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Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation and education

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Introduction: ethics and education

It seems rather uncontroversial to suggest that ethics is foundational for education insofar as education—in one way or another—is directed at the recognition of, and striving toward, the good life. Since ethics may be conceived in radically different ways, however, it follows that accounts of ethics in education vary correspondingly. This paper makes for an attempt to outline some educational implications of the 17th century rationalist Spinoza's naturalistic ethical account; an account that, following Andrew Youpa (2003), I will refer to as his ethics of self-preservation.

As Michael LeBuffe argues, 'Spinoza's moral theory is an indispensable tool for the study of his other ideas' (2010, p. 4), indicating that Spinoza's entire metaphysical system hinges on his notion of an ethical life (Kisner & Youpa, 2014). In fact, Spinoza's seminal work, the *Ethics*, may be read as 'a work aimed at showing how as many people as possible, to as high a degree as possible, can attain perfection' (LeBuffe, 2010, p. 6). Since, as we will see further on, Spinoza's notion of perfection is connected with his notion of freedom, this indicates that Spinoza's ethical project is ultimately geared at 'the protection and promotion of freedom' (Kisner, 2011, p. 1). Understood in this sense, Spinoza's *Ethics* amounts to a practical educational guide for living ethically, as individual humans and, in extension, as larger social and political communities. It is a curious guide, however, as it introduces a moral theory that—while being couched in well-known moral language—appears to contradict and debunk several preconditions of morality as it is commonly understood, 'such as the belief in a free will, which grounds moral responsibility, and belief in the reality of good and evil, which would ground moral knowledge' (Kisner & Youpa, 2014, p. 3).

Despite displaying these anti-humanistic traits (Melamed, 2011), Spinoza may still be read as a full-fledged moral theorist, albeit one where morality is firmly placed within the bounds of his naturalism and the necessitarianism that this entails. It is because Spinoza's ethical account is grounded in (and flows from) his naturalistic metaphysical system that it offers an interesting starting point for a discussion on ethics in education. Even though this sets it apart from a moral education as envisaged from an Aristotelian point of view, in some ways at least, it appears that in terms of its general appeal for contemporary moral education, many of the benefits that Kristján Kristjánsson (2014) identify with regards to Aristotle also seems to apply to Spinoza. Like Aristotle, Spinoza offers a moral theory that provides a strong naturalistic account of human nature; a moral theory that offers a universal (i.e. available to all) model of human flourishing; a moral theory that is grounded in a notion of intrinsic value (for Spinoza this notion is expressed through the intrinsic value of the knowledge of God); the adaptability of the moral language (both Aristotelianism and Spinozism can be expressed through ordinary moral language, although it should be noted that while Spinoza speaks of good and evil, virtue and sin, he supplies a strictly naturalistic account of these concepts); the centrality of emotions and the attention paid to the moderation of the passions; a strong sense of moral holism; and a non-individualist approach (even though Spinoza may be read as a kind of psychological egoist, his notion of the well-being of the individual human being is conditioned by the overall state of the greater moral community).

It is against this background—the apparent tension between a normative moral theory (expressed in a language of traditional morality) and the denial of a free will and of the reality of good and evil—that the present paper marks an attempt to outline a coherent understanding of moral education from a Spinozistic point of view. In order to do this, I will first have to take a closer look at some of the fundamentals of Spinoza’s moral theory. Having done so, I will then focus on drawing out some implications of his moral theory for a Spinozistic account of ethics in education. In doing so I will connect Spinoza’s ethics of self-preservation with the notion of teaching as the art of offering the right amount of resistance (Dahlbeck, 2014) by way of LeBuffe’s (2010) model of the optimistic nutritionist.

Spinoza’s ethics of self-preservation

To get a sense of the peculiarity of Spinoza’s moral theory it needs to be situated within his metaphysical system. For Spinoza, everything that is can be grounded in one and the same infinite substance: God or nature (*Deus sive Natura*) (E 1p15). This substance, in turn, is expressed through infinitely many attributes whereof humans know only two: extension and thought (E 2ax5). The reason humans only have access to these two attributes is simply that a human being consists of a mind and a body (E 2p13c) and can therefore only perceive the world either in terms of extension or thought (E 2ax5). For Spinoza, extension and thought are attributes of the same substance and he holds that they mirror each other, i.e. that they run parallel with one another (E 2p7s) and, furthermore, that there is no causal connection between the two. That is, everything expressed through thought is simultaneously expressed through extension and vice versa. Extension and thought are to be understood in terms of different ways of grasping the same substance. However, even though these attributes provide different ways of conceiving one and the same substance they are conceptually independent of one another. They may be thought of as ‘two separate explanatory tracks’, one ‘for the explanation of things conceived as extended’ and one ‘for the explanation of things conceived as thinking’ (Della Rocca, 2012, p. 13). These things—that are either conceived as extended or as thinking—Spinoza calls finite modes. Modes, plainly speaking, are all the individual things or the corresponding ideas of these things in nature. These modes (whether extended or thinking things) are conceptually dependent on the one substance (E 1def5). As such they are conceived as part of the substance and consequently as ‘merely modally distinct from each other and from the one fundamental object’ (Della Rocca, 2012, p. 17). A crucial implication of this scheme is that the human mind is a finite mode (a collection of ideas) that is modally, but not substantially, different from other things in nature and from nature as a whole. This, in turn, implies that the human mind is not granted unique ontological status since there is no metaphysical gulf between humanity and the rest of nature. It is in this sense that Spinoza may be considered an anti-humanist (Melamed, 2011) as this implies that, for Spinoza, human beings are relatively ‘marginal and limited beings in an infinite universe’ and that the problem with any moral theory founded on the notion that humanity somehow makes for a separate dominion within a dominion is that it tends to cause ‘people to believe that the world is arranged to fit their fictions and caprices’ (Melamed, 2011, p. 150). Any viable moral theory, for Spinoza, needs to take this into account. Consequently, Spinoza’s notions of good and evil are not privileging the human mind (in any substantial sense) but are always bound to the

limited perspective of the experiencing body/mind. From the perspective of nature as a whole, singular events are neither good nor evil in themselves. This is so since singular events and bodies are to be understood as different expressions of the substance striving to persevere in existence at the same time. As any given body will do this at the expense of other bodies – for example, a human being eating an apple will be strengthened in this act, while the body of the apple will clearly be weakened through it – it is merely a matter of a redistribution of power. From the perspective of nature – being the all-encompassing substance – the overall flow of power stays constant even though it shifts internally. Spinoza elaborates:

As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For example, music is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf. (E 4pref)

From the perspective of the experiencing body/mind, however, things can certainly be judged either good or evil. The method of determining whether something is good or evil is fairly straightforward and Spinoza proposes that: ‘Insofar as a thing agrees with our nature, it is necessarily good’ (E 4p31) and, hence, that ‘insofar as it is evil for us, it is contrary to us’ (E 4p30). That is, insofar as a thing helps us persevere in existence it is necessarily good for us and insofar as a thing hinders us in this endeavor it is necessarily evil for us. This is not, however, quite as straightforward as it may seem at first. To persevere, for Spinoza, is not the same as simply surviving for as long as possible but rather to preserve and to enhance one’s degree of reality. The notion that there are degrees of reality hinges on the notion that a thing can be more or less ontologically independent. For Spinoza, the only thing that is completely independent, ontologically, is the infinite substance of God or nature. This is the only thing that is completely self-caused and self-explanatory and that is not relying on anything external for its existence and its explicability (E 1def3). Everything else—i.e. all the different modes or expressions of the substance—are, to varying degrees, externally determined in relation to themselves as finite modes (although they are obviously determined internally in terms of being modes of the one substance). This is a matter of degree and we see this quite clearly when we consider the simple fact that while a human body may cause itself to move, a chair, for instance, may not. The extent to which something can be explained through itself and to which something can cause things corresponds to its degree of reality. Since this is a matter of degree (and not a matter of a difference in kind) it entails that ‘one and the same thing can be more of a thing at one time than at an earlier or later time’ (Youpa, 2003, p. 478). The striving for self-preservation and for the enhancement of the degree of reality is understood as the essence of a thing (E 3p6) and ‘a particular thing’s level of perfection and its essence are one and the same’ (Youpa, 2003, p. 480). This introduces the overarching motivation for Spinoza’s moral theory: that the human mind may increase its degree of reality by becoming more active and more perfect and ‘[s]ince “perfection” has the same meaning as “reality” it follows that a mind’s degree of reality can increase and decrease’ (ibid.).

Since Spinoza's necessitarianism involves causal determinism, and since causal determinism precludes a freedom of the will, it follows that freedom, for Spinoza, is not a matter of whether our actions are causally determined or not, but rather 'how our actions are determined, by internal or external causes' (Kisner, 2011, p. 18). Freedom for Spinoza is understood as one's power of acting (E 1def7) and this is directly connected with one's ability to understand causes adequately. As such, the enhancement of one's freedom is always hinged on the acquisition of adequate ideas. An adequate idea amounts to an idea that we can understand properly by virtue of having access to the chain of causes of which it is an effect. When we lack this knowledge of causes we perceive things inadequately and confusedly. The problem, then, is that when our conscious striving is founded on inadequate ideas we confuse the idea of an external thing with the changes that we undergo as an effect of the relation between our bodies and external objects. LeBuffe explains by way of an example: 'the error produced by my idea of imagination on which the sun seems near to me is an idea about the sun that mistakenly takes what is really the product of my body's interaction with the sun for the sun itself: instead of judging only that the sun seems near, I judge that the sun is near' (2010, p. 136).

Consequently, the key to increasing one's degree of reality is to gradually replace one's inadequate ideas with adequate ideas. As LeBuffe notes, 'the distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas ultimately mark a difference in the causal origin of our ideas' where 'those that arise, in part from external causes—namely ideas of imagination—are inadequate' and 'those that arise from the mind as a total cause are adequate' (p. 8). The more adequate ideas we have, the more we may direct our conscious striving—our desire (E 3p9s)—at things that we know will bring us joy (*laetitia*) and, in doing so, avoiding the things that we know will bring us sadness (*tristitia*). By understanding our affects—the changes in the body's power of acting and the ideas of the affections (E 3def3)—and by learning to distinguish between the thought of an external cause and the actual changes we undergo, we may influence the degree to which we pass from a state of lesser perfection to a state of greater perfection. The affect of joy, then, is understood as 'that passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection' and the affect of sadness as 'that passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection' (E 3p11s).

Hence, one might say that we are determined—by our essence—to consciously desire 'all and only those objects that we associate with *laetitia* and we are consciously averse to all and only those objects that we associate with *tristitia*' (LeBuffe, 2010, p. 136). The tendency to err when striving for *laetitia*, in extension, results in a confusion between things that seem to be good for me and things that I know to be good for me. Hence, it becomes a moral imperative to acquire knowledge about oneself and about one's relations with external things as this knowledge will help one to distinguish the good from the bad. The better I know myself, the more adequate ideas I will have, and, as a result, the better I will be at evaluating what is truly good in the sense that it will help me preserve and enhance my perfection.

A better understanding of oneself and of the changes one undergoes as a result of one's encounters with external things amounts to a greater power to act in accordance with this understanding. In terms of ethics, a greater degree of mental freedom means that a person is

less enslaved by harmful passions by virtue of understanding the necessity of things as they follow from being caused by the infinite substance (E 1p17s). Human freedom, then, for Spinoza, does not entail a freedom of the will but amounts to an adequate understanding of nature that, if arrived at, may result in a life that is ‘not given to sudden disturbances of the passions’ (Nadler, 2002, p. 237). Since only God or nature, being self-caused, can be completely free, it follows that human freedom is necessarily limited and that it always ‘involves a degree of passivity in virtue of our nature as finite things, which necessarily depend on and are passive to external things’ (Kisner, 2011, p. 8). The moderation of the passions, then, is not a matter of eliminating the influence of passive affects altogether, as this would be impossible, but rather to ‘eliminate only the kinds of passivity and passions that harm our power’ (ibid.) and in doing so restrict our freedom.

When addressing the problem of the tension between Spinoza’s necessitarianism and freedom it is helpful to turn to his understanding of an action, which is directly related to his notions of adequate and inadequate ideas. For Spinoza a person is active when he or she is the cause of his/her actions and passive when the cause is external to the person. While the resulting course of events may look (and for all intents and purposes be) the same, the difference lies in the fact that if the cause originates in the acting person it may be properly understood, and if it is properly understood it may lead to a feeling of contentedness within the person, as he or she then understands the changes taking place within the body. If the cause is external, however, the understanding of it is necessarily confused and as a result the affected person is at a loss as to why things happen the way they do. Hence, freedom, for Spinoza, is a matter of understanding something adequately. While it does not imply being able to change the outcome of things, as this outcome is already predetermined, it does imply a degree of freedom insofar as the person is at peace with the natural unfolding of events. Consequently, freedom for Spinoza is a matter of degrees of understanding and an increase in one’s understanding will lead to a better concept of the good in the sense that it will be ‘more productive of the things that we find valuable’ (LeBuffe, 2010, p. 166).

Education and resistance

The principle obstacle to overcome in the setting of Spinozistic moral education, then, comes in the guise of a non-productive concept of the good, which in turn would be the result of an inadequate understanding of the relation between what appears desirable and what actually increases my power to persevere in being. Because we are prone to mistake what seems good for us with what is truly good for us we need help in understanding and distinguishing ideas of external causes from the actual changes that our bodies undergo as a result of interacting with other bodies. Spinoza discusses this in relation to his conception of the ideal state. Because the state—much like a human being—is nothing above or beyond a collection of extended and thinking parts, Spinoza holds that the same ethical principles apply on the level of the state as on the level of individual humans. A good state is a state that recognizes its nature as a collection of body/mind-parcels thriving on preserving and enhancing its perfection and that therefore corresponds to the nature of its parts, i.e. the individual human beings. On a more practical level, since preserving and enhancing our perfection is intimately

connected with increasing our activity, and since increasing our activity hinges on our ability to be guided by rational ideas, the potential of the individual human being is always conditioned by the external limits of the state. As Matthew J. Kisner points out, this means that ‘developing and exercising our rationality depends upon material conditions, including political conditions, such as a state that promotes the free exchange of ideas’ (2011, p. 5).

In the *Theological-Political Treatise (Tractatus Theologico-Politicus)*, Spinoza concludes that if all humans were equally guided by a rational understanding of themselves and the external world, the regulatory state apparatus (the legal system, the military, law enforcement, etc.) would in fact turn out to be superfluous. This would be so since the regulatory function of the state, in Spinoza’s view, exists precisely to compensate for the human tendency to let passions rather than reason guide the striving for self-preservation. Spinoza explains:

Now if human being were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but what true reason points them to, society would surely need no laws; men would only need to learn true moral doctrine, in order to do what is truly useful of their own accord with upright and free mind (Spinoza, 2007, p. 72).

However, as Spinoza points out immediately following this:

But they are not so constituted, far from it. All men do indeed seek their own interest, but it is not from the dictate of sound reason; for the most part they pursue things and judge them to be in their interest merely because they are carried away by sensual desire and by their passions (which have no regard for the future and for other things). This is why no society can subsist without government and compulsion, and hence laws, which moderate and restrain desires (Spinoza, 2007, pp. 72–73).

As Michael Della Rocca concludes: ‘The trick, then, for a successful state is to strike the proper balance between being too repressive and not repressive enough’ (2008, p. 214). Similarly, we may apply this notion of balancing repression to the context of education. That is, if students were naturally prone to desire ‘nothing but what true reason points them to’ there would be no need for any external moderation of the passions. But since students, like people in general, are often guided by passions when seeking to satisfy desires, they tend to seek short-term benefits rather than long-term satisfaction.

One way, then, of striving for a more long-term sense of happiness is to train oneself in the strenuous art of overcoming these temporary (and unpredictable) pleasures, and to—with the help of a teacher balancing the amount of resistance—strive for a gradual enhancement of perfection. This understanding of the relation between the teacher and the student may seem counterintuitive in the sense that it stands in stark contrast with the prevailing notion of the teacher as a provider of services in demand by the student. It becomes a question of determining what kinds of needs are to govern the teaching situation. Is it the kind that the student him- or herself expresses—i.e. needs that may very well be grounded in a vague

desire to satisfy temporary wants—or is it the kind that the teacher—based on a greater degree of adequate knowledge—identifies? This, in turn, is connected with the question of whether what feels good for the time being (being immediately reaffirmed, for instance) really is what is good for you in the long run?

In connecting Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation to the notion of teaching as the art of offering the right amount of resistance it may be helpful to take a look at LeBuffe's model of the optimistic nutritionist. LeBuffe argues that Spinoza—and in this case the Spinozistic teacher—may be compared to an optimistic nutritionist, being one 'who recognizes the grim facts about juvenile sweet-hunting but nevertheless hopes that children can be brought around to the view that what they really want are carrots' (2010, p. 113). Accordingly, the teacher as optimistic nutritionist approaches the student as one who is naturally prone to strive for self-preservation but who may not be able to differentiate between what seems good for the moment and what truly is good in the long run. Hence, in aiding the student acquire more adequate ideas, the student may—him- or herself—come to understand the correlation between experiences of *laetitia* and actual increases in the power to persevere, and can then, as a result, resist the passions that cause him or her to 'associate *laetitia* with something other than what increases [the student's] power to persevere in being' (p. 175).

Returning to Spinoza's ideal state, it is worth noting that it is not conceived as being primarily repressive however. Its primary function is to maximize the degree of freedom of its citizens in a way that is 'compatible with the existence of the state itself' (Della Rocca, 2008, p. 214). By maximizing the degree of freedom of its citizens, Spinoza argues that the power of the state is enhanced; provided, that is, that the state is guided by reason. In fact, one way of conceiving of Spinoza's overall ethical project is to read it in the light of this context. It asks: what is needed in order to overcome the obstacles standing in the way of a community guided by reason? And: what are the conditions necessary for a community working toward 'a more harmonious way of life' with a greater 'capacity to deal with conflict and stress' (James, 2012, p. 2)? One of the major obstacles to overcome, in Spinoza's view, is people's general attachment to 'their imaginatively-grounded beliefs and habits which in turn make them resistant to change' (James, 2011, p. 185). The problem is that '[e]ven when they see that their beliefs are wanting, they are often unwilling to give up what they take themselves to know in favour of an adequate but faintly grasped alternative' (ibid.). As Susan James points out, people's disposition to associate ideas frequently lead them 'to misinterpret situations and misunderstand causal connections' (p. 183) and, hence, a farmer and a soldier will associate different things when they come across the traces of the same horse. The problem is that, 'such train of thought can lead the soldier or the farmer astray, as when the soldier jumps to the erroneous conclusion that horses are essentially for military use, or the farmer infers that a particular field must have been ploughed by a horse' (ibid.). Obviously, people's unwillingness to critically evaluate their prejudices is not something that can be solved by subjecting them to brute force, but must be addressed in terms of a question of how to help people align their conscious desire with what actually helps them persevere in existence. That is, it becomes a question of enhancing people's freedom. This is so since the ideal community for Spinoza is a community where people 'have the opportunity to cultivate the habit of

examining their ideas and practices, and are free to alter them in the light of their investigations' (p. 188).

Education, it seems, could set the stage for such a project. Hence, teaching as the process of offering the right amount of resistance may be conceived in terms of two different but interrelated aspects. On the one hand, it concerns the notion that since people in general are guided by their passions, resistance may be introduced by denying the student immediate relief through the satisfaction of temporary desires. This aspect is reminiscent of Spinoza's notion of government that is geared to moderate and restrain passive affects. On the other hand, it also concerns the notion that offering resistance may be understood in terms of creating opportunities for students to arrive at more rational explanations themselves, leading them to challenge their own erroneous conclusions and prejudices so as to acquire the ability to form understandings that are less governed by passions and false beliefs. This would be an ongoing process where the bar may be raised gradually and 'as testing the truth or falsehood of one's beliefs by subjecting them to increasingly rigorous standards of confirmation becomes an option' one may make room for students 'who want to press this process of clarification as far as they can, and go all out for truth' (ibid.). This aspect is more directly aimed at increasing the relative freedom and power of a student, so that he or she may acquire a greater degree of perfection as a result. For Spinoza, since the essence of a person is understood in terms of his or her striving to persevere and to flourish in being, and since an adequate understanding of one's body and of the causes of changes therein will lead to a greater degree of freedom and perfection (as a result of being liberated from the bondage of the passions), one could say that the desire to be more rational comes naturally to humans insofar as it will help them in realizing their essence. However, since most humans persevere in existence without an adequate understanding of why they do so, they may not be compelled to strive beyond attaining a vague sensation of satisfaction. When this satisfaction is being prompted by external causes, however, a person has little or no control over its comings and goings, and he or she is therefore condemned to live a life largely governed by 'their hopes and fears in the face of the vicissitudes of nature and the unpredictability of fortune' (Nadler, 2011, p. 31). Steven Nadler explains:

The difference is like that between pursuing things because they make you feel good and pursuing things because you know that they are truly good for you. It is not that with the passions my desire is erroneously led, since it is directed at things that do indeed increase the powers of the body. But these goods that benefit my body are not [. . .] the highest good. For one thing, they are unpredictable and beyond one's control. Moreover, the benefits they bring are shortlived. When desire is led by adequate ideas, on the other hand, the resulting desire and judgment is for what is truly in one's best interest as a rational being (Nadler, 2006, p. 211).

Hence, the challenge for the Spinozistic teacher is to prompt his or her students to aspire to reach beyond the temporary satisfactions of the passions so as to acquire a more enduring sense of satisfaction, and so that their well-being is more fully under their own command

rather than under the command of various external influences. This, in turn, is connected with the notion of resistance in the sense that in experiencing the volatility of fortune—and thereby understanding the instability of relying on one’s passions—a person would appear to be more inclined to strive for a more enduring sense of happiness, even if this would mean giving up on some of the temporary pleasures that one has grown accustomed to.

Ultimately, becoming ethical for Spinoza is intimately connected with becoming more aware of how we function psychologically. This is important as it is connected with understanding what we desire and how we can attain it and with what helps us persevere in being and what hinders us. In becoming aware of ‘the connection between our conscious desires and the striving to persevere in being’ (LeBuffe, 2010, p. 141) we may actively seek out the objects that will help us preserve and enhance our perfection. In the context of contemporary moral education, the Spinozistic teacher may be understood in terms of the optimistic nutritionist who

recognizes that people are not always cognizant of this connection [between sweetness and health] and that, while we always seek ends that we associate with the experience of *laetitia*, we do not always consciously desire to persevere. In this respect, the natural mechanism for perseverance is limited. We can improve upon it by understanding and remaining cognizant of our own natures. (LeBuffe, 2010, p. 142)

The principal task of the Spinozistic teacher, then, would be to oversee and guide the student in the ongoing process of improving upon the natural mechanism for persevering in being. Even though our essence compels us to do this, we may be more or less conscious of what the actual means for persevering are. This introduces the overarching educational imperative as it were. Hence, in helping students resist harmful passions, moral education from a Spinozistic point of view would be geared at helping students make the connection between their conscious desire for the experience of *laetitia* and the objects that will actually aid them in preserving and enhancing their perfection.

The following abbreviations are used in citations from Spinoza’s *Ethics*:

E	<i>Ethics</i>
app	appendix
ax	axiom
c	corollary
def	definition
p	proposition
pref	preface

s scholium

For example, E 2p40s2 refers to *Ethics*, part 2, proposition 40, scholium 2.

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