Spinoza’s individual and the role of the state in education

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Abstract:

There are two different interpretations of the state in Spinoza. On the one hand, the state is interpreted as an individual in a literal sense (Matheron, 1969; Zac, 1963) and on the other hand it is interpreted as an individual in a metaphorical sense (McShea, 1975; Den Uyl, 1983; Rice, 1990). Depending on what kind of individual the state is taken to be – a literal or a metaphorical – the state’s role in education varies radically. The focus of this paper is to outline some consequences of Spinoza’s political philosophy and of his metaphysics of individuation for the role of the state in education.

... Is the education of citizens a private matter or is it primarily a concern for the state? Throughout the history of political and educational philosophy this question has remained central. Different philosophers have answered the question in different ways and different periods have witnessed different ways of organizing public education in response to it. At the root of this question is another question. This question concerns how we understand the state and how we construe the relation between the state and the well-being of its citizens. How we understand the state, in turn, depends on if we consider it the natural extension of the will and striving of its individual citizens or if we consider its main purpose to be to protect its citizens from each other and from external threats.

Spinoza’s state has frequently been taken as a prime example of the state as an individual in an ontological sense, that is as a body politic comparable to a human body only much more complex (see Matheron, 1969; Kwek, 2015). This interpretation is typically founded on Spinoza’s reasoning about the ideal state (TTP, Ch. 5.20; TP, Ch. 5.6; E3p7s2)1 presupposing fully rational citizens striving in unison with a united will. Spinoza is, however, very clear that this state is unrealistic (TTP, Ch. 5.21-22; TP, Ch. 6.3) insofar as “the free man” (that is, a fully rational person) is an unattainable ideal. Because humans are largely determined by their surroundings they can never be completely liberated from external influences (passions). Humans are always to some extent constituted through encounters with external bodies and their knowledge about the external world is always necessarily limited. Because of this, humans commonly misunderstand themselves and the world and they end up competing over the same things, believing these things (such as money or reputation) falsely to lead to satisfaction and peace of mind. In order to protect people from each other, the state is established so as to compensate for their ignorance by deterring people from causing one another harm.

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1 All references to Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise (TTP) and the Political Treatise (TP) are to Curley’s (2016a; 2016b) translations. Passages in Spinoza’s Ethics will be referred to using the following abbreviations: E(-thics), p(-roposition) and s(-cholium). Hence, E3p7s2 refers to the second scholium of the 7th proposition of part 3. All references to the Ethics are to Curley’s (1985) translation.
There are two different interpretations of the state in Spinoza. On the one hand, the state is interpreted as an individual in a literal sense (Matheron, 1969; Zac, 1963) and on the other hand it is interpreted as an individual in a metaphorical sense (McShea, 1975; Den Uyl, 1983; Rice, 1990). Depending on what kind of individual the state is taken to be – a literal or a metaphorical – the state’s role in education varies radically.

The literal interpretation of the state is grounded in an understanding of the individual as a more or less complex collection of bodies maintaining a stable relation of motion and rest. While the body politic is in this sense taken to be a relatively more complex body than the individual human (because it is made up of more interacting parts) it corresponds with the individual human insofar as it is composed of parts that interact so as to bring about unified effects. The body politic is taken to have a mind and a will much like individual humans and the state strives – much like individual humans – for increased freedom and autonomy from external bodies (explained by Spinoza’s panpsychism). This amounts to a collectivist understanding of the state where the will of the individual human is subordinated to the will of the collective much like the will of an individual body part is subordinated to the will of the individual human.

From this perspective, education may be understood as an instrument through which the state can coordinate the will of the social body and through which it can orchestrate its different parts so that they bring about unified effects serving to increase the freedom and autonomy of the state. The collective (represented by the state) is always already present and it is not the result of human ingenuity or the fruit of a social contract. The individual human is always part of a larger social body and the normative project is not about constituting a body politic in the form of the state (as the body politic is always already there regardless of how it is labelled) but about governing the existing body politic in line with rational principles ensuring that it strives for things that lead to freedom rather than bondage. The main purpose of public education, in this context, is to coordinate the state’s striving for freedom and to maximize and direct all the individual parts so that they are striving in the same direction. Education, then, plays a positive role in terms of shaping the collective will and the individual’s ethical striving for freedom is always subordinate to the collective striving for the same thing. For Spinoza, freedom is equivalent to knowledge and this means that education serves to maximize the knowledge of its citizens so as to maximize the freedom of the collective. By increasing his or her knowledge, the individual will come to see him- or herself more clearly as an organic part of the body politic and can therefore see to it that his or her striving is properly in tune with the other parts.

In stark contrast to the collectivist interpretation of the state is the individualistic interpretation, based on a metaphorical understanding of the state. Much like the collectivist view, the individualistic interpretation is grounded in an understanding of the individual as being made up different interacting parts; parts that are already individuals in their own right. While the literalist interpretation of the state can illustrate how the relation between parts and whole in the individual human corresponds with the composition of the state (and how the individual parts cooperate in both so as to produce unified effects), it becomes more difficult to identify a unifying principle underlying the striving for self-preservation, what Spinoza calls the *conatus* of the individual (E3p7), in relation to the state. Since the essence of every individual is its *conatus*, the literal understanding of the state needs to posit that it is kept together by this unifying principle of self-preservation and that it cannot be destroyed by itself (but only by being overpowered by external bodies) (E3p4). For example, a group of people may join together in the shifting of a large rock but as soon as the rock is successfully moved they can disperse the group and focus instead on their individual affairs. A literal individual cannot
dissolve itself at will for the simple reason that its defining characteristic is the ability to hold together its many different parts throughout internal and external changes. In this sense a microbe (living in the bloodstream) is a literal individual that is part of the greater individual of the bloodstream. The bloodstream, in turn, is part of the greater individual of the human being which is part of an ecosystem and so on. The state, however, is not an individual in this literal sense since it cannot be derived from natural laws that dictate its striving for self-preservation in the same way as an ecosystem.

What, then, is the role of the state in education when the state is interpreted as an individual in the metaphorical rather than the literal sense? An important difference is that the will of the individual cannot be subsumed under the will of the state as the state – as a metaphorical individual – cannot be said to have a will. The role of the state becomes one of protecting its citizens from external threats rather than that of maximizing its freedom. In this sense we are concerned with a kind of contract set up to guarantee the freedom of the citizens rather than a body (in an ontological sense) striving for perseverance and autonomy. What, then, is required for the state to be able to guarantee this freedom and how does it connect with education? A precondition for the freedom of the individual human is that the state functions as a protection against abuse and violations. Spinoza’s state, from this point of view, is minimalistic insofar as its main purpose is to maintain the different institutions set up to protect individuals from being abused and to ensure that the individual can strive for freedom without unnecessary external threats. Rule of law and the judicial system is one such institutional protective measure and education is another. Public education is not so much a means for collective flourishing as it is a necessary condition for safeguarding the striving of the individual. Another consequence is that focus shifts from the promotion of collective flourishing to benevolent indoctrination. What is important is that the state is able to protect individual citizens, not how this is done. Much like the judicial system can serve as a deterrent, education (and religion) can function by manipulating people into socially accepted behaviour even when people do not yet understand the necessity of this from a rational point of view. In this way, the state can protect individuals whose rational striving for freedom might otherwise be threatened by individuals who are governed largely by passions. This kind of public education does not primarily aim at the enlightenment of its citizens. Its role is (much like the state’s role) negative in the sense that it aims at preventing and moderating threats against the individual. The enlightenment of the individual is a private affair that can and indeed should be protected by the state, but it cannot be the primary concern of the state since the will of the individual is not coextensive with the (non-existing) will of the state. Accordingly, in his unfinished Political Treatise, Spinoza writes that:

It doesn't make any difference to the security of the state in what spirit men are led to administer matters properly, provided they do administer them properly. For freedom of mind, or strength of character, is a private virtue. But the virtue of the state is security. (TP, Ch. 1.6)

Depending on how we interpret Spinoza’s body politic two radically different understandings of the relation between state and education emerges. If the state is interpreted as an individual in the literal sense, the enlightenment of the individual becomes a concern for the state since the path to knowledge is coextensive with the path to freedom for the state. If, however, the state is interpreted as an individual in the metaphorical sense, the enlightenment of the individual should remain his or her private concern as the primary role of the state is to guarantee the freedom to philosophize and not to dictate the conditions or the direction for philosophizing. There are good reasons for believing that Spinoza’s state should be interpreted
as an individual in a metaphorical sense. For example, he notes that: “Academies supported at the expense of the State are instituted not so much to develop native abilities as to keep them in check” (TP, Ch. 8.49). This, in turn, means that there are good reasons for believing that for Spinoza, enlightenment is a fundamentally private concern that the state should have little or no influence over.

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