

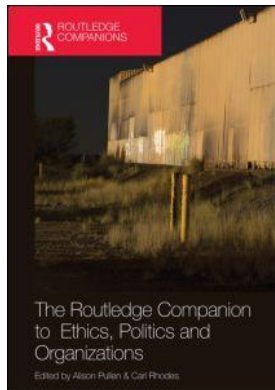
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### Monstrous ethics

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## Part 6

# Difference, ethics and organizations

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## Monstrous ethics

*Torkild Thanem and Louise Wallenberg*

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Speaking of monstrous ethics may seem like an oxymoron. As the monstrous is traditionally associated with the excessively horrifying, vicious and unruly, it is the immoral and the unethical incarnated: the monstrous disrupts moral boundaries of good and evil. However, the monstrous is also associated with the enormously large, the disgustingly ugly and the remarkably unusual. Hence, it provides a cunning entry to interrogate how moral judgement continues to be based on and confused with quantitative behaviour patterns and aesthetic preferences rather than ethical values. Complicating the relationship between the ethical and the monstrous further, Nietzsche (1886/1966: 146) warned in *Beyond Good and Evil*, that '[w]hoever fights monsters should see to it that, in the process, he does not become a monster'. The monstrous is therefore not given, and it is by no means in a straightforward opposition to the ethical. The Babylonians knew this, and perhaps we moderns are starting to recognize this, albeit in a different vein: for the Babylonians, a monstrously shaped offspring was not necessarily sign of God's wrath against human sin, as certain monstrous births promised future glory (Thompson, 1930); for us moderns, animated films such as *Monsters, Inc.* remind us that monsters can be good and that humans may be evil.

While these sentiments suggest that it is necessary to challenge the dominant notions that conflate the monstrous with the immoral, this is not to say that expressions of the monstrous cannot or should not be deemed immoral or evil. Acts of genocide and child molestation are indeed monstrously evil and immoral in the worst possible sense, but naming them as such does rarely, if ever, require much ethical contemplation. Furthermore, it is possible to judge certain business practices as monstrously immoral – in their consequences, intentions or disregard for others, and according to conventional perspectives of utilitarian ethics, Kantian ethics and virtue ethics. For instance, the production and distribution of genetically modified (GM) crops may cause so much harm to people and communities that it may be regarded monstrously immoral. However, these perspectives reduce ethical judgement to a matter of maximizing utility, obeying rules or acting according to given moral virtues. And as utilitarian ethics, Kantian ethics and virtue ethics tend to universalize the calculus, rules and virtues that underpin moral judgement (Parker, 1998; ten Bos and Willmott, 2001; Hancock, 2008), they ignore how such judgement is shaped by dominant social and aesthetic norms and manipulated by dominant actors that may exaggerate their goodness whilst underplaying their harmful effects, irresponsible rule-breaking or vicious character traits.

Rather than prescribing a life in harmony with dominant norms of social behaviour and aesthetic preference, ethics may therefore require us to challenge, disrupt and transgress the moralism of such norms. Indeed, it would be absurd if acting ethically would mean that one should accept the racism of racist societies or the sexism of patriarchal organizations. At the same time, and without downplaying the prevalence of racist and sexist sentiments in contemporary modern societies and organizations, we would be hard-pressed to argue that the racist conflation of ethnic physiognomy with monstrous evil is a dominant trend. Rather, contemporary modern societies and organizations are marinated in a neoliberal celebration of individual responsibility and performance. In some countries, such as the UK, neoliberal sentiments are increasingly reiterated, accentuated and redressed in neoconservative garb. With both neoliberalism and neoconservatism, individuals within and beyond work organizations are expected to take moral responsibility to be healthy, employable, committed and successful, and those who fail to do so are deemed morally weak. However, neoconservatism more strongly demonizes those they regard as physically and morally unfit. As neoconservative commentators claim that ‘fat people are bad for business’ (*This Morning*, 2013) and label state benefit recipients ‘parasites’ (e.g. *Daily Star*, 2014), these groups are not merely deemed so weak in moral character that they are unable to contribute to society through participation in work and organizations; they are even singled out as so enormously lazy that they are regarded unable to carry their own weight.

Whether or not the monstrous is conflated with evil or with moral weakness, challenging the moralism of dominant social and aesthetic norms requires us to explore alternative trajectories for the good life. Insofar as we are operating within a lexicon of monstrous ethics, this may involve the crafting of a positively monstrous ethics. In recent social and organizational theorizing, this has taken two forms so far. Anchored in Levinas’s (e.g. 1961) ethics of self–other relations, Shildrick (2002) has argued for a feminist monstrous ethics where the leaky, fragile and vulnerable nature of the embodied self requires us to take responsibility for the other. In contrast, one of us (Thanem, 2011) has tried to articulate a positively monstrous ethics through Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677) – *l’enfant terrible* of ethics. In the *Ethics*, which was his *magnum opus*, Spinoza (1677/1994) argued that ethics is not a question of good versus evil, but a question of power and what a body can do. On our reading, this has significant implications for how people relate to others and to themselves within and beyond organizations.<sup>1</sup>

In the remainder of the chapter we will therefore discuss three forms of monstrous ethics: monstrous immorality according to conventional ethics perspectives; neoliberal and neo-conservative notions of monstrously moral weakness; and Spinozian concepts for a positively monstrous ethics. In the first section we will discuss how practices that disrupt boundaries of good and evil in organizational life may be deemed monstrously immoral according to utilitarian ethics, Kantian ethics and virtue ethics. Doing so, we will draw on the example of the multinational GM crops industry. In the second section we will interrogate how neoliberal and neoconservative regimes construe social and aesthetic deviance as monstrous signs of moral weakness through media representations of weight-gaining celebrities, obese legal defendants and state benefits recipients. Whereas our discussion of the GM crops industry illustrates the monstrously immoral exploitation of poor communities by big business, our discussion of neoliberal and neoconservative moralism draws attention to a complex of discursive forces that seek to justify further marginalization and exploitation of poor communities. In the final section we will discuss how a Spinozian ethics may enable us to transgress the moralism of dominant norms, challenge the immorality of big business exploitation schemes, and explore alternative trajectories for the good life within and beyond organizations.

## Monstrous immoralities

Conventional perspectives of utilitarianism, Kantianism and virtue ethics may be mobilized to discuss the monstrously immoral in relation to the production and patenting of GM crops. The innovation, production, patenting and sales of GM crops is big business. According to one source, the ‘Global value of the biotech seed market alone was US\$13.2 billion in 2011’ (James, 2011). But GM crops may also have significant implications for the local communities where they are manufactured and for the consumers who ingest GM-based foodstuffs. In what sense, then, may GM crops and the organizations that produce them be regarded monstrous in moral terms?

Both proponents and opponents of GM crops tend to take a utilitarian–consequentialist perspective when evaluating the morality of GM crops. Proponents, which typically count agribusiness multinationals, often argue that GM crops provide an important solution to alleviate world hunger and poverty and to meet the future challenges of population growth whilst improving the living conditions of poor farming communities. It is further claimed that GM crops, which are engineered with pest-resistant traits, make farming more efficient and more sustainable, as they enable farmers to expand and stabilize their harvest yields whilst requiring fewer resources and no pesticides. Monsanto (undated, a), which is the largest operator in this field, claims that they are developing seeds that ‘help farmers double the yields’, ‘use one-third fewer key resources per unit of output’, ‘lessen habitat loss and improve water quality’. Further, they claim that they help ‘improve the lives of all farmers who use our products, including an additional five million people in resource-poor farm families’.

In contrast, opponents tend to argue that GM crops carry severe risks to the health of individual farmers and consumers as well as to the economic and ecological sustainability of local communities. Whereas proponents claim that GM crops are safe, opponents such as Greenpeace argue that it is still impossible to know the long-term effects that GM crops may have on health and illness but that other problems with GM crops are becoming prominent. In developing countries local farmers and communities are being made financially and agriculturally dependent on GM crops and on their multinational manufacturers, as GM crops out-compete native species and contaminate organic crops. Furthermore, opponents argue that the pest-resistant qualities of GM crops have been overstated by manufacturers, who engineer GM seeds in such a way that they are resistant only to the manufacturer’s own herbicide (see e.g. Greenpeace UK, undated). The consequence is reduced biodiversity and an agriculture that is less rather than more ecologically and economically sustainable.

While a deontological Kantian perspective is rarely invoked in discussions about the ethics of GM crops, it seems to have more to say about the behaviour of agribusiness companies than about GM crops per se. It would be difficult to argue that GM crops as such violate any moral duty or obligation from a Kantian ethic. Kant’s (1785/1988) reiteration of the golden rule states that no human should be reduced to a means to an end, but this does not apply to non-human organisms in the natural environment. Hence, the golden rule is more relevant in evaluating the ethics of GM crops manufacturing. Although GM crops multinationals claim to work for the benefit and well-being of poor farmers and populations, it could be argued that they are exaggerating the benefits of GM crops whilst tying up local farmers in financially disadvantageous contracts, thus making farmers dependent on expensive crops and herbicides that do not yield the promised results. Consequently, a Kantian analysis may suggest that this industry makes local farmers a mere means to the organizational end of profit maximization.

A virtue ethics perspective complicates the rights and wrongs of GM crops somewhat. Even though virtue ethics shares a rationalist ground with utilitarian and Kantian ethics in emphasizing that morality is enabled by rational thought rather than instinct, it is concerned with the whole life and moral character of a person or an organization rather than with isolated acts and their

consequences. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (350BC/1953) highlighted virtues such as courage, temperance and generosity, truthfulness, friendliness, modesty and patience. Extending these virtues of interpersonal relations to humans' relationship with the natural environment, contemporary writings in environmental virtue ethics emphasize the capacity to appreciate, respect and love nature as environmental virtues. For instance, Sandler (2005) uses the virtues of humility and compassion to assess the use of GM crops in agriculture. Insofar as GM crops involve humans dominating and exploiting nature rather than appreciating, respecting and loving nature, he argues, GM crops violate the virtue of humility in human–nature interactions. But insofar as GM crops such as golden rice (which is rich in vitamin A) may enable the exercise of compassion for people who suffer from vitamin A deficiency, GM crops may enable virtuous relationships with humans.

In corporate social responsibility pledges, GM crops manufacturers appeal to a number of virtues to govern their relationship with humans and the natural environment. On Monsanto's (undated, b) account, this involves showing integrity through 'honesty, decency, consistency, and courage', sharing knowledge and technology 'to improve agriculture and . . . crops, . . . help farmers in developing countries', and respecting 'The safety of . . . the communities where we operate'. Unfortunately, our discussion above suggests that these virtues are not necessarily honoured in actual business practices, but diluted by vices of dishonesty, greed, hubris and disrespect. Indeed, MacIntyre (1984) argued that organizations operating in the capitalist economic order could not be virtuous because basic virtues such as cooperativeness, compassion and solidarity would always be undermined by the pursuit of profit maximization.

In summary, and despite differences in logic, the three perspectives of utilitarian, Kantian and virtue ethics make it possible to evaluate the morality of GM crops manufacturers by establishing boundaries between good and evil – in terms of their consequences, their compliance with or violation of moral obligations, or their exercise of virtues contra vices. GM crops manufacturers may therefore be deemed monstrously immoral insofar as they cause extremely painful effects, violate fundamental moral obligations, or express an extremely vicious rather than virtuous character. However, the power of dominant actors to redefine relevant consequences, obligations and intentions means that the ethical conclusions drawn from these three perspectives are more arbitrary than is often acknowledged. Depending on how costs and benefits are calculated, how means–end relations are defined and what emphasis is given to intended virtues contra actual vices, GM crops manufacturers can be viewed as morally good or bad. Ironically this reproduces the monstrously relativist immoralism that these perspectives claim to block.

Despite these problems, utilitarian calculus, Kantian duties and moral virtues further shape moral judgement in neoliberal settings. The neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility, self-management and self-improvement suggests a utilitarian concern with the individual's contribution to society, a Kantian concern with the individual's responsibility to fulfil one's obligations to society and a virtue-based concern where the virtuous individual is capable of taking care of herself or himself. In order to problematize the monstrous aspects of neoliberal moralism and how this is reiterated and accentuated under current neoconservatism, let us now examine how the calculus, rules and norms that underpin these ethico–political regimes conflate aesthetic and social deviance with moral weakness.

### **Monstrosities of moral weakness**

Under contemporary neoliberalism and neoconservatism, people who are regarded extremely ugly and enormous risk being demonized as monstrously immoral. Whereas this association has

a long history which leastwise goes back to the Christian deadly sins of gluttony and sloth, media representations of the obese and lazy body now seem to play a central role in this moral terrain. As populations across all continents are growing heavier and unhealthier (World Health Organization, 2010, 2013), the rising costs associated with obesity are turning the obese and physically inactive body into a target of moral judgement (e.g. LeBesco, 2011; see also Thanem, 2009). Three kinds of media representations seem to crystallize: tabloid coverage of women celebrity weight gainers; commercial television documentaries about people suffering from extreme obesity; and docusoaps about people living on the socio-economic margin of western societies.

Parts of the gossip press thrive on reporting about women celebrities with severe weight gains, frequently publishing invasive photos and multi-page features of 'Weight Winners and Losers'. The singer Christina Aguilera may serve as a case in point: At the beginning of her career in the late 1990s, she was applauded by the gossip press for her size zero figure, but later scorned and harassed by the same media for gaining close to 30 kilos during her first pregnancy. Other female celebrities who have been subject to similar media treatment include the singer Jessica Simpson, the reality television personality Kim Kardashian and, perhaps most infamously, the actress Kirsty Allen. Gossip magazines regularly flaunt unflattering snapshots of these and other overweight celebrities on their covers with titles in bright pink or yellow reading 'Jessica's diet disaster: can't stop gaining weight!', 'Pregnant Kim's nightmare: 65-LB weight gain!' and 'Dumped at 200 LBS'. Rather than victimizing the celebrity in question, she is scrutinized, vilified and ridiculed for being mentally, physically and morally weak. And unlike the rest of us, it is implicitly assumed that she has no good excuse for 'letting herself go': 'despite all her money and success, she is still incapable of taking care of herself!'

We admit that the weight-gaining celebrity may be an extreme case, but this kind of treatment by the gossip press may have wider moralizing effects. Even though the celebrity hype of popular culture is widely criticized for setting unrealistic and impossible beauty standards for aspiring youths, and even though the ridiculed celebrity may make the rest of us feel less bad about ourselves, the gossip press merely offers a more striking expression of the moral calculations, rules and virtues that dominate neoliberal society: through the powerful image of the morally weak celebrity, the rest of us are reminded of our own moral weaknesses.

The immorality of the obese body is further expressed in television documentaries such as *Half-Ton Killer?* (2012), which are widely broadcast on western cable television. This is a modern form of the Victorian freak show, but one where the enormous and extremely obese body is the only object of interest. These programmes seem to suggest that 'the fatter, the freakier'. A central theme in this documentary genre concerns the obese person's incapacity to do and to act. Much focus is on how the lead social actor is rendered immobile by their obesity. They are prisoners in their own home, in their own bedroom, and in their own body. Unable to take care of basic hygienic needs and incapable to get dressed on their own, they are dependent on constant care by others. In these documentaries, the camera tends to keep a certain distance. Whether out of respect or repulsion, this enables the camera to capture the entire body as it is being washed and dressed by a caretaker. Indeed, the camera only closes up on the face when they do the one thing that they can do without assistance: eating.

In *Half-Ton Killer?* the obese young woman Mayra Rosales of La Jolla, Texas, is accused of having killed her 2-year-old nephew by a direct strike to his head. However, there are initial doubts about her guilt because her immobility may have made her incapable of actually carrying out the strike. As the police investigation starts, a major problem turns out to be logistic: how to get Rosales out of her house and into the courtroom, and how to house her in prison if she is convicted. Press reports state that she is 'too fat for prison', and her initial house arrest while awaiting trial causes an outrage amongst many Texans who doubly accuse her of murder and



of being let off lightly. Rosales recalls the protracted event and how she was being publically haunted and vilified in the media: ‘They’re making me feel like I was a monster, but I’m not what they’re saying I am.’ She first agrees to having caused her nephew’s death, saying that she accidentally fell on him and crushed him, but later admits that it was her own sister, that is, the boy’s mother, who caused his death. The sister eventually pleads guilty and is sentenced to prison. Mayra Rosales is freed from all legal charges relating to her nephew’s death.

This documentary complicates the moral treatment of the obese body in contemporary society. First, it draws attention to the almost anachronistic sense in which aesthetic deviance continues to be associated with monstrous evil. But second, and perhaps more importantly, its focus on how the obese person’s incapacity to act questions her ethical autonomy. While the extremely obese is deemed so physically and morally weak that she is regarded incapable of taking care of herself, it is even doubtful if she is capable of breaking the law. Insofar as ethical autonomy is a defining feature of the human, as Kant implied, the lacking ethical autonomy of the enormously obese person works to dehumanize her and monstrify her.<sup>2</sup>

However, the neoliberal and neoconservative moralism that underpins the contemporary association of moral weakness with social and aesthetic deviance, is perhaps more clearly actualized in current media reports on state benefit recipients. The UK docusoap series *Benefits Street*, broadcasted by Channel 4 during the spring of 2014, has provoked heated political debate in the UK and beyond. The series follows the residents on James Turner Street in Birmingham during 2013. As one resident in his seventies says: ‘James Turner Street was one of the best streets, now, [it’s] one of the worst!’ Unemployment is extremely high and drug addiction is widespread amongst residents. Some of the families have been unemployed and dependent on state benefit across generations. Hence, they are part of a non-working underclass that in the UK is widely demonized as ‘chavs’ (Hayward and Yar, 2006; Brewis and Jack, 2010; Jones, 2012).

In the first episode, viewers are told that the series aims to depict how the already underprivileged residents will manage to cope with the UK government’s severe cutbacks on the state benefit system. The dramatic but cold voice-over tells viewers that ‘times are getting tougher. They’re having to learn how to get by on less, and rely on each other more.’ But even if the television producers may initially have been driven by a desire to show empathy with residents and how they cope with a harsh form of social engineering, the television series comes across as a social experiment where the main question is not how the residents will survive, but *if* they will survive.

At the same time, residents are depicted shoplifting or spending substantial sums on alcohol. In one episode, the programme follows a group of residents who steal clothes from high street stores in central Birmingham and how they try to sell them locally around James Turner Street. In other scenes, a young woman resident who is struggling with drug addiction is filmed waiting by the cash machine as time approaches midnight and transfer of the monthly benefit payment into her account. She withdraws 100 pounds sterling, which she then converts into alcohol at the local off-licence shop. Although such scenes may portray residents as untrustworthy and irresponsible lawbreakers who cheat the system, other scenes may bring out the warmth, care and support that residents show for each other in spite of their material dispossession. In one episode the camera team follows an ex-convicted resident who earns his living by selling basic necessity items around the neighbourhood at self-cost prices. When he visits one family that is not even able to purchase a package of laundry detergent at 50 pence, he tells them not to worry and gives it to them for free.

The series is enormously popular, with the first episode attracting 4.3 million viewers, which is a 17.7 per cent share of all viewers and more than any Channel 4 show in 2013. But it has

also created much controversy. Left-wing commentators are critiquing the series for turning poverty into porn and ‘kick[ing] those without a voice’ (Round, 2014). In contrast, right-wing politicians and commentators are claiming that the series reveals how people on benefits openly and mockingly exploit a naively generous system. On 13 January 2014, the conservative Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Ian Duncan Smith argued in the House of Commons that the television series justified the severe cutbacks on the benefit system by the government’s Welfare Reform Act. But *The Sun* newspaper columnist Kathie Hopkins has perhaps been the most vocal, arguing that ‘fat people are bad for business’ (on *This Morning*, ITV, 28 February 2013) and calling the residents of James Turner Street ‘parasites sucking the blood out of your pet terrier’ (*Daily Star*, 10 January 2014). Further, in an interview on BBC Radio she argued that:

The people on Benefits Street . . . don’t have work, are living off the tax payers . . . don’t have any intention of getting out of bed and trying to get a job, they are mostly on sanctions because they won’t turn up at their job centre and look for work, and they are prepared to sit back, have a life paid for by others, and smoke their way through life, drink their way through life . . . watching bigger TVs than any of us will ever own.

(BBC, Three Counties Radio, 17 January 2014)

From this right-wing perspective, benefit recipients are not merely construed as morally weak and lacking in moral character, but as calculating, selfish and evil exploiters who grow fatter and fatter whilst refusing to contribute.

In a neoliberal discourse of responsible, performing and enterprising individuals, the allegedly obese and unhealthy bodies of benefit recipients becomes an illustration of people who fail to take moral responsibility to participate in society through honest work, and who fail to take care of themselves and their own health and well-being. Rather than contributing to growth and wealth creation through active participation in work, organizations and society, they are seen as an extreme burden on society and its institutions.

The neoconservatism of right-wing commentators takes neoliberalism one step further, deeming benefit recipients so unwilling and incapable of meeting social and aesthetic norms that their moral weakness has taken monstrous proportions. Interestingly, right-wing commentators are not mobilizing a wholly rationalistic argument against benefit recipients. Rather, their criticism seems to be rooted in embodied and aesthetic feelings of disgust, repulsion and distaste against people who express a completely different way of, and taste for, life. That the tastes and ways of benefit recipients may be shaped by socio-economic conditions of disadvantage and dispossession is ignored in a right-wing ideology, which only sees individuals and no societies. And in passing, we note that neoliberal and neoconservative ideologues and commentators rarely critique the multinational companies that exploit the dispossession and despair of poor communities, whether through disadvantageous GM crops schemes or through systematic underpayment.

Such demonizing of difference suggests that there is a pressing need to explore ethical trajectories that involve transgressing rather than reinforcing some of the dominant social and aesthetic norms that underpin the moralism of contemporary neoliberalism and neoconservatism. The transgressive nature of such a project reverses the conventional association of the monstrous with the immoral, taking us instead in the direction of a positively monstrous ethics. Let us now turn to the work of Spinoza in order to explore the opportunities for developing a positively monstrous ethics of a joyful organizational life, which thrives on difference rather than demonizes difference.

## The monstrously good life?

While we have utilized Spinoza's philosophical treatment of ethics in some of our own recent work to rethink the relationship between ethics and the monstrous (see Thanem, 2011), Spinoza has received very little attention in organization studies, in the organizational ethics literature and in the field of business ethics. He is even a marginal figure in moral philosophy. At the same time, he remains a notable figure across a range of philosophical traditions, and is widely recognized as a precursor to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Much of the early commentators, however, held him in little regard. Hume, only having read him second hand, rejected his 'hideous hypothesis of a God full of contradictions'. Hegel, having read him more closely, misread him as an idealist and ended up rejecting him as a failed idealist. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that Nietzsche found 'a spiritual companion in Spinoza' (Hardt, 1993: 129, n. 2), although Nietzsche (1866/1966) also ironized that Spinoza was a 'sickly recluse', much like himself, we might add. Without apparent irony, however, Russell (1946: 552) called Spinoza 'the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others have surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme.' 'As a natural consequence,' Russell adds, Spinoza 'was considered during his lifetime and for a century after his death, a man of appalling wickedness.' What Russell is alluding to here, is Spinoza's atheism and his pantheist identification of God in all things earthly, even in filth, disease and excreta, and even in the most wicked of creatures.

On the whole, and maybe because of his contradictory arguments and the intricate geometric style of the *Ethics*, Spinoza's works have been subject to a range of competing interpretations. In the history of philosophy and in analytic philosophy Spinoza is typically regarded a rationalist (e.g. Hampshire, 1951; Bennett, 1984), and in certain parts of political philosophy, he is embraced as a forerunner of political and economic liberalism (e.g. Smith, 1997). In contrast, there is a large post-Marxist literature on Spinoza, from Althusser's (1970) close reading of Marx's *Capital* to Hardt and Negri's (2004) reading of the Spinozian multitude as a subject of political resistance and transformation within and beyond capitalism (see also Virno, 2004; Montag, 2005; Lazzarato, 2010). Moreover, Spinoza is increasingly being picked up by the current affective turn in cultural and social thought (e.g. Ruddick, 2010; Seyfert, 2012).

In what follows, we will not engage with any of these literatures, but instead reiterate Thanem's (2011) most selective and somewhat superficial discussion of Spinozian ideas, which is heavily informed by the commentaries of Deleuze (1988, 1992) and of Gatens and Lloyd (1999). Despite the obvious problems of this strategy, it also has some advantages: Deleuze's expressive-ethological reading construes Spinozian ethics as an affective theory of power rather than a moral philosophy, thus challenging the moralism of dominant social norms; and Gatens and Lloyd's feminist reading shows how this is compatible with an implicit emphasis on difference and responsibility in Spinoza.

Indeed, one reason why Spinoza has figured so marginally in moral philosophy, in business ethics, and even in the literature on ethics in organizations may be that he reverses fundamental assumptions of conventional moral philosophy. For Spinoza, the ethical and good life is a joyful life. As Deleuze (1988, 1992) points out, at the core of Spinoza's ethics are not moral questions of good and evil, but expressive, ethological and political questions of what a body can do of its own power and independently of the will power of the mind:

no one has yet determined what the body can do, that is, experience has not yet taught anyone what the body can do from the laws of Nature alone, insofar as Nature is only considered to be corporeal, and what the body can do only if it is determined by the mind. For no one has yet come to know the structure of the body so accurately that he could

explain all its functions . . . This shows well enough that the body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which its mind wonders at.

(EIIIP2S)<sup>3</sup>

For Spinoza, reality and ethics are constituted by political relations between bodies (EIP11S3–4; EIVP37), and an ethical and joyful life is pursued by enhancing the body's capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies (EIVP38). While this suggests that the capacity to affect and be affected is not equally distributed amongst bodies, bodies are driven by the *conatus*, which is the body's unpredictable and uncontrollable striving to persevere (EIIIP6, P8). This is necessarily a social matter. Bodies cannot persevere on their own, but seek to persevere by entering into affective relations with other bodies that enhance their capacities (EIVP38, P39Dem).

Spinoza acknowledges the difficulties of this process by emphasizing the strength of our passions (EIVP32) and the conflictual nature of socio-affective relations between bodies (EIApp). Bodies affect others through active affects, or actions, but are affected by others through passive affects, that is, passions that make us feel or suffer (EIIIDef2–3). Although a body's capacities and joy are primarily enhanced by active affects, joyful encounters may also be caused by passive affects insofar as they involve joyful feelings such as enjoyment, love and adoration rather than sad feelings such as suffering, hatred and disgust (EIIIP11S, P37, DefAff).

Following Deleuze (1992: 236–237), our power and joyfulness depend on our composability, harmony and agreement with other bodies (EIVP29, EIVP38). As bodies strive together to preserve themselves, sad encounters result from incomposable bodies that disagree. In contrast, joyful encounters result from bodies that agree and can be composed into harmonious alliances. Consequently, bodies have a tendency to seek joy and avoid sadness by trying to repeat agreeable encounters that create joyful passions and evade sad encounters that create sad passions (EIIIP36; Deleuze, 1992: 257).

However, this is not a straightforward process of maximizing joy and minimizing sadness, of forming harmonious alliances in static ways between homogeneous bodies, or of entering into alliances with others where they can enforce harmony and composability by dominating and suppressing others (EIVP37). The smallness of one body in the grand scheme of things (EIVP3) means that passive affects and sad encounters are initially more numerous than active affects and joyful encounters (EIVP32). Moreover, the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of the *conatus* means that agreement and disagreement results from chance encounters with other bodies (EIIIP8, P15; Deleuze, 1992: 238). Repeating the same encounters will not guarantee joyful encounters and harmonious alliances. As Deleuze (1988: 55; 1992: 262) points out, joyful encounters must therefore be carefully selected. But according to Gatens and Lloyd (1999: 103), this also involves an element of experimentation.

Furthermore, harmony assumes variation, not sameness (Gatens and Lloyd, 1999), and a body can only enhance its capacities by connecting to other bodies with quite different capacities (EIVP38). Homosocial connections to bodies that are too similar will not expand a body's capacities, but only give more of the same and perhaps even undermine the possibility of making new connections in the future with bodies that are truly different from oneself. Dominating and suppressing others will also not produce joyful harmonious alliances but diminish joy and create disharmony (EIVP37). By diminishing the capacities of other bodies, domination and suppression diminishes joy: because it closes down connections to capacities that otherwise would expand the body's own capacities and power; because it produces sad affects in the dominated body; and because it produces disagreement and resistance rather than harmony.

Spinoza argues that reason is needed to form harmonious alliances between bodies that retain their difference (EIVP24, P29). But as with most of his concepts, Spinoza has something rather

particular in mind. Reason is not simply a cognitive matter, but profoundly political and embodied. Reason is political because harmonious composites of bodies are more reasonable and more powerful than divided composites (EIVP18). And reason is embodied because ‘the body is what the mind knows’ (EIIP13) and because the skilful capacity to ‘select and organize good encounters’ (Deleuze, 1988: 55) is developed over time through embodied encounters with others (EIIP18, P19). Such encounters enable one body to grasp the common features that it shares with other bodies (EIIP17C, EIIPPost2). Indeed, reasonable bodies are even able to understand bodies that disagree so much that they may be deemed contrary, and to compose a more powerful and heterogeneous body that incorporates the capacities that made them different in the first place (EIIP40S1–2, EIVP38–39).

Deleuze’s ethological reading of Spinoza has been critiqued for positing a relativist and immoralist ethics concerned with the expansion of a body’s capacities, power and freedom (Norris, 1991). However, such criticism would forget that Spinoza rejected any free will and any possibility of individual freedom (EIIP48). Spinoza was primarily concerned with understanding the limits of our freedom. As Gatens and Lloyd (1999) have argued, this means that Spinozian freedom is necessarily a freedom with respect and responsibility, though Spinoza did not explicitly develop this theme. Freedom is determined by the contexts we embody, as we seek to ‘assert and extend’ ourselves in the face of others who ‘strive to do likewise’ (Gatens, 1996: 111). Throughout Spinoza’s work, there is a fundamental scepticism against the unlimited exercise of power (EIVP37; see also the *Theological–Political Treatise* (2007) and the *Political Treatise* (2000)). One body’s striving to exercise its freedom by asserting and extending its capacities must be evaluated in terms of how it affects others. This leads Gatens and Lloyd (1999) to argue that our responsibilities are not universally given or freely decided by individuals but come from those who continue to be harmed and suffer. Hence, we are responsible to enhance our capacities and exercise freedom in ways that respect and do not harm others, and take responsibility to create and support conditions that help others enhance their capacities. Gatens and Lloyd speak of a collective process of becoming-free which requires a critical history of how we became who we are today. This involves taking responsibility for the past by endeavouring to change and end what continues to harm others. While this puts additional limits on individual freedom, it may enable a collective freedom that shifts the locus of responsibility from individuals to practices and institutions.

As discourses of de-bureaucratization, self-management and creative self-expression have become more prominent features of contemporary business life than discourses of standardization, rule-following and the conform ‘Organization Man’, some might argue that organizations are already taking such responsibility by celebrating rather than demonizing difference and diversity. As an example, diversity management programmes aimed to employ and promote people with different ethnic, social and gender backgrounds are now almost standard ingredients of a corporate world which regards a more diverse workforce crucial in serving an increasingly diverse population of customers. Furthermore, office buildings and work environments are increasingly designed to facilitate free movement and spontaneous interaction between different employees and across organizational departments and hierarchical levels, on the assumption that creativity will flourish (e.g. Kornberger and Clegg, 2004; Thanem et al., 2011). Organizations also spend considerable sums on corporate social responsibility initiatives, including donations to the education of children in developing countries and homeless support organizations in western cities (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2011; *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 2012).

However, organizational life is not yet just nice and fluffy. To take Sweden as an example, many women continue to be victims of sexual harassment at work (e.g. *Arbetsmiljöverket*, 2012: 310); top management teams and executive boards continue to be dominated by men (Statistics

Sweden, 2013); and non-westerners with higher education tend to earn less than westerners with similar education levels (IFAU, 2013). Moreover, corporate social responsibility is often mobilized as a branding exercise (e.g. Costas and Kärreman, 2013); open space office design is also a tool for disciplinary surveillance (e.g. Hofbauer, 2000; Thanem et al., 2011); and diversity management is often geared to minimize rather than stimulate difference (e.g. Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000).

The hypocrisy of diversity management, open space office design and corporate social responsibility can be scrutinized from a range of different ethical perspectives (e.g. Hancock, 2008; Banerjee, 2007). But what Spinoza brings to the table is the sense that acting ethically is not just about what we do towards others. Ethics cannot stop at recognizing and including the difference of so-called minority groups. Rather, by recasting the ethical question of difference in terms of affectivity, dominant as well as marginalized groups need to open up so much so that they can be affected by others. This is the only way that people can change how we relate to ourselves and to others, and enhance our own capacities in ways that also enhance the capacities of other people (Thanem, 2011). If the residents of James Turner Street are to serve as a last case in point, it is difficult to see how an ethical engagement is possible unless privileged non-residents open ourselves up to be affected by residents through ongoing embodied encounters. Perhaps such encounters may enable privileged non-residents to take some responsibility for ending the past and current practices of gentrification, ghettoization and economic exploitation that have produced and continue to produce harm. Our other examples, of how poor communities are exploited by GM crops multinationals and demonized by neoliberal and neoconservative discourse, pose similar challenges.

### ***Non finitur sed nova initia***

In this chapter, we have discussed three ways through which monstrous ethics can be pursued. We first examined how utilitarian ethics, Kantian ethics and virtue ethics make it possible to evaluate certain business practices as monstrously immoral – that is, insofar as they cause extremely painful effects, violate fundamental moral obligations or express extremely vicious character traits. We then scrutinized how these conventional perspectives further shape moral judgement in contemporary modern society and organizations – that is, by underpinning the neoliberal and neoconservative demonizing of aesthetic and social deviance and by construing such deviance as a sign of moral weakness with monstrous proportions. Finally, we explored the possibilities for a Spinozian and positively monstrous ethics for a joyful organizational life, which reverses the conflation of the monstrous with immorality, resists the demonizing of difference, and encourages transgressing the social and aesthetic norms that sustain the moralism of current neoliberalism and neoconservatism.

When writing this chapter, we have been increasingly reminded how easily ethical critique might slip into moralism, and how easy it is to pass judgement on others, from the sideline and without doing much to change how one lives with others. It is hard to escape the feeling that talk is cheap, even though others have spoken enthusiastically about the counter-discursive role of critical scholarship (e.g. Dunne et al., 2008; Spicer et al., 2009). Does this mean, then, that such feelings of hypocrisy and inadequacy should be fought and eliminated? We would argue that such feelings can only be repressed through rationalist ethics perspectives, whether utilitarian, deontological or virtue-based. The problem is that, by maximizing utility, devising rules and obligations, or defining virtuous character traits upfront, such perspectives tend to pass final judgement rather than engage with the ethical relations that give rise to such feelings in the first place. In contrast, our feelings of unease, hypocrisy and inadequacy strike a chord with

previous arguments in organization studies regarding the ongoing, imperfect and irresolvable nature of ethics (e.g. Parker, 1998; ten Bos and Willmott, 2001; McMurray et al., 2011; Pullen and Rhodes, 2010). And rather than being a sign of failure, we hope that our feelings may open up towards some newish and positively monstrous beginnings in how we relate to others and to ourselves.

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## Notes

- 1 Examining the differences and similarities of these two perspectives is beyond the scope of this chapter, but readers interested in this may find chapter 6 of *The Monstrous Organization* useful as well as our recent paper 'What can bodies do? Reading Spinoza for an affective ethics of organizational life' (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2015).
- 2 There is an implicit Cartesianism in this too. Rather than blaming the body as such, it is the moral and cognitive weakness of the mind, which prevents it from controlling the body.
- 3 References to Spinoza's *Ethics* (E) are made as follows, and in line with common practice in Spinoza studies. Roman numerals indicate the part of the *Ethics*, and Arabic numerals refer to propositions (P), postulates (Post), definitions (Def), axioms (Ax), lemma (L), proofs (Dem), corollaries (C), scholia (S) and the definitions of the affects in part III (DefAff).

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