

Spinoza's Anti-Humanism and Ethics of Education

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Network 13: Philosophy of Education

Paper presented at ECER 2015, 8-11 September, Budapest, Hungary.

Abstract: Given the growing interest (across disciplinary boundaries) in Spinoza's work in recent years, there is surprisingly little written on the subject of Spinoza and education. There are a handful of journal articles, such as Aloni's "Spinoza as educator" (2008), Derry's "The unity of intellect and will" (2006), Puolimatka's "Spinoza's theory of teaching and indoctrination" (2001) and Dahlbeck's "Educating for immortality" (2014), and a few notable anthology chapters, such as Genevieve Lloyd's "Spinoza and the education of the imagination" (1998), but overall the literature on Spinoza and education is quite limited. This paper seeks to add to this work, focusing on initiating a discussion on some of the normative consequences of formulating a philosophy of education based on Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation. In doing so, it connects with a recent trend in Spinoza scholarship focusing on the ethical core of his philosophy, such as LeBuffe's *From Bondage to Freedom* (2010), Kisner's *Spinoza on Human Freedom* (2011) and Kisner and Youpa's *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory* (2014).

Keywords: Spinoza, philosophy of education, ethics, self-preservation, anti-humanism

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A major contributing factor to Spinoza's increasing popularity can be attributed to his radical break with Cartesian dualism. In recent years, there has been a growing discomfort with Cartesian dualism in educational theory. Gert Biesta (1999), for instance, has argued that the common-sensical understanding of human subjectivity – being founded on Cartesian dualism – represents subjectivity in education in an unsatisfactory way, and that because of this its metaphysical basis needs to be reevaluated. As Spinoza has formulated a radical and metaphysically solid alternative to Cartesian dualism, it would seem that Spinoza could offer the kind of metaphysical grounding that Biesta calls for when he investigates the possibilities of forming a new conception of subjectivity in education.

Spinoza was one of the most influential and radical philosophers of the Enlightenment era. His curious metaphysics function as bedrock for his naturalistic psychological account which in turn is the basis of his moral theory. This paper takes Spinoza's moral theory as its point of departure when investigating the normative consequences of a philosophy of education based on Spinoza's philosophy.

However, turning to Spinoza in order to see if his philosophy could answer Biesta's call for a new conception of subjectivity also means that we have to reevaluate other foundational notions in education. My own contention is that when (which is fairly rare) Spinoza is appealed to in educational theory, one of the most challenging aspects of his philosophy is usually either glossed over or not being considered at all. This aspect would be Spinoza's anti-humanism and the implications that this has for his moral theory. One might speculate as to why this is so, but I think a reasonable guess is that once Spinoza's anti-humanism is taken into account the very notion of modern education, as a humanistic project, becomes troubled at its very foundation.

Hence, a central purpose of this paper is to show that any serious attempt at formulating a Spinozistic ethics of education needs to take Spinoza's anti-humanism into account, and that in actually doing so we will see that it is possible to formulate a coherent philosophy of education founded on Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation. This, however, requires a reconceptualization of some of the key concepts that we associate with the philosophy and

ethics of education: concepts such as human freedom, knowledge, understanding and happiness.

This paper engages with Spinoza's texts – primarily the *Ethics* and to a lesser extent the *Theological-Political Treatise* – in a reading that seeks to identify key normative claims that would give shape to a Spinozistic philosophy of education. Focusing on the ethical theory of Spinoza, I also draw on relevant secondary sources such as LeBuffe's *From Bondage to Freedom* (2010), Kisner's *Spinoza on Human Freedom* (2011), Youpa's "Spinozistic Self-Preservation" (2003) and Kisner and Youpa's *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory* (2014). These sources help me unpack Spinoza's complex ethical account in relation to his particular brand of psychological egoism. In arguing that Spinoza's account of human nature is anti-humanistic I rely mainly on Melamed's article "Spinoza's anti-humanism: An outline" (2011).

An anticipated conclusion of the paper is that while there is an apparent tension between Spinoza's psychological egoism and traditional moral education, these seemingly incommensurable domains are in fact reconcilable. This requires, however, that we pay close attention to Spinoza's understanding of key ethical concepts such as the will, human happiness and freedom. Denying the existence of a free will and the reality of good and evil, Spinoza needs to formulate an ethical account that is compatible with his thoroughgoing anti-humanism while still being recognizable as a moral theory. In investigating what a philosophy of education based on this ethical account might look like, I hope to be able to present a feasible – metaphysically solid – alternative to Cartesian dualism without falling into the pitfalls of amoralism.

Below follows a step-by-step overview of the paper

The paper will proceed by addressing the following three questions:

- What is Spinoza's anti-humanism?
- How does Spinoza's anti-humanism constrain his ethics?

- What would a Spinozistic account of ethics of education look like given his psychological egoism?

Starting with the first question – concerning Spinoza’s anti-humanism – the argumentation will proceed along the following steps:

1. Spinoza’s anti-humanism follows from his substance monism – substance, attributes and modes are the metaphysical building blocks of the universe
2. Naturalism – one set of laws that apply to all things equally, no exceptions (E 1p29)
3. Causal determinism – only God or Nature (substance) is self-caused (E 1D3), everything else (i.e., all the modes) is caused by something external to it (E 1a1)
4. If we – qua finite modes – could encompass the full causal chain of finite things we would see that nothing is contingent but that everything happens as an effect of a prior cause. Hence, there is no spontaneity in nature (E 1p29, E 1p33)
5. Countering superstition – humans are no dominion within a dominion – no special rules apply for humans (E 3pref)
6. Spinoza does not assign a unique value to humans among other things in nature
7. Spinoza does not recognize the primacy of the human perspective in understanding nature
8. Spinoza denies an essential property of humanity that would justify an elevated and unique value (Melamed, 2011, p. 148)
9. Therefore, man is limited in relation to nature
10. Anthropocentrism is an illusion
11. Instead, a more adequate way of understanding humans would be by way of a strict form of naturalism (E 3pref)
12. Nature knows no morality (Melamed, 2011, p. 150)

The second question – relating to the relation between anti-humanism and ethics – may be approached along the following line of arguments:

1. The free will is an illusion resulting from the limited cognitive capacities of humans – we believe that we act spontaneously because we cannot conceive of the full causal chain explaining our actions (Letter 58, S 909)
2. Good and evil are relative terms – there is no objective moral scale since morality is nonsensical from the perspective of nature qua substance – from this perspective, everything is perfect (E 4pref)
3. Spinoza's ethical account amounts to a form of ethical constructivism where value is a relational concept – things are only imperfect relative to an ideal posited by a striving thing – a thing striving to persevere in being (E 4pref)
4. Spinoza does have a universal notion of ethics that applies to all finite modes (but not to nature qua substance)
5. The striving to persevere in being is the essence of every finite thing (E 3p7)
6. The foundation of virtue is the striving to persevere in being (E 4p18s) – good and evil are relative to the striving individual – what is good is what helps us in our striving (E 4p31) and what is bad is what hinders us in our striving (E 4p30)
7. Our desire for self-preservation is strengthened by joining with others that we take to be similar to us – by the imitation of the affects – which means that we benefit from friendship and benevolence (E 4p18s)
8. This results in the merging of altruism and egoism for Spinoza – it is good for me to help you become more like me (i.e. more rational)

The third and final question – concerning ethics of education and psychological egoism – is approached along the following steps:

1. What is the role of education?
2. Two problems to overcome: challenges of a Spinozistic moral education
3. The problem with our natural tendency for striving is that we sometimes mistake things that appear to be good for us for things that really are good for us and so we need help in coming to understand what is truly good for our striving to persevere in being – connecting sweetness and nutrition
4. Another problem is that insofar as we are overpowered by passions (passive affects) we suffer from *akrasia* – weakness of the will – and even though we recognize the

good we still pursue that which is bad for us. A present affect will tend to overpower a stronger future affect (the pull of the candy bar in the hand is stronger than the pull of the future benefits of nutrition). Moral education beyond praise and blame

5. Moral education is geared at moderating the passions so that we not only recognize but also act on the good – overcoming *akrasia* – understanding and empowerment
6. The teacher acts the part of an optimistic nutritionist (LeBuffe, 2010), helping students recognize the good and act on the knowledge of the good. The teacher does this motivated by egoism, striving to make the students more like him- or herself so that the teacher may then emulate the students in his or her own striving for self-preservation

List of Abbreviations

E	<i>Ethics</i>
a	axiom
d	demonstration
D	definition
p	proposition
pref	preface
s	scholium

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

References to Spinoza's letters are to Shirley's (2002) translation.

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Intent of publication:

This paper touches on some key aspects of an upcoming monograph tentatively titled *Spinoza and Education: Freedom, understanding and empowerment*.