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Educating for Immortality: Spinoza and the Pedagogy of Gradual Existence

‘Become what you are!’ – Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Introduction

What is it to live? According to Michael Della Rocca’s (2008; 2012) reading of Spinoza, to live is not an either/or kind of matter. Rather, because Spinoza’s concern is with the quality of existence it follows that existence may be conceived in terms of degree. The idea is that through good education and proper training a person can learn to increase his or her degree of existence by acquiring more adequate (as opposed to confused) ideas. This gradual qualitative enhancement of existence is, in effect, an operationalization of Spinoza’s quest for immortality of the mind.

From a contemporary perspective, Spinoza’s terminology may well come across as both alien and counterintuitive, which is why it is necessary to situate these terms within the broader context of his philosophy. This is important, not in order to domesticate or adjust Spinoza’s radical philosophy to a contemporary setting by way of charitable interpretations¹, but because Spinoza’s counterintuitive philosophy, as Melamed puts it, ‘provides us with very fruitful and rare opportunities to challenge (rather than confirm) our most basic beliefs and intuitions by studying texts that are both well-argued and strongly opposed to our commonsense’ (2013a, p. xiv). I would argue that when this is taken into account, a Spinozist conception of education can indeed open up for new insights with regards to contemporary concerns in education.

Having said this, one may conclude that while Spinoza’s idea of immortality differs from the traditional Christian account of the immortality of the soul (as well as Plato’s, see Harris, 1971, pp. 669-671) in some key respects it nevertheless concerns a form of immortality of the mind albeit grasped from a strictly naturalistic² standpoint. And as such it is clear that we are faced with not only a philosophical and metaphysical problem of some magnitude but, in addition, that we have come up against an educational problem that is rarely addressed. The philosophical problem at hand concerns the tension between Spinoza’s naturalism (and the necessitarianism that follows from this) and his notion of immortality as the highest blessing a person can strive for. Since Spinoza’s necessitarianism (E 1p29) dictates that everything that happens, happens by necessity (as it is caused by the infinite intellect of God or nature to happen that way) one might wonder how there can be room for any kind of freedom of action within this deterministic scheme? The educational problem, emanating from this, concerns the tension between necessitarianism and the overall goal of education. Why educate people at all

¹ For a lengthier discussion on the benefits of avoiding so-called charitable interpretations when working with early modern philosophy see Melamed (2013b).

² Very briefly, Spinoza’s naturalism will not allow for the appeal to anything outside of nature as this outside is, strictly speaking, inconceivable (and unintelligible) from within nature.

if their lives are already predetermined? In addressing these problems, this essay marks an attempt to present a pedagogization of what Della Rocca (2008; 2012) refers to as the ‘degrees of existence’ in Spinoza.

I will begin by explaining the notion of degrees in existence in some detail. In order to do this, however, I will first need to draw up a brief outline of Spinoza’s metaphysical system as this provides a basis for his psychological account, being, in turn, the context in which the enhancement of existence is staged. Having done so, I will extrapolate on some key notions in particular. These include the notion that, for Spinoza, evaluation is immanent rather than transcendent; that existence is hinged on the acquisition of power, which in turn is to be understood in terms of knowledge; and that confused and adequate ideas are to be understood in terms of passive and active affects. Having done so I will turn to the educational implications of Spinoza’s gradualist notion of existence arguing that; (1) the imitation of affects is key for understanding Spinoza in an educational setting and; (2) that teaching, in a Spinozistic context, involves the act of offering resistance. Finally I will conclude this essay by sketching out what I call an education for immortality of the mind based on the notion that existence is gradual and that it may be enhanced through an increase in a person’s degree of understanding and power of acting.

Spinoza’s metaphysics and his corresponding account of human psychology

According to Spinoza’s metaphysics 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 infinite attributes whereof humans know only two: extension and thought (E 2ax5). Since extension and thought are attributes of the same substance Spinoza holds that they mirror each other, i.e. that they run parallel with one another (E 2p7s). That is, everything expressed through thought is simultaneously expressed through extension and vice versa. This is so since for Spinoza ‘[t]he soul is the idea of the body, and as the body is altered so is the mind affected’ (Harris, 1971, p. 669). Extension and thought, then, 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 objects in the durational world. These modes (whether extended or thinking things) are conceptually dependent on the one substance (i.e. God or nature) (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).

Spinoza subscribes to a Cartesian understanding of substance, understanding a substance to be self-caused and self-explanatory and therefore as something that is not relying on anything external for its existence and its explicability (E 1def3). The reason there can only be one

substance in Spinoza's metaphysics is that, from a naturalistic point of view, it makes little sense to posit that something that is ontologically independent (that is self-explanatory) can have all the infinite attributes and be the cause (i.e. explanation) of all finite modes while at the same time allowing for another self-caused substance as this would introduce a different set of rules beyond the rules that apply in nature. This would clearly violate Spinoza's naturalism where 'everything in the world plays by the same rules' and where 'there are no things that are somehow connected with each other but that are not governed by the same principles' (Della Rocca, 2008, p. 5).

In Spinoza's monistic rationalist system existence is largely a matter of intelligibility (E 1p11d2). To exist, for Spinoza, is to be explicable – either through itself (as with the one substance) or through another (as with the modes). Hence Spinoza's definitions of a substance as that which is 'conceived through itself' (E 1def3) and a mode as 'that which is in another through which it is also conceived' (E 1def5). Consequently, all the modes are the same in that they are all modifications of the one substance. From this standpoint a human being and a table are the same to the extent that they constitute different modifications of God or nature. However, since for Spinoza, the essence of a thing is defined in terms of its striving for self-preservation (*conatus*) (E 3p6), and since self-preservation requires some degree of power and autonomy of mind we can see how different things – by virtue of having more or less autonomy from external causes – can exist to different degrees (E 2p13s). As a result, from a Spinozistic point of view individual things are not distinguished by a difference in kind but by a difference in degree.

For Spinoza, everything that is perceived as extended (i.e. all physical bodies) is governed by the natural law of motion and rest, being the immediate infinite (i.e. all-pervasive) mode of the attribute of extension or the defining feature (natural law) of all finite individual bodies if you will. Consequently, all extended things must abide by the governing principle that the parts of a body 'maintain among themselves a stable ratio of motion and rest' (Nadler, 2006, p. 93). Hence, what distinguishes a particular body from other bodies in the world is its particular degree of motion and rest. As Steven Nadler puts it: 'Take matter, add motion, and you get a world of particular individuals' (2006, p. 96). It follows then that the essence of an individual body is its particular ratio of motion and rest. As Nadler points out:

Whether it is a case of a table, a baseball, a snow fort, or a human body, its essence would be a type of formulaic mathematical or dimensional mapping of that body that identifies it as the particular parcel of extension that it is. Any body is nothing but a specific ratio of motion and rest among a collection of material parts. Its unity consists only in a relative and structured stability of minute bodies. And this is what is reflected in its essence, its eternal being. (Nadler, 2002, p. 230)

Each individual body, then, is composed of a finite part that we associate with an actual body that dies and decomposes, and an eternal (timeless) part that may be described in terms of an idea – God's or nature's idea – of that body or what Matson (1990) calls 'the body essence' which may be understood as 'the license (from the nature of Extension) for there to come to

be an organism of a certain sort' (p. 89). This means that each body, human and otherwise, correlates with an idea of its essence according to Spinoza's parallelistic system (E 2p13s). The difference between the idea of the essence of a baseball and the idea of the essence of a human is a matter of the degree of freedom. Since a baseball is more or less completely determined by external causes (it cannot, for instance, move of its own accord but must be caused to move by someone or something external to it) we can conclude that its degree of freedom (or power of acting) is fairly limited. A human being, on the other hand, may cause him- or herself to act (in various degrees of course) which would help distinguish a person from an inanimate (or perhaps better, considerably less animated) object. By virtue of this relative degree of freedom, a person can also develop so that he or she acquires more freedom and more power of acting. This, according to Spinoza, is achieved by gradually replacing confused ideas with adequate ideas and thereby expanding ones degree of freedom vis-à-vis external influences. Matson describes this process of change as follows:

The proto-mind of such a body, as I call the idea of the essence of the body, which before birth expresses nothing but this essence, can then begin to be augmented with other ideas. Some of them are ideas of modifications of the body by impingement of other bodies: these ideas are imagination, memories, and passive emotions. But other ideas that coalesce in the mind are expressions of the active nature of the mind. These are adequate ideas, knowledge of the second and third kinds. They are eternal. (Matson, 1990, p. 93)

Famously, Spinoza's epistemological account introduces three kinds of knowledge (E 2p40s2) or cognition³. The first kind (*imaginatio*), which brings about inadequate or confused ideas, are sensory impressions, experiences and memories that derive 'from our haphazard encounters with things in the world and the way they impinge on our bodies' (Nadler, 2006, p. 166). These are inadequate insofar as they tell us nothing about the actual causes of the changes in our body but merely relate 'a partial and "mutilated" knowledge of what the body is and how it persists' (Nadler, 2006, p. 169). In contrast, the second (*ratio*) and third (*scientia intuitiva*) kinds of knowledge produce adequate ideas insofar as the mind is the cause of ideas itself. This would result in a kind of mirroring of ideas where an 'idea and its logical and causal relations to other ideas in the mind [...] mirror the logical and causal relations among ideas in God or Nature, in the infinite intellect' (Nadler, 2006, p. 166). Or as Nadler summarizes it: '[F]or a human mind, to conceive something adequately is to conceive it as God or Nature conceives it' (2006, p. 167).

Being a necessitarian (as a direct consequence of his naturalism), Spinoza does not subscribe to a notion of freedom that allows for a free will (E 1p32, E 2p48) and so one might wonder in what sense people would be able to enhance or liberate themselves through education in a Spinozistic universe. Spinoza's notion of freedom is hinged on the enhancement of one's power of acting which is always in some sense predetermined by one's essence or prescribed potentiality. That is, one's freedom is always conditioned by the relative complexity of one's

³ Melamed prefers to translate *cognitio* as cognition rather than knowledge 'since for Spinoza *cognitio* may well be inadequate and false' (Melamed, 2013c, p. 100).

body if you will. Since humans, for Spinoza, have a much greater potentiality (by virtue of having more complex bodies) than other animals or things in the world, they may, in theory at least, acquire a greater degree of freedom than other finite bodies and minds. Since Spinozistic freedom – understood as one’s power of acting (E 1def7) – is intimately connected with one’s ability to understand causes adequately, the enhancement of one’s freedom is always hinged on the acquisition of adequate ideas. A greater understanding of oneself and of nature equals a greater power to act in accordance with this understanding. This, in turn, equals a greater degree of mental freedom in the sense that one is less enslaved by one’s passions by virtue of understanding the necessity of things. Nadler summarizes:

When a person sees the necessity of all things, and especially the fact that the objects that he or she values are, in their comings and goings, not under one’s control, that person is less likely to be overwhelmed with emotions at their arrival and passing away. The resulting life will be tranquil, and not given to sudden disturbances of the passions. (Nadler, 2002, pp. 236-237)

In order to begin to resolve the problem of the tension between Spinoza’s necessitarianism and freedom it is helpful to turn to his understanding of an action. As we have just seen, 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 quite simply 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 truer sense of the relative value of things, and a growing freedom from the impotent passions and irrational aims and purposes of the natural man’ (Taylor, 1896, p. 146). Eventually, one may – by gaining in one’s understanding of the natural order of things and of one’s own place in it – ‘be freed from the alternating tyranny of vain hopes and foolish despondencies, and so to be, as far as man may, happy’ (ibid). Hence, happiness, in the Spinozan account, quite simply amounts to an adequate understanding of one’s place in nature. The goal of any education, then, would be to increase the relative understanding of a person so that that person can better appreciate his or her place in the natural scheme of things and, by doing so, making that person content and more comfortable with him- or herself. The ultimate goal, of course, would be to assist someone in their striving for immortality of the mind.

Degrees of existence: Spinoza’s immortality of the mind

For the eternity of the human mind as set forth in Spinoza's *Ethics* is, as we shall see, something very different from what is ordinarily understood by the phrase 'immortality of the soul'. (Taylor, 1896, p. 147)

On the definition of eternity Spinoza writes: 'By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing' (E 1def8). It follows from this definition that eternity 'cannot be explained by duration or time, even if duration is conceived to be without beginning or end' (E 1def8expl). Hence, Spinoza's conception of eternity would seem to be that it represents a qualitative rather than quantitative property. As Harris (1971) concludes: 'The eternity of the "immortal" part of the human mind or soul is thus not a continued duration after the death of the body, but a quality of being' (p. 673). How, then, are we to understand this particular brand of immortality if it bears no reference to a person's durational existence? First, one may conclude that for Spinoza, unlike in the traditional Christian conception, immortality 'is treated throughout as a kind of life to be entered on and enjoyed here and now, not as something for which we must wait till death or the next world' (Taylor, 1896, p. 146). Second, it is important to note that while Spinozan immortality appears to be readily available for human beings during their lifespan '[i]t is not conceived of as in the current belief of Christianity, as equally and originally inherent in all mankind; it has to be acquired by each man for himself, and may be acquired by different men in varying degrees' (ibid). This introduces an element that will turn out to play a crucial role for the educational implications of gradual existence. Because, if immortality is hinged on a person's striving to perfect him- or herself then it may also be considered a kind of delimited object of training; i.e. something (more or less) tangible toward which a person can be guided with the assistance of a knowledgeable teacher or guide. Before discussing the educational aspects further, however, let us first try to ground Spinoza's naturalistic notion of immortality in his understanding of eternity as non-durational. That is, given that eternity is understood in terms of a quality of existence (rather than in terms of a temporal concept) what might it mean when Spinoza proposes that '[t]he human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but something of it remains which is eternal' (E 5p23)?

Taking a cue from Della Rocca (2008), we might begin to do this by first distinguishing Spinoza's conception of immortality from a more traditional Christian account. One way of doing this is by way of Spinoza's understanding of evaluations as immanent rather than transcendent. A traditional account of the immortality of the soul would hold that one's afterlife introduces another *kind* of life that is either to be conceived as a reward or a punishment for things done during one's embodied existence. This, of course, introduces a different set of rules than the natural laws that govern all finite life on earth. In doing so it clearly violates Spinoza's univocal conception of nature where there is no room for 'a dominion within a dominion' (E 3pref). For this reason, '[t]he notion of one's needing another kind of life in order to be rewarded for virtue (or, perhaps, punished for evil) is inimical to Spinoza's notion of intrinsic value, to his view that virtue is its own reward and vice its own punishment' (Della Rocca, 2008, p. 256). Since for Spinoza 'our ideas are the awareness of our bodies and nothing else' (Harris, 1971, p. 679) it follows that every evaluation is made from the particular perspective of a person's body. It also follows from this that what we

would normally conceive of as a universal notion (such as the concept of man) is, strictly speaking, illegitimate from a Spinozistic point of view. This is so because ‘universals are highly confused ideas [...] we form in our mind to compensate for the limitedness of our cognitive capacities, i.e. our inability to perceive, store, and recollect individual items in their complete manifold of characteristics’ (Melamed, 2013c, p. 102). Our tendency to appeal to universals, then, does not represent an adequate way of understanding nature but it is rather a necessary evil brought on by the fact that our cognitive faculties are inherently limited as it were. Similarly, the notion of an afterlife is to be considered an inadequate idea insofar as it may be understood in terms of an attempt to explain something natural by referring to something outside of nature. Consequently, as Della Rocca concludes:

The value of eternal existence doesn’t come to us at some later point; rather the value comes to us *now* in our increased intelligibility, in our increased inherence in God, in our increased existence. For Spinoza, the eternity we seek is immanent in our lives as we enjoy them now. (Della Rocca, 2008, p. 272)

If Spinoza’s immortality is immanent to durational existence, what, then, does it amount to? As already hinted at, the answer to this question appears to be linked with Spinoza’s notion of a gradual existence. Since, as mentioned earlier, Spinoza’s conception of eternity is defined in terms of the degree to which something ‘follow[s] necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing’ (E 1def8), to understand something under an aspect of (non-durational) eternity – i.e. to understand how something follows necessarily from an attribute of God – is equivalent to understanding something adequately. The measure of a person’s degree of existence, then, appears to be consistent with the degree to which that person understands things adequately. Understanding things adequately, in turn, is hinged on being able to produce a kind of knowledge that ‘proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things’ (Wilson, 1996, p. 117). In order to grasp the meaning of this it is helpful to contrast an adequate understanding of things with its opposite. Margaret D. Wilson explains:

Obviously, he [Spinoza] wants to contrast the shaky, superficial, and shifting inferences and abstractions that we make imaginatively as a result of our random encounters with various bodies, with direct intellectual insight into the fundamental principles that cause things to be what they (essentially) are. Because these causes are implicit in the essence of the human body, which the human mind ‘explicates’, they are directly accessible to the human mind – and in fact ‘can only adequately be conceived’ by it. (Wilson, 1996, p. 115)

This means that the first step toward understanding things adequately is to acknowledge that this understanding is – as already hinted at above – always an inherently embodied understanding. That is, attempting to form knowledge first by way of abstractions or universals will always result in more or less confused notions since the reliance on universals is a way of compensating for the inability of the human mind to encompass many different things at once. Rather, a person striving for an adequate understanding of nature should focus on understanding the causes of changes in his or her particular body since every instance of

human knowledge is always a product of the human body. This leads to a shift in focus from the abstract to the particular, where a true understanding of the causal mechanisms of nature can only be arrived at by way of an adequate understanding of one's own body. For example, Susan James (2011) explains that 'our experience of our own bodies and their interaction with bodies external to us gives each of us access to the adequate idea that a body is capable of motion and rest' (p. 193). However, there is no guarantee that this availability translates into adequate knowledge since '[t]he idea will only become active in people who are free from prejudice in the sense that their imaginative ideas do not stand in the way of their capacity to recognize what bodies are actually like' (ibid). Producing adequate ideas thus hinges on one's ability to set 'aside one's inadequate assumptions by some means or other, whether by reflection, travel, experiment or discussion; and these processes in turn depend on collective forms of inquiry and education that will be more developed in some situations than others' (ibid). Hence, we see how even though the starting point of forming adequate ideas is the proper understanding of one's own body, the process of acquiring increasingly more adequate ideas is dependent upon collective processes and educational measures.

Similarly, Wilson remarks that 'in order to have clear and distinct ideas, in contrast to ideas deriving from fortuitous effects of external things on our body, we must avoid abstractions and base our thought on particulars' (1996, p. 114). By doing this, one might arrive at an understanding that not only explains the changes in one's own particular body at a given point in time but that, via a true understanding of the particular, can begin to identify things that are common to all bodies, and to thereby grasp 'the productive power of material nature, as it operates according to eternal, necessary "laws" of motion and rest' (p. 115). Again, this process of understanding things adequately is always a matter of degree and it appears that only God can have a perfect understanding of nature as a whole. From the point of view of the human body – being, relatively speaking, more complex than other finite bodies – one can at least aspire for a greater degree of understanding, and correspondingly, for a greater degree of existence. Hence, a person can – theoretically at least – obtain a form of immortality, but only to the degree that his or her ideas are identical with God's eternal and perfect ideas of nature. Or, as Della Rocca (2008) puts it (in more straightforward rationalistic terms): 'So, for Spinoza, the more rational a person is, i.e. the more powerful he is, the more of his mind is eternal and thus the more of his mind remains after the body's death' (p. 258).

From this we may also conclude that the degree to which a person understands things adequately is also connected with his or her degree of power of acting and, in turn, with his or her degree of freedom from passive affects. This is so as an adequate understanding of the causes of the changes in one's body automatically allows for an increase in one's influence over the passive affects that would otherwise function as external determinates of one's actions. Hence, there is a direct link between one's degree of understanding and one's degree of power and one's degree of freedom. Because 'a thing's *power* is its ability to cause things on its own, freedom is simply power. Thus in striving for more power – as is good and right – and thus in striving to have more knowledge, we are striving to become more free' (Della Rocca, 2008, p. 188). In brief, this means that 'the ability to see things in their causal network, the ability to explain things, is our ticket out of bondage' (p. 191). Passive affects (passions)

therefore stand in a direct relation to confused or inadequate ideas, and correspondingly, active affects (actions) stand in a direct relation to adequate ideas. The more we understand about our body and its relations to the surrounding world, the more freedom we have to act in accordance with this understanding and to be the cause of our own actions. Similarly, a poor or confused understanding of one's body and its affective encounters with the surrounding world amounts to a life where one is at the mercy of external influences and, consequently, where the causes of one's actions are external to oneself.

Increasing one's degree of existence through education: The imitation of affects and teaching as the art of offering the right amount of resistance

Turning now to the educational implications of the degrees of existence in Spinoza, the question arises whether what seems to be an utterly egoistic project – one hinged on the acquisition of power on behalf of the individual – can be meaningfully conceived of in terms of a collective process of learning that not only aspires for the development of the individual, but that is ultimately geared for the betterment of society. Or, put differently, what would be the incitements for aiding others in their personal striving for power? This question is legitimate since education – broadly speaking – is hard to conceive of in terms of anything other than an organized endeavor to collectively improve the conditions of the human social world. In this I suspect that Spinoza would agree. How, then, can one reconcile Spinoza's focus on self-improvement with an educational philosophy of social improvement? In answering this question, it appears that Spinoza's notion of the imitation of affects is helpful. Again, the key appears to be Spinoza's linking between rationality, power and freedom. He seems to be arguing that if we aspire for an increased rationality – so as to liberate ourselves from the bondage of the passions – then we need to surround ourselves with others who seek the same thing, since he argues that our basic psychology is geared for the imitation of affects. That is, for Spinoza, 'when I perceive someone similar to me to have a certain affect, I will have a similar affect' (Della Rocca, 2008, p. 166). The challenge then is to surround oneself with people expressing active affects so that the imitation of affects take a turn for the positive, rather than surrounding oneself with people governed chiefly by passions, in which case the imitation of affects would take a turn for the negative. Della Rocca extrapolates:

Thus, if we perceive others to desire to be more rational, more active, more powerful, we will tend to emulate that desire and also seek to become more powerful. Since becoming more powerful is beneficial, imitating the desire of others to be more powerful is also beneficial to me. For this reason, I have a reason to benefit others by inculcating in them the desire to be more rational. (Della Rocca, 2008, p. 198)

Consequently, what would at first glance appear to be a strictly selfish business – namely that of increasing my own power of acting – is, in Spinoza's system, turned into a collective endeavor insofar as I benefit from the increasing rationality of those around me, and that therefore, my aiding people in their striving for more power is a good way of pursuing my own self-improvement. Della Rocca continues:

Here Spinoza says that I should help others not so much because they will thus be inclined to help me in return. Rather, I should help them because I can then simply observe their newfound or newly strengthened desire for the good, a desire which I will thus imitate. (Della Rocca, 2008, p. 198)

The imitation of affects, then, is turned into a kind of link between the egoistic striving for more power and the collective striving for a flourishing community. This means that it may be understood in terms of a key concept for the pedagogization of Spinoza insofar as it unites the goal of the individual with the goal of the larger community in a shared pursuit of adequate ideas and enhanced existence. Hence: ‘This interest in a common society arises from what Spinoza sees as our interest in enhancing those respects in which we agree with, share properties with, one another’ (Della Rocca, 2008, p. 199).

From this we may conclude that the aim of the Spinozistic teacher is to – in the just quoted words of Della Rocca – ‘inculcate in [the students] the desire to be more rational’, so as to become more rational him- or herself. Consequently, the teaching situation is geared to guiding students towards a more rational life, at the same time as it is geared to the self-improvement of the teacher. This aspect of self-improvement is, ultimately, what will motivate the teacher in striving to enhance the lives of his or her students in the first place. Being unable to self-improve in isolation, the doctrine of the imitation of affects dictates that the rational person will be moved toward a life of generosity, not primarily for altruistic reasons, but out of a desire to become more rational and thus to gain in his or her own power of acting. As Genevieve Lloyd notes with regards to the merging of altruism and egoism in Spinoza: ‘Self-seeking – traditionally opposed to rational virtue – now becomes its foundation’ (1996, p. 9). What seems at first glance to be a paradox – the fact that egoism and altruism amounts to the same thing for Spinoza – may be resolved by the fact that, for Spinoza, to the extent that I am aiding someone with whom my nature agrees (another human being striving to become more rational), I am in reality helping myself (Della Rocca, 2008, p. 194).

The question that follows from this, of course, is how does one go about inculcating a desire to be more rational in one’s students? In order to tackle this question, I believe that it is reasonable to dwell on the fact that education, for Spinoza, is ultimately about the cultivation of the potential that lies dormant in each individual, so that a person may live a happier life as a result of understanding, more adequately, their place in the natural world. Accordingly, Aloni suggests that: ‘Spinoza’s pedagogical drive, like Zarathustra’s, originates from an overflowing spiritual existence and a strong urge to actualize the vitality, wisdom and beauty which exists in most people only as a potential’ (2008, p. 524). The challenge, then, becomes one of overcoming the many obstacles that prevent a person from developing their potential. Pedagogy, from this point of view, may be understood in terms of the art of offering the right amount of resistance. This notion is based on the assumption that if a student encounters no resistance – or too much resistance – his or her potential remains just that – a potential. In order to develop this potential the student needs to overcome certain barriers. From a Spinozistic standpoint these barriers often manifest in the guise of inadequate understandings where generally held notions or opinions – i.e. notions that compensate for the human

inability to perceive the world in its full complexity – determine the course of a person’s actions as opposed to an adequate understanding of the causes of the changes of one’s body. Consequently, ‘[e]ducation [understood from a Spinozistic point of view] involves the effort to raise the students from the dominion of imagination to that of reason’ (Puolimatka, 2001, p. 400).

In order to elucidate (and substantiate) the notion of teaching as the art of offering the right amount of resistance it is fruitful to turn to Spinoza’s conception of the ideal state as it is outlined in the *Theological-Political Treatise (Tractatus Theologico-Politicus)*. Here, Spinoza concludes that if all humans were equally guided by a rational understanding of themselves and the world, the regulatory state apparatus (the legal system, the military, law enforcement, et cetera) would in fact turn out to be superfluous. This would be so since the regulatory function of the state, in Spinoza’s view, is precisely to compensate for the human tendency to let external passions rather than reason guide the striving for self-fulfillment. 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, p. 72-73)

As 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 desires. 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 qualitative enhancement of existence.

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?

Spinoza's ideal state is not 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 enable 'individuals and groups to arrive at their own convictions and live in the light of them' (p. 188). 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' (ibid). 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 sense of happiness 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 existence 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 happiness (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). 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 short-lived. 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 (such as socially constituted desires and wills). 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. The resistance, then, may be conceived in terms of the overcoming of temporary pleasures that stand in the way of the developing of one’s potential. In this scenario the role of the teacher may be understood in terms of someone offering a well-balanced amount of resistance. For Spinoza, to overcome this resistance is to take a first step toward increasing one’s existence and toward attaining an immortality of the mind. Correspondingly, this means that to accommodate one’s students – in the sense that one

approaches them in terms of prospective customers, aspiring to satisfy their demands⁴ – is inimical to education insofar as the wants and desires of students are, generally speaking, caused by passive affects (determining their course of action) rather than their rational wills. As Jan Derry notes with regards to the unity of the intellect and the will in Spinoza vis-à-vis a more commonsensical notion of freedom and desire:

In our common sense conception, will presents itself to us as a capacity, a power vested within ourselves. This power (located in the soul according to Descartes) is set apart from the world of matter upon which we act, as an independent force. Coupled with this everyday common-sense conception of freedom is the idea that free will is the unencumbered pursuit of the object of desire – ‘free to consume what I like’. Presupposed here is that what-I-am is what-I-desire (my identity is an outcome of my consumption patterns). There is little thought that desires may not be genuinely my own, i.e. not my own in the sense that they determine me externally. (Derry, 2006, p. 115)

The educational purpose of offering resistance, then, may be conceived in terms of an endeavor to help students liberate themselves from the bondage of this commonsensical notion of freedom (which will leave them at the mercy of the capriciousness of the passions) and to guide them instead toward an understanding of freedom that is intimately connected with gradually increasing their rational understanding of their bodies and of the relations between their bodies and the external world.

Conclusion: Toward an education for immortality

Unlike such Enlightenment philosophers as Hobbes or Rousseau, Spinoza never actually wrote a philosophy of education per se (Aloni, 2008). He did, however, in his *Ethics*, write a philosophy of self-improvement that would be difficult to read as anything other than deeply educational at heart. Perceived against the backdrop of his overall metaphysics, a curious educational account emerges; one that grounds the larger social and political endeavours of humanity in the personal striving of the individual for an ever-increasing power of acting. Education, for Spinoza, is a decidedly individualistic affair, but then again, so is the making of society. Since every form of knowledge bears the unique mark of the individual body that expresses it, one might conclude that at the foundation of every social structure is an encounter between concrete bodies; each expressing a particular perspective from where to grasp the world. I would argue, based on this, that Spinoza’s foremost contribution to educational theory is his grounding of larger social endeavours in the striving of the individual. Hinged on the striving to be more rational, as dictated by the doctrine of the *conatus*, education appears to offer a way of grounding the structure of the human social world in the same (egoistic) principles as those guiding the individual. Spinoza’s notion of the imitation of affects thereby offers a way of linking the egoistic striving for power on behalf of the individual with the educational goal of building a sustainable society. It does so as it

⁴ For a more in-depth discussion on the shift toward understanding the teacher as a provider of services in relation to a more consumer-oriented view of citizens at large see for example Clarke and Newman, 2009 and Clarke et al., 2007.

conditions self-improvement by the human characteristic to imitate what others desire. By being surrounded with people who desire to be more rational, one can utilize this desire for the good and become strengthened in one's own striving for increasing one's degree of existence. Part of this striving involves overcoming the obstacles posed by passions that determine the student's behaviours externally. With regards to this, the role of the teacher may be conceived in terms of the one balancing the amount of resistance so that the student is properly challenged but not overwhelmed.

Returning to the opening question, to live, for Spinoza, is to be explicable. Hence, the key to immortality lies in explicability. The more and better I can understand things, the more and better I can live. To acquire immortality, in Spinozistic terms, while being something to aspire for, seems at the same time to be an unattainable goal. It would require that all of one's ideas are identical with God's/nature's and that in sharing a perfect understanding with God/nature one's personhood merges fully with the substance that is God/nature. To *achieve* immortality, then, is to become one with God or nature. To *aspire for* immortality, however, is something different, and, I would argue, very much compatible with education as an organized endeavour to secure human well-being in the future. Far from being a form of well-being that is founded on the relative comfort of the masses, however, Spinoza's vision of human well-being is founded on the realization of the inherent potential that lies dormant in the individual.

Finally, we see how an understanding of the Spinozan conception of freedom – as gradual and as conditioned by the relative complexity of one's body – opens up for a potential solution to the educational problem of reconciling the goal of education (insofar as it hinges on the notion that humans have some form of influence over their lives) with Spinozistic necessitarianism. If freedom is conceived in terms of the degree to which a person realizes his or her potential to adequately understand the changes in his or her body then there is no real contradiction between this and the doctrine of necessitarianism. This is so as the freedom to be the cause of one's actions amounts to the understanding that I should learn to act in accordance with my nature, rather than to resist my nature, as this will leave me with little or no sense of control over my ability to feel happiness. That is, since freedom for Spinoza concerns the ability to be at peace with the natural unfolding of events, a Spinozistic philosophy of education must be geared toward increasing the relative understanding of the causal mechanisms of nature in relation to (and from the perspective of) the experiencing body.

List of Abbreviations

E	<i>Ethics</i>
ax	axiom
d	demonstration

def	definition
expl	explication
p	proposition
pref	preface
s	scholium

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

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