri points out, this is where metaphysics as constitutive has the capacity in “deepening its own conditions, [where it] reaches the point of defining

¹³ Aurelia Armstrong, “Autonomy and the Relational Individual” in *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*, ed. Moira Gatens (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 43-63.

¹⁴ Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London: Routledge, 1996), 7.

¹⁵ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2009), 79.

a materialistic horizon.”¹⁶ As Spinoza regards the power of imagination to form ideas by way of cognizing individual things (E2p40s2), it cannot be divorced from the way we perceive reality. Negri further argues that imagination reveals the complexity of the real and material articulations of reason, which, then, reveals in our philosophical consciousness that is constitutive to our understanding of the underlying metaphysical perception of reality.¹⁷ Thus, in my contextual reading of Spinoza in proximity to the cannibalistic tendency of thought and body as a way to inform and transform the urban, we now proceed with the notion of urban cannibalism as a device in treating the city in terms of Spinoza’s metaphysics.

Urban cannibalism, also referred to as “Urbanibalism” is a concept which acts as a metaphorical signification that looks at the urban environment from the point of view of the stomach. As it recognizes the metabolic process the digestive organ undergoes, it is situated internally by looking at the complexities and processes of nature and externally towards its manifestations. Hence, the notion is not merely ecology in its essentialist and pacifying tendencies.¹⁸ Here, the term *cannibalism* introduces an aggressive and disturbing thought to the concept by appropriating it as the character of urban environment. As the *art of overgrowth*, urban cannibalism rejoices over the spontaneity of surplus of life in cities. This notion echoes Marx in his characterization of capitalism and its metabolic process – often associated to a vampire that sucks the living labor out of everything under its vampiric cloak; whereas urban cannibalism tries to overturn this by welcoming an uncontrollable element in the capitalist machine.¹⁹ Thus, a city as existing and that which we live in occupies time and space gives rise to a concept of it as a conventional unit of thought. This

¹⁶ Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 128.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁸ Wietske Maas, Matteo Pasquinelli, “Urbanibalism” in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti, Maria Hlavajova (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 442-443.

¹⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976), 342.

singularity is not particular to subjective individuality which is why the urban experience of a higher middle-class professor in a top university in Manila will vastly vary to an adjunct lecturer in a city college in the same urban environment. This is the paradox of the city – as far as the urban imaginary goes, the city as a unit of thought and as an ‘event’ gives and at the same time takes away experiences in an attempt to homogenize its sporadic fluctuations and spontaneous flinching. In this sense, it is easy to situate the city in the principle of non-identity – and it is rightly so. However, as we compare one city to another, for example Quezon City and Manila, we denote them in terms of identity. What are the characteristics unique to QC that are simply not present in Manila? Here, we fall into metaphysical significations of relying on particularities of the two in order to associate them in terms of difference. This is where urban cannibalism would be able to creep in. As an approach that traces violent histories (such as colonization), migrations that were forced by social and natural affairs (flash floods that exacerbates the poor living conditions of the citizens), among others, urban cannibalism looks at cities in its metabolic tendencies – with emphasis on metabolism described not as a relaxed instantiation of metabolic process but as an active, aggressive, and even hostile force that relies on tensions between digestive organs in order to absorb, liquify, and push excesses into new territories and state of affairs.²⁰

For Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw, it is on the spatio-temporal environment classified as the city that we must recognize the cannibalistic tendency of nature as it accelerates the transformation a city undergoes. They contend that both in the physical and socio-ecological changes in nature, the transformation also happens at an epistemic level.²¹ This happens to be the case as we tend to differentiate nature and culture as domains with their own respective rules, processes, and consequences. But, as I argue and introduce Spinoza’s relational ontology in proximity to the concept of urban cannibalism, I wish to

²⁰ Wietske Maas, Matteo Pasquinelli, “Urbanibalism” in *Posthuman Glossary*.

²¹ Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw, “Urban Political Ecology” in *In the Nature of Cities*, ed. Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika, Erik Swyngedouw (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-19.

contend that the difference between culture and nature is a difference we impose when we think of social configuration of affairs through institutions, communities, concrete networks and layers of materialities, cultures, and experiences – and by large the experience of a city, is one that sees nature in an essential sense of the term – where human beings are divorced from with its own set of regularities and principles. For Spinoza, this is a confused idea that we ascribe to ourselves. Human beings do not occupy a special place in terms of the intricate web of immanent relations in nature. As a (social) kingdom within a (natural) kingdom, we tend to set various significations of what is natural and what is not. For example, high-rise buildings, water canals, and different modes of land, air, and sea transportation are seen as manmade, with their raw materials extracted and processed from various natural resources. This idea further delineates the imaginary towards the urban environment as something unnatural. However, as far as urban cannibalism is concerned, this is not the case. There is no instance where the natural raw material becomes unnatural or artificial when it undergoes a thorough process of transformation. It is only by means of the tensions between various elements and components that manmade objects become created. The same idea is consistent with the idea of a city. Take Harvey as an example when he says, “In a fundamental sense, there is in the final analysis nothing unnatural about New York City.”²² This line also resonates with Deleuze’s idea of “Nature that distribute affects, does not make any distinction at all between things that might be called natural and things that might be called artificial.”²³ Thus, urban cannibalism as a method of thinking about cities in its immanent relations means thinking about it primarily not in terms of nature and culture, but of constant tension, spontaneity, and sometimes even hostility in its metabolic processes.

Cities, as hubs of vast populations and often become sites of social, technological, and economic advancements where people from different backgrounds meet, are considered as one of the

²² David Harvey, *The Nature of Environment* (London: Merlin Press, 1993), 28.

²³ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1988), 124.

greatest inventions of humankind. As Rodriguez characterizes it, the city is a dynamism at play, allowing for concentration of various fields of human development in cooperation to bring about human beings' technological, scientific, cultural, political, and economic determinations to its realization.²⁴ Yet, even with the idea of cities as mankind's greatest endeavor and achievement, upon closer inspection reveals spatial and temporal marks that embeds itself as its homogenous identity. As machinery for accelerating processes for human utility and consumption, cities also function as sites for the hegemonic and metabolic flow of the capital. This reduces the non-identical nature of city-dwellers, both human and non-human, into mere cogs of the capitalist machine, in the name of world economic and political order.²⁵ Kocchar-Lindgren makes an excellent case in his articulation of Hong Kong. As he argues, the city of Hong Kong in its history, future, and all the existing entities within intersect with one another as they traverse as islands of quasi-stability.²⁶ These provides the city with its own internal and external distinctiveness, but at the same time it is situated with tensions and delicate strings that brings it about as a thriving and economically powerful city. Therefore, by looking at the city in terms of an arabesque which determines a dynamic transformation through weaving determined patterns of various lines, shapes, and colors, it resembles urban cannibalism in the sense that expansion does not happen in a harmoniously dynamic or spontaneous way. A city chews, digests, and metabolizes in order to extract the nutrients and push away the excess out of the system.

From Illusion to Promise

Kaika contends that modern cities appear to be the invention of the Enlightenment subject to acquire, control, and compartmentalize

²⁴ Agustin Rodriguez, "The City and the Dynamism of Invention and Exploitation" in *Making Sense of the City*, ed. Remmon Barbaza (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019), 193-212.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Gray Kocchar-Lindgren, *Urban Arabesques: Philosophy, Hong Kong, Transversality* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 3.

every flow that emanates from nature as its expressions.²⁷ It projects itself as a promise, almost utopian, that through rationality's teleological determinations, it is capable of bringing about a design that encapsulates most, if not all, of its ambitions into the fore. While this idea of grandeur, especially in its architectural and physical transformations of spatiotemporal situatedness, is optimistic and characteristic of the enlightened rational subject, Spinoza reminds us that teleology is one of the most confused ideas – not to mention an illusion, that human beings commit to (e)la). The idea of the city resembles this. Barbaza claims that the city appears as an illusion, referring to both Harvey and Lefebvre, he contends that there is an ambivalence when it comes to thinking about cities in contrast to nature.²⁸ While it was established above that the question between culture and nature becomes blurred when it comes to cities as urban cannibalism renders this question obscure in Spinoza's ontology of immanent relations, the city then dissolves into mere coagulation of concrete, towers of glass, bridges, roads, infrastructure, endless opportunities, life itself – which defines the characteristics of a city. Along with this blurring, the promise of the city also becomes a broken one.

It is important why we should address the promise of the city in relation to understanding Spinoza's immanent ontology of relations and urban cannibalism. This is where I argue that the concept of urban cannibalism as a device in viewing the processes of the city, and the city in general, could determine the metaphysics and ethics, in which the city informs us, and conversely, philosophy as a way that we transform the city. Most of the cities follow the Western and European vision, design, and ideals that give emphasis to the critical role humans play in the realization of perfection which reflects in the geometric arrangement of space and aestheticizing the city in harmony with "nature" divorced

²⁷ Maria Kaika, *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature, and the City*, (New York & London: Routledge, 2005), 73.

²⁸ Remmon Barbaza, "The City as Illusion and Promise" in *Making Sense of the City*, 213-226

from the city itself.²⁹ Here, cities take on an artificial sense of nature while insisting on the difference between them. Hence, *Modernity's Promethean Project*, as Kaika denotes it, offers a promise for city-dwellers to be urban cannibals, where the aspect of experiencing the city is similar to experiencing life itself.³⁰ By invoking the mythological narrative of the titan appropriating it to the Enlightenment's humanistic and rational endeavor, it enhances the humanistic capacity of reconciling nature within the apparent artificiality of the urbanization process. However, as Rodriguez points out, the Enlightened subject's apparatus became the tool to facilitate the unrelenting metabolic expansion of global capitalism.³¹ Here, we can understand, through Spinoza's immanent ontology, which obtains its legitimacy through relationality of various modes of existence on how they overlap boundaries through their persistence, or simply conatus. Thus, as we refer to ourselves as city-dwellers, we must also admit that we are urban cannibals, perceptive of the flow of the capital, perceptive of the way that we participate in its metabolic process as it devours the living labor of its constituents in the name of its illusions that it masks as promises, and the other way around.

A city, then, along with its paradoxical nature of existence, is a way to determine the rational development of political, economic, and social relations. Balibar rules that in Spinoza, such relations present a double aspect when it comes to identifying the *transindividuality* of every mode in their composition and decay, characterized by exchange with other individuals' totality or parts through affections which is integrated into a social configuration of ethical relations – which can be observed, for instance, in a city.³² However, such a teleological account in tracing the development of human thought through urban development could only limit itself in its spatiotemporal situatedness.

²⁹ Matthew Gandy, "Urban nature and the ecological imaginary" in *In the Nature of Cities*, 62-72.

³⁰ Kaika, *City of Flows*, 12.

³¹ Rodriguez, "The City and the Dynamism of Invention and Exploitation" in *Making Sense of the City*, 193-212.

³² Etienne Balibar, "Philosophies of the Transindividual" in *Australasian Philosophical Review*, Vol. 2, 5-25.

As cities tend to homogenize and flatten their terrain, boundaries, and territories, one could always fall into these teleological illusions since it is difficult to imagine where the flows in the city stop. They merely transform into other modes of existence but nonetheless retain their homogenous modalities mixed with the motivations of their movement as they transform. From networks of road that disperse into different forms of transportation such as air, water, and land transportation - from bodies of water which sustain marine life to networks of pipelines that provide clean, drinking water and sewerage that separate and consume the waste and mix it with itself in order to smoothen its flow into treatment plants or out of the network altogether. These demonstrate that even if we perceive the changes that the city undergoes, these transformations only happen through determinations of various forces that enable them, turning the idea of a city into an illusion. Nonetheless, we should not simply disregard the city, its grandeur, and its promises as mere illusory or vain ambition. Rejoicing over the idea of overgrowth, uncontrollable impulses, and movements within the carefully planned urban sites and city centers, we should not be afraid, as city-dwellers, to be urban cannibals. As Maas and Pasquinelli declare in Amsterdam: we should never abandon the city in favor of a virgin territory. This assumption welcomes a new horizon of interpretations and meaning when it comes to defining the urban environment. As we destroy the idea of the dual scripting we associate with city-nature dichotomy, we create new meanings based on immanent relations that points out to a future while inhabiting the present and considering the past of a city's spatiotemporal situatedness. This is where the illusion becomes a promise.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, I will briefly summarize the points I made in this paper. First, Spinoza's relational ontology offers a profound way of understanding reality in terms of relations. By highlighting immanence, I emphasize that an individual's persistence to exist, or *conatus*, drives one to create connections that contribute to their affective constitution. This notion then provides a way in thinking of an interconnected network of bodies, thoughts, and forces that continuously affect one

another, influencing individuals to act based on their disposition in the ecology of relations to which they belong to. Second, I introduce the idea of urban cannibalism as overgrowth. By protruding to an idea of excess, surplus, and the uncontrollable elements of life observed in the processes of individuals and by large nature, the idea of a city is one that is characterized through metabolism—of understanding its development through an active procedure of digestion. This enables us to think of the individuals that participate in different affairs are susceptible to tension, conflict, and hostility. And lastly, the promise of the city is in its tendency to homogenize everything within its boundaries becomes apparent as an illusion. Here, by introducing urban cannibalism, such an illusion transforms into a promise in realizing that as city-dwellers, we participate in the ongoing affective transformation of a city which brings about its teleological determinations.

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