

## **Spinoza's doctrine of the imitation of affects and teaching as the art of offering the right amount of resistance**

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Network 13: Philosophy of Education

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 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. 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 Spinozistic 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 happier and more comfortable with him- or herself.

In Spinozistic terms, the degree to which a person understands things adequately is 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.

Approaching Spinoza's overall metaphysics, 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 for

guiding students towards a more rational life, at the same time as it is geared for 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 (1996) notes with regards to the merging of altruism and egoism in Spinoza: 'Self-seeking – traditionally opposed to rational virtue – now becomes its foundation' (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 when 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 (2008) 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' (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).

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 natural 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 demands<sup>1</sup> – 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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.

### **Concluding remarks**

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 endeavors 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 endeavors 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 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 behaviors 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.

Finally, we see how an understanding of the Spinozistic 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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