



Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain

Annual Conference

New College, Oxford

31 March - 2 April 2017

The egoistic teacher: educational implications of Spinoza's psychological egoism

Dr Johan Dahlbeck

Malmö University

johan.dahlbeck@mah.se

In this paper I suggest that Spinoza's understanding of virtue and collective flourishing, rooted in his psychological and ethical egoism, offers a fresh perspective on the question of egoism in education. To this end, I suggest an understanding of the teacher as egoist, where the self-seeking of the teacher is conditioned by – and runs parallel to – the flourishing of his or her students. The understanding of the egoistic teacher is offered as a productive counter-image to the altruistic ideal in education critically discussed by Chris Higgins (2003; 2011) as well as to the conception of the teacher as primarily a provider of services and the student as a consumer on an educational market.

Introduction: Egoism and Education

Egoism and education are two concepts in tension with one another. Typically, education – insofar as education is broadly conceived as an ethical enterprise – is regarded as an antidote to both small-mindedness and selfishness. From this perspective to be educated is to come to know the world, and by coming to know the world we enter into a community with others, gaining a perspective that allows us to look beyond the restrictions of our own personal wants and needs so as to contribute to a common world that is believed to be something more than the sum of its parts. Education, in this sense, is construed as a systematic combating of egoism and its supposedly dire consequences for the human social world.

At the same time, it is difficult to deny that egoism functions as a very basic psychological driving force in our daily lives. Arguably we do many of the things we do because we hope to gain something from it. Of course, some of the things we hope to gain are more noble (such as an increased understanding) than other things (such as wealth and reputation), but all of it is in some sense fueled by self-interest. If this is so then egoism cannot be disregarded altogether but must be taken into account as a necessary factor in all human affairs. Education, being a largely human affair, therefore has to take egoism into account.

In this paper I aim to address the question of egoism and education in a way that I hope will shed new light on the enduring debate of what role egoism plays in education. Rather than approaching egoism as a necessary evil, however, I will construe an account of education where the egoism of the teacher and the students is taken to be a productive and foundational force. In order to do this I will draw on Spinoza's psychological egoism, arguing that this can help construct an ethical account of education where benevolence is conditioned by rational self-seeking and where the teacher's desire to teach is taken to be grounded in the fundamentally egoistic desire to persevere in being rather than in an altruistic impulse to help others.

Problematic Aspects of the Altruistic Ideal in Education

In contemporary educational philosophy there is an ongoing debate on the problems with asserting a commonsensical notion of the good teacher as self-evidently altruistic (Higgins, 2003; 2011). Likewise, there is a surge in interest in addressing some of the more taken for granted assumptions of progressive education concerning the benefits of student-centeredness and the importance of avoiding unpleasant experiences in education (Mintz, 2012; Jonas, 2010). These debates are closely related to the debate on the role of egoism in education insofar as they go to the heart of what education is and what it ought to be and to the question of where this leaves the teacher and the students.

Chris Higgins, in his *The Good Life of Teaching* (2011), argues that the altruistic ideal in education is widespread yet fundamentally flawed. It hinges, he claims, on a set of assumptions that do not necessarily add up. These are (1) that '[t]eaching is a deeply moral endeavor in which the welfare of other human beings, their current vulnerabilities and their future possibilities, is the teacher's primary concern'; (2) that since 'acting on this concern requires a high degree of selflessness and sacrifice ... [t]eachers who are self-absorbed, or trying to meet their own needs vicariously through their teaching, betray the moral core of teaching'; and, consequently (3) that 'good teaching is a selfless labour of love' and 'the best teachers simply decide that the good they accomplish for others makes their own sacrifice worthwhile, and carry on indefinitely in the name of benevolent service' (pp. 170-171). Higgins questions the assumed correspondence between the first assumption and the second and third, arguing that '[t]his altruistic stance ... is unsustainable and ultimately undesirable because it tends to collapse into asceticism and lead to "teacher burnout."' Instead, Higgins argues that '[g]ood teaching requires self-cultivation rather than "self-sacrifice"' (2003: p. 131).

Assuming that there is an inherent conflict between benevolence and self-cultivation seems to have the unfortunate consequence of pitting the well-being of the teacher against the well-being of the students. By doing so, it entrenches the commonsensical notion that education is either student-centered (and therefore automatically good) or teacher-centered (and therefore automatically bad). As Avi I. Mintz argues, however, this risks leading to an overly simplified understanding of learning where 'genuine learning is exciting and pleasurable (not joyless or painful)' (2012: p. 249). This is problematic as it assumes that learning should be devoid of painful and frustrating experiences as these are taken to inhibit rather than enable learning. Mintz concludes that the unfortunate dichotomization of learning and discomfort – being an effect of the progressive ideal of student-centeredness – 'has led to contemporary classrooms in which students are denied meaningful challenges and deprived of important educational experiences' (pp. 249–250). Similarly, Mark E. Jonas (2010) argues that the widespread fear of inflicting pain in contemporary classrooms may turn out to hamper the student's development of self-mastery rather than strengthen it. While pain is obviously not an end in itself, an education sanitized from discomfort risks producing 'weak-willed conformists who are directed by the whims of their desires and the whims of their cultures' (p. 49).

In a time when education is frequently embedded in a logic of economic progress (Gilead, 2012), the service-minded and self-sacrificing teacher – seeking above all to alleviate the discomfort of the student-consumer – will find his or her work being oriented around an individualistic preference-satisfying notion of well-being. One of the problems with framing education within an understanding of well-being grounded in economic terms is that whereas the standard economic understanding of well-being assumes that (1) 'preferences are stable' and (2) 'that preferences are to be taken as given' (p. 115), it is, from an education perspective, reasonable to believe that the satisfaction of preferences in fact needs to be preceded by a laborious process of education. In addition, it is also quite reasonable to argue that whereas economic progress relates to well-being in terms of individual preferences, education needs to be grounded in an inter-subjective conception of well-being so as not to simply validate the expressed preferences of the students. Accordingly, John White suggests that '[t]he individual on his or her own is not the final authority on what counts as his or her flourishing. There is a centuries-long continuous tradition of thought about this topic to guide us' (2002, p. 452). Gaining an understanding of this tradition of thought will help students come to see what well-being can entail beyond the satisfaction of temporary wants, and it can

help them reassess their preconceived preferences and set them on the path to striving for a more tenable form of well-being.

The economization of well-being in education may serve to illuminate the problem of egoism to the extent that it opens up for a discussion on rational versus irrational self-seeking. It is obvious that if the prevailing notion of well-being in education is informed by a logic of economic progress then the self-seeking teacher comes across as nothing above or beyond a self-absorbed and small-minded person indulging in a kind of irrational self-seeking. If, however, the notion of well-being appealed to is an inter-subjective and collective notion then it becomes possible to conceive of the teacher's and the student's self-seeking as being co-extensive and as mutually empowering, making self-seeking rational from the point of view of the well-being of society at large. It is important, then, to distinguish between these different kinds of well-being when taking on the question of egoism in education.

Spinoza offers an understanding of self-seeking in this latter sense. In fact, for Spinoza the well-being of society is conditioned by the self-seeking of the individual, provided that this self-seeking is guided by a rational understanding of virtue. Elsewhere I have argued that while Spinoza's ethical theory may not lend itself as a model for moral education (because it lacks some key characteristics typically required by moral education) it certainly does open up for a decidedly moral account of education (Author). Since Spinoza's ethical theory is conditioned by his psychological egoism, however, it is necessary to unpack Spinoza's psychology before we begin investigating its implications for education in general and the relation between the well-being of the teacher and the student in particular. In what follows I will therefore lay out the basics of Spinoza's psychological and ethical egoism, in order to then investigate how the notion of the egoistic teacher follows from this. Having done so I aim to draw some preliminary conclusions regarding the role of egoism in education more broadly, so as to establish an ethical account of education grounded in, rather than conceived as a defense against, the egoism (qua rational self-seeking) of the teacher and the students.

Spinoza's Psychological and Ethical Egoism: Self-Preservation as the Foundation of Virtue

The striving to persevere in existence is the essence of every finite thing according to Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine (E3p6, E3p7¹). A human being, being one such finite expression or mode of substance, is therefore determined by its nature to seek out things that will aid in this striving for perseverance and to avoid things that hinder it. This striving is the fundamental motivation for everything we do. In fact, for Spinoza, our striving for self-preservation is the only foundation of virtue (E4p22c). On Spinoza's view, 'we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it' (E3p9s). This means that moral concepts like good and evil are not objective standards for Spinoza but rather modes of thought serving to facilitate our striving for whatever furthers our self-preservation. We need these psychological labels because we often mistake things that are bad for us (things that may give us temporary pleasure but that are ultimately detrimental for our striving to persevere) for things that are truly good for us (things that give us lasting

¹ Passages in Spinoza's *Ethics* will be referred to using the following abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), d(-emonstration), D(-efinition), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and pref(-ace). DOA refers to D(-efinition) O(-f) the A(-ffects). Hence, E4p22c refers to the corollary of the 22nd proposition of part 4. All references to the *Ethics* are to Curley's (1985) translation.

joy). Standards of good and evil (or good and bad) may serve to help us recognize what we should strive for if we follow the guidance of reason rather than our passive responses.

When we recognize what is truly good for us this will have the benefit of making us more powerful, as it will mean that we can join with others benefitting from the same thing. The notion that a joint striving is beneficial for the egoistic striving of the individual is suggested by Spinoza in E4p18s:

For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all.

If we strive for things that are in competition – such as money or reputation – we will end up struggling over finite goods, but if we recognize that what is truly good for us are things that are not in competition we will come to see that we can be strengthened in our own striving by joining with others striving for the same thing. The best thing we can strive for, as rational beings, is understanding and for Spinoza an adequate understanding of the world is ‘[t]he absolute virtue of the mind’ (E4p28d). When we strive for understanding collectively we will be strengthened in our egoistic striving. Spinoza’s argument for why this is so – as hinted at in the above quoted passage from E4p18s – hinges on his understanding of the relative complexity of bodies and thoughts.

The Relative Complexity of Bodies and Thoughts: Spinoza’s Understanding of the Unity of Simpler and More Complex Bodies and their Corresponding Ideas

A body for Spinoza is defined by relations of motion and rest. Simple bodies are composed of extended parts that maintain a stable relation of motion and rest and that can affect and be affected by external bodies. More complex bodies are similarly composed, but because they are made up of many more interacting parts, they have more capacity of affecting and being affected by other bodies. Even complex bodies, however, can join together and function like a single body, providing that they strive for (and benefit from) the same things. The way to determine whether individual parts (however complex) make for a single body depends on whether or not they are organized in such a way as to bring about effects resulting from their unified effort. As we saw above, all bodies – from the simplest to the most complex – are striving to persevere in existence. Accordingly, if whatever benefits my striving for perseverance is also beneficial for someone else (being like me) we may join together in this striving for the same thing, which, as Genevieve Lloyd points out, goes to illustrate the ‘overtones of unavoidable sociability’ (1998, p. 160) of Spinoza’s understanding of an individual body. Bodies that are unlike my own, in contrast, pose a threat insofar as they also strive for self-preservation and insofar as their self-preservation threatens to diminish my power of acting. In order to strengthen my own power of acting vis-à-vis external bodies I therefore need to find ways of striving collectively, while still being motivated by egoism. Because bodies are dependent upon other bodies for their striving to persevere in this sense, individual bodies are always caught up in – and determined by their position in – complex causal networks of other bodies that they affect and are affected by.

Famously, Spinoza subscribes to a form of parallelism maintaining that '[t]he order and connections of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things' (E2p7). Body and mind (extension and thought) are understood as parallel attributes expressing the same substance – God *or* Nature – in two different ways. Spinoza's parallelism dictates that '[t]he human mind is capable of perceiving a great many things, and is the more capable, the more its body can be disposed in a great many ways' (E2p14). This means that the ethical striving for self-preservation (whether perceived via the attribute of extension or thought) is always conditioned by external bodies and thoughts insofar as these can either hinder (when incompatible) or aid (when compatible) the striving of the body/mind-parcel in question. As Spinoza explains in E4p18s (quoted above), the more we can join with others who are like us, the more powerful we can become in our own striving and we are therefore more likely to be successful in our egoistic striving for self-preservation. Simply put, successful self-preservation, for Spinoza, hinges on our ability to join with others. Spinoza's ethical perfectionism is therefore both fundamentally egoistic – insofar as we always strive to preserve ourselves – and fundamentally social – insofar as we can only do this successfully when we join with others striving for the same thing.

The Merging of Egoism and Altruism: Benevolence without Pity

Spinoza defines benevolence as 'a desire to benefit one whom we pity' (E3DOA 35). Pity, in turn, is understood as a form of sadness 'accompanied by the idea of an evil which has happened to another whom we imagine to be like us' (E3DOA 18). Benevolence, from this perspective, results in a form of sadness, which for Spinoza is equivalent to a diminishing of our power of acting. However, Spinoza also offers another understanding of benevolence, one that is not negative in the sense that it results in a diminishing of our power to act. When benevolence is understood as a desire to help others that originates from our rational striving to persevere in being it is empowering rather than disempowering. Accordingly, in E4p37, Spinoza writes that '[t]he good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men,' and in E4p37s1, that 'he who strives from reason to guide others acts not by impulse, but kindly, generously, and with the greatest steadfastness of mind.' It is this latter understanding of benevolence that is perfectly compatible with Spinoza's psychological egoism as outlined above. In fact, when we aid others in their striving for something good we will also be aided through this endeavor. The link between the egoistic striving for self-preservation and the flourishing of the greater community may therefore be identified as a rational form of benevolence through which a person can be empowered by aiding others in their striving. Spinoza scholar Steven Nadler explains that a virtuous person

will treat others in such a way that their own *conatus* or power of acting is increased (which is what virtue is) and that their life is thereby improved. And he will do so because he, egoistically motivated that he is, recognizes through reason alone that it is to his own benefit to do so. (Nadler, 2014, pp. 50–51)

Spinoza's conception of egoism guided by reason clearly illustrates how egoism and altruism (without pity) collapse into the same thing and it also motivates why we need to form collective concepts of the good so that we can strive for the same things without posing a threat to one another. As Don Garrett points out, since self-seeking is conditioned by benevolence, Spinoza 'need not deny the phenomena of altruism. He is committed only to the view that the causal origins of these phenomena always lie in a single psychological force, which is the individual's own endeavor for his or her own self-preservation' (Garrett, 1996, p.

303). Placed in an educational context, Spinoza's ethical and psychological egoism illustrates how – even though the motivation for teaching and being educated springs from the egoistic desire to strive for more power – the educational relation is always framed by a collective striving for the good life where rational benevolence has a central position. This allows us to conceptualize the role of the teacher as a self-seeking teacher without assuming that this self-seeking needs to be carried out at the expense of the students. On the contrary, from a Spinozistic point of view, the self-seeking of the teacher is conditioned by the rational striving of his or her students for the same thing. For this to be possible, however, the teacher must first ensure that the students strive for things that are certainly good – i.e. an increased understanding of themselves and the world – rather than things that will end up corrupting the community by spreading envy and hatred.

The Self-Seeking Teacher: An Ethical Account of Teaching

Depending on how we understand the goal of our ethical striving – in terms of the satisfaction of our temporary preferences *or* in terms of a more *eudaimonistic* and inter-subjective understanding of well-being – the concept of egoism in education will take on radically different meaning. Self-seeking can either be guided by a misconceived understanding of what is good – where whatever things I happen to desire for the moment guides my striving – or by a rational understanding – where I come to see that whatever is beneficial for other people striving for a rational understanding of the good is also beneficial for me.

The ethical task of the teacher – understood from this latter perspective – becomes one of unifying the will of the students (by helping them come to understand what they benefit from qua rational beings) so that the greater social body may become more empowered, thereby aiding all of the individuals striving for a better understanding of themselves and what they benefit from. Again, this hinges on Spinoza's understanding of the composition of more or less complex bodies, and so from a Spinozistic perspective, it makes sense to understand the ideal collective (such as a group of students and their teacher) as being made up of parts of a larger and more complex body that strive collectively and that communicate motion to one another in a unified manner producing certain effects. The teacher, in this conception, corresponds with Spinoza's understanding of the sovereign in the ideal state. Both make for a single locus of power through which all the different motions of its many parts are being directed and orchestrated (provided that they strive for the same things). This comparison relies on a decidedly social understanding of the will. Michael Rosenthal explains:

Like the sovereign, who decrees a law but who depends on the concerted action of all its subjects to enact it in practice, the will appears to express a singular action, but it actually expresses the united action of the multiple discrete individual things that constitute the parts of the whole through the regular communication of motion to one another. (Rosenthal, 2014, p. 97)

Egoism, when understood in a context where even the will of the individual is conceived as a socially constituted expression of many different parts interacting so as to produce an effect, is just as bound up with external forces as anything else. In itself, it is neither good nor bad but simply an expression of an individual striving for self-preservation. In an educational context, it can be either productive or detrimental (for teacher and students alike) depending on whether it is guided by a rational understanding of what to strive for collectively or by the misconception that true goods are in competition.

In this sense, a Spinozistic understanding of teaching as an egoistic yet rational endeavor may serve to offer a much needed alternative to the altruistic and self-sacrificing ideal in education without at the same time furthering an irrational (i.e. harmful to others) understanding of self-seeking. By doing so, it may also serve to offer a useful counter-image to the preference-satisfying notion of well-being commonly assumed in an educational discourse embedded in a logic of economic progress (Gilead, 2012). The very purpose of education, from a Spinozistic point of view, is to come to find out what our preferences are and to endeavor to align our preferences with the preferences of those striving for the same thing so that we become empowered rather than disempowered as a social body. It is only when we understand what we benefit from more clearly (and thereby what it is rational to strive for) that we can claim to be educated. The teacher is pivotal in this process as he or she plays the part of a role model illustrating the many benefits of rational self-seeking. It is also the task of the teacher to unify the will of the students so they can come together as a single expression of power. Instead of assuming that what we already want is what we benefit from, education should therefore begin by asking us: what is it that you truly need and how can you best obtain it?

References

Author

Garrett, D. (1996) Spinoza's ethical theory. In D. Garrett (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (pp. 267-314). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Gilead, T. (2012) Education and the logic of economic progress, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 46(1): 113–131.

Higgins, C. (2003) Teaching and the good life: a critique of the ascetic ideal in education, *Educational Theory*, 53(2): pp. 131–154.

Higgins, C. (2011) *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Jonas, M. E. (2010) When teachers must let education hurt: Rousseau and Nietzsche on compassion and the educational value of suffering, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 44(1): pp. 45–60.

Lloyd, G. (1998) Spinoza and the education of the imagination. In A. O. Rorty (Ed.), *Philosophers on Education: New Historical Perspectives* (pp. 156–171). London & New York: Routledge.

Mintz, A. I. (2012) The happy and suffering student? Rousseau's *Emile* and the path not taken in progressive educational thought, *Educational Theory*, 62(3): pp. 249–265.

Nadler, S. (2014) The lives of others: Spinoza on benevolence as a rational virtue. In M. J. Kisner & A. Youpa (Eds.), *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory* (pp. 41–56). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rosenthal, M. A. (2014) Politics and ethics in Spinoza: the problem of normativity. In M. J. Kisner & A. Youpa (Eds.), *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory* (pp. 85–101). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Spinoza, B. (1985) *Ethics*. In E. Curley (Ed. and trans.), *The collected works of Spinoza, Vol. I* (pp. 408–617). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

White, J. (2002) Education, the market and the nature of personal well-being, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 50(4): pp. 442–456.