

Character education and ethical egoism: Spinoza on self-preservation as the foundation of virtue

Johan Dahlbeck, Malmö University, johan.dahlbeck@mah.se

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In recent years, character education and virtue ethics have undergone a form of renaissance in the philosophy of education (Sanderse, 2015). Virtue and character are Aristotelian notions that amount to key components of an ethical life. The Aristotelian conception of the highest good to strive toward (in life as well as in education) is expressed through the notion of *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is commonly taken to denote a form of happiness in the sense of a life well lived or a flourishing life. The path leading up to *eudaimonia* is a path laid out along the virtues. In this sense “it is impossible to achieve *eudaimonia* without being morally good – without actualizing the moral virtues” (Kristjánsson, 2007, p. 15). If we can become virtuous – that is, if we manage to live according to the virtues – we will become happy in the *eudaimonistic* sense. Accordingly, the premier aim of Aristotelian character education may be taken to be the cultivation of ethical virtues in children and students.

Aristotle construes ethical virtues as intermediary states balancing between deficiency and excess. The art of living a well-balanced life is kept in check by the desire to strive for acting on virtues placed between two extreme poles, both of which are equally undesirable. For instance, the virtuous person will strive to always act generously, avoiding both the deficiency of greed and the excess of wastefulness. To live guided by ethical virtues such as generosity is to live a flourishing life. To achieve this kind of life is an end in itself, which is why *eudaimonia* is conceived as the highest good to strive for. This means that *eudaimonia* is desirable for itself and not for the purpose of attaining some other good and, correspondingly, that all other goods are desirable for the sake of *eudaimonia* (Kraut, 2014). This makes *eudaimonia* the ultimate end (*telos*) of human life and to be able to strive for this kind of perfection is what distinguishes the human being from other forms of life naturally incapable of this kind of intellectual happiness.

David Carr suggests that “virtuous agents are those who respond at the right time, to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive and in the right way” (2003, p. 219). A person who does this has acquired a virtuous character. This, however, requires training and so it would be fair to characterize Aristotelian character education as “a form of moral education focusing on the development of virtues” (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 2). The notion that a virtuous character hinges on the ability and determination to make sound moral choices is central for many contemporary accounts of character education. As such, to be moral is to be able to make moral choices (i.e. to have moral agency), even when the moral choice is the most difficult and least readily available option. To be able to make moral choices, in turn, seems to require a capacity to choose freely. At least this is what most people assume is what makes us morally responsible for our actions. If we did not have the ability to choose freely between a moral and an immoral way of responding to any given situation, it is difficult to see how we could be held morally responsible for our choices.

Aristotle's conception of moral agency and responsibility – as laid out in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1984, hereafter *NE*) – is not immediately recognizable as corresponding with the commonsensical notion of the free will, signifying that we are free to do as we choose. In fact, Aristotelian ethics have undergone a radical transformation so as to accommodate a version of the free will that was not prevalent in classical Greek philosophy. This transformation is generally attributed to thinkers like Aquinas who, in the thirteenth century, sought to reconcile Aristotelianism with a (largely Augustinian) concept of the will to which all vices could be causally related (Kent, 1995). Contemporary character education owes much to this transformation, and personal decision-making is central for many models of character education drawing (however loosely) on the Aristotelian cultivation of virtue (Ravven, 2013, pp. 1-55). This transformation may be summarized as moving from a naturalistic understanding of the will – where decisions follow naturally from the character of a person – to an understanding of the will as a capacity setting humans apart from the rest of nature (while bringing her closer to God) insofar as it grants her the ability to intervene with natural causation.

Despite the naturalistic elements of his understanding of the will, Aristotle is generally recognized as having offered the first theory of moral responsibility (Eshleman, 2014).¹ To be free, on Aristotle's account, is to be the cause of one's actions. When we are the cause of our actions, we are morally responsible and we can choose to act virtuously or not. Aristotle writes:

For where it is in our power to act it is also in our power not to act, and *vice versa*; so that, if to act, where this is noble, is in our power, not to act, which will be base, will also be in our power, and if not to act, where this is noble, is in our power, to act, which will be base, will also be in our power. (*NE*, Book III, 1113b)

To become morally responsible for one's actions, insofar as we acquire the power to act and the power not to act, is part of one's moral development. This requires understanding how we function and how we are constrained by things that are external to us. When we understand this clearly, we will be in a position to make moral choices and we will be able to act virtuously. As Carr puts it, for Aristotle "moral wisdom of knowledge is a knowledge of how to make right moral choices" (1991, p. 59). There is a sense, then, in which we might find the seed of a free will-argument in Aristotle. What is important for Aristotle, however, is not whether we always make the right decisions or not. Good decision-making is merely the natural outcome of having developed a virtuous character. The main objective of moral education, from a classical Aristotelian point of view, is to have students cultivate a virtuous character, and they will cultivate their character by increasing their understanding of themselves and the world. This means that "once character is set, people cannot do otherwise than they do" (Ravven, 2013, p. 169); a conclusion that makes Aristotle into a naturalist insofar as "human beings act necessarily according to their character and that natural (including mental) processes operate by necessity" (*ibid.*).

¹ Cf. Aristotle, *NE*, Book III, 5.

² Passages in Spinoza's *Ethics* will be referred to using the following abbreviations: D(-efinition), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and pref(-ace). Hence, E3p9s refers to the

Many contemporary models of character education are less focused on the cultivation of a virtuous character (in the Aristotelian sense) and more focused on learning how to act. This action-oriented form of moral education is commonly taken to be informed by Kantian ethics, oriented around identifying patterns of acting that correspond with moral principles. Heidi M. Ravven notes that “in the American context, the Aristotelian notion of personal character has been reshaped through the lens of free will,” in the sense that “character educators use a (Kantian) model of choosing actions that accord with principles (or virtues) to which children have freely committed themselves, rather than a model that involves training behavior” (2013, p. 44). The focus on personal decision-making, Ravven claims, reveals the “foundational nature of the free will perspective in America” (p. 51). Moral choice, in this tradition, is not so much a matter of acquiring a virtuous character as it is a matter of the individual orientation of the will in a natural world where we have the freedom to act for good or for evil.

What, then, is the problem with grounding character education in the assumption that humans have free will in this latter sense? This question may be approached from at least two, equally relevant, perspectives. It may be approached in terms of a philosophical problem and it may be approached as an educational problem. From a philosophical point of view, the notion of a free will is problematic insofar as it relies on an understanding of human freedom where to be free is to be exempt from natural causation. That is, if freedom is understood in terms of freedom from constraint and the subsequent understanding of the will is understood as being uncaused or spontaneous, then we come up against the philosophical problem of having to explain how it is that humans have the ability to act contrary to laws or regularities that bind the rest of nature. From a Kantian perspective, for instance, being “a transcendently free person” ultimately means that one “stands outside the realm of natural laws” (Giesinger, 2010, p. 517) insofar as it concerns a kind of freedom that “cannot be attributed to any natural human sentiments or dispositions but [that] can be attributed [...] to the noumenal self which lies beyond any empirical knowledge we may have of our inner phenomenal nature” (Carr, 1991, p. 80). There are, however, conceptions of human freedom that do not introduce this kind of tension with a naturalistic understanding of the world, and so one way of coming to terms with this problem would be to appeal to a different concept of freedom.

From an educational point of view, the notion of a free will is problematic as it appears to render all aspects of moral education into matters of personal choice and, in extension, because it makes moral education almost exclusively concerned with the question of praise and blame. There is also a deeper underlying tension between free will and education in the sense that for a free will to be genuinely free it needs to be uncaused and spontaneous and for education to be effective it needs to assume that actions and thoughts can be externally influenced (and willfully manipulated). Johannes Giesinger frames the free will problem in terms of a pressing educational paradox:

It seems that what he [the learner] thinks, what he wants and how he acts can never be truly *his*, since it is brought about by education and other factors beyond his control. *On the other hand*, if we consider the learner as endowed with a free will, then it might seem impossible to educate him at all. (Giesinger, 2010, p. 515)

That is to say that “if his [the learner’s] present and future actions stem from a will that is genuinely free, then they will be independent from any educational influence” (ibid.).

Returning to Aristotle, we saw earlier that the Aristotelian will may be conceived in terms of a naturalistic understanding of the will, where decisions are taken to follow naturally from a person’s character. The will, in this sense, is not free insofar as it is always the outcome of a person’s character disposition. At the same time, Aristotle construes justified praise and blame as being conditioned by voluntariness (*NE*, Book III, 1114b). For an action to be voluntary it needs to be caused by the agent performing it and it needs to be not caused by ignorance. For an action not to be voluntary, in contrast, it needs to be caused by something external to the agent or by ignorance. Character education, from a classical Aristotelian point of view, therefore focuses on formation of character, where a person’s choices are conceived as the natural outcome of his or her character. If a person makes bad choices, it is either because he or she was forced in the direction of that choice (by external causes) or because of lack of knowledge. To amend this lack of knowledge would therefore be the goal of character education.

Contemporary character education, being clearly influenced by a more Kantian understanding of the will, have tended to focus less on the cultivation of character and more on the individual student’s ability to make the right choices. This has accentuated the problematic aspects of the concept of a free will in a way that classical Aristotelian ethics largely avoids. Since Aristotle’s ethics rely on pre-modern notions such as the *telos* of human existence, where every human being is believed to be naturally predisposed to strive for ‘their true or most fully realised form’ (Sanderse, 2015, p. 393), in a sense which is clearly not compatible with a post-Copernican world-view, it begs the question of whether the modern Kantian amendment to Aristotelianism is the most viable alternative for contemporary character education.

It is to this end that I would like to turn to Spinoza, being both a virtue ethicist and a causal determinist (as well as a necessitarian), in order to investigate the currency of such an alternative. What is particularly interesting about Spinoza in this context is his refusal to adapt his ethical theory (as well as his metaphysical framework) to the modern yearning for a free will that can act as a guarantor for moral responsibility (Dahlbeck, 2016a; Dahlbeck, 2016b).

There is a seeming tension between Spinoza’s ethical ideal of self-determination and his deterministic metaphysics positing that everything in nature is causally determined by something else. It begs the quest of what it means for a thing to strive in a world conceived in strictly deterministic terms. It is clear that striving, from Spinoza’s point of view, does not imply the freedom to act contrary to our nature. It does not involve a free will if by this we mean an uncaused will arising spontaneously. On the contrary, the more we act from our nature as striving things the freer we become. As Karolina Hübner notes: ‘For this reason, striving has to be understood in conditional or hypothetical terms, as a claim about what a thing *would* do, were it left to its own devices, and per impossible free from the influence of things more powerful and essentially different from it (E4a1)’ (2013, p. 23). Since we are always under the influence of external things, however, our striving to be self-determined is always hampered. This natural limitation is what sets the stage for Spinoza’s ethical theory to begin with. It posits that there is a sense in which we all strive to become free and that this striving is an essential feature

of our nature as striving things. Since there are other things in nature (whose striving is potentially detrimental to us) striving at the same time, however, the ethical project concerns finding out which things will empower us and which will not.

Spinoza's *Ethics* (1985a) may be read as a general guide to the formation of a good character where a good character is characterized by an adequate understanding of natural causation. It begins with an overarching metaphysical system establishing that everything that exists is an expression (mode) of nature (substance) and that what define these things is *the striving to persevere and flourish in being* (E3p7²). All things are the same in this regard. Spinoza moves on to his account of the human mind (being another thing determined to strive for perseverance) in order to establish a path to human freedom and happiness. By conceiving of the human mind as a finite mode, he equates it with the mind of any other finite mode, albeit relatively more complex than most other known minds. For Spinoza, there is nothing exceptional about a human being that would warrant an elevated status from the perspective of nature *qua* substance. This has led some commentators to label Spinoza an anti-humanist (Melamed, 2011). This is not to say, however, that Spinoza is uninterested in matters concerning human well-being, quite the opposite, but it serves to highlight the fact that he refuses to adjust his account of the human being according to popular fictions and superstitions. This is evident from the fact that Spinoza's account of the affects follows his general metaphysical outline. Accordingly, he states that he will "consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies" (E3pref), illustrating that rationality and ethics are inseparable concepts for Spinoza.

Freedom, for Spinoza, is not opposed to determinism. On the contrary, Spinoza defines freedom as follows: "That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone" (E1D7). In a letter to G. H. Schuller, Spinoza remarks that: "So you see that I place freedom, not in free decision but in free necessity" (Letter 58, S: p. 909³). On Spinoza's view, total freedom entails total self-determination. The only thing that is self-determined in this sense is substance (E1p14), being both self-caused and self-sustained. Everything else is necessarily caused by something else and is dependent on other things for its existence (E1p28). This means that human freedom is necessarily limited by external causes and that the human will is just as causally determined as anything else in nature. Accordingly, Spinoza's definition of the will corresponds with his definition of appetite (except in relation to the mind only), as the striving to persevere (E3p9s). The act of willing something for Spinoza is not understood as a spontaneous act or an uncaused choice, but as an instantiation of the desire to persevere in being conditioned by specific circumstances (precluding any real sense of voluntariness). Spinoza concludes: "This, then, is that human freedom which all men boast of possessing, and which consists solely in this, that men are conscious of their desire and unaware of the causes by which they are determined. In

² Passages in Spinoza's *Ethics* will be referred to using the following abbreviations: D(-efinition), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and pref(-ace). Hence, E3p9s refers to the scholium of the 9th proposition of Part 3 of the *Ethics*. All references to the *Ethics* are to Curley's translation (Spinoza, 1985a).

³ References to Spinoza's correspondence are to Shirley's translation in *Spinoza: Complete works* (Spinoza, 2002).

the same way a baby thinks that it freely desires milk, an angry child revenge, and a coward flight” (Letter 58, S: p. 909).

To be free, on Spinoza’s account, is therefore to understand the causes of one’s decisions. The more I understand, the more freedom from external causes I acquire. In the context of character education, this would mean that the aim is to help students understand natural causation so that they may come to see in what sense they are determined to act the way they do. This obviously circumscribes human agency severely, and naturalizing the will also renders moral responsibility problematic. Being confronted about his denial of moral responsibility, Spinoza contends: “As to his final remark, that ‘on this basis all wickedness would be excusable,’ what of it? Wicked men are no less to be feared and no less dangerous when they are necessarily wicked” (p. 910). As is evident from this brief quote, Spinoza seems relatively unconcerned by the consequences of his naturalistic conception of morality. In his *Metaphysical Thoughts* (CM) he concludes: “If only those were fit to be punished whom we feign to sin only from freedom, why do men try to exterminate poisonous snakes? For they only sin from their own nature, nor can they do otherwise” (CM II, 8/C: p. 331).⁴

Perhaps Spinoza can offer a way of reconciling the Aristotelian concept of virtue with a thoroughly naturalistic understanding of the will in an educational setting where the cultivation of a virtuous character need not be synonymous with personal decision-making. Instead, a virtuous character, on Spinoza’s view, is marked by an understanding of the natural limitations of a human being; an understanding that in itself may lead to a sense of *eudaimonia*.

Eudaimonia for Spinoza is a form of happiness best described as the tranquility of mind resulting from understanding and accepting natural causation. It follows from this that a virtuous character is the result of a life characterized by an affirmation of this understanding. The striving to persevere of the individual may then join with the striving of others so as to form a community founded on reason rather than one held together by superstition and fear. The construction and maintenance of such a community would be the goal of a Spinozistically conceived character education and as long as the free will is construed as a supernatural force intervening with the common order of nature it poses a threat to the well-being of such a community.

Happiness, for Spinoza, is good because it increases our *conatus*, our striving to persevere and to flourish in being (E3p6). Our striving to persevere, in turn, is our essence (E3p7); i.e. it is what defines us. In fact, as we saw above, the striving to persevere is the essence of every finite thing.⁵ Since the striving to persevere in being is a matter of degree, things can be differentiated by the particular degree of power by which they do this. Hence, the *conatus* of a stone defines it insofar as it determines the degree of power with which the stone strives to persevere in being. The same goes for you or me. From this it follows that what is good is simply that which will help us

⁴ References to Spinoza’s *Metaphysical Thoughts* (CM) are to Curley’s translation (Spinoza, 1985b).

⁵ In order for this to make sense with regards to simpler body/minds it should be noted that the word striving, in this context, does not denote an intentional kind of striving but rather a *tendency* to persist in motion unless prevented to do so from without.

persevere in being (E4D1). Since happiness is understood as an increase in the power to persevere, it is good. Correspondingly, whatever hinders our striving is bad (E4D2). This conception of virtue hinges on Spinoza's understanding that the foundation of virtue is self-preservation. Spinoza states this explicitly in E4p22c, which reads: 'The striving to preserve oneself is the first and only foundation of virtue'. Accordingly, anything that is conducive to self-preservation is deemed to be virtuous. That is, anything that helps us persevere in being is virtuous and anything that hinders this striving is a vice. This conception of virtue – as anything that helps *me* persevere in being – strongly hints at Spinoza's leanings toward psychological and ethical egoism (Nadler, 2013). If the foundation of virtue is to persevere and flourish in being, and if what is instrumental for this striving differs to some extent from individual to individual, then this means that *my* ethical striving will be geared for my own self-preservation without at the same time guaranteeing the self-preservation of anything else.⁶

Self-preservation becomes the driving force of moral education insofar as the desire to become more rational motivates the teacher to help the student become more rational so that the teacher, in turn, can mold the student into a moral exemplar for him or her to emulate. This is so because, as Della Rocca notes, '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' (2008, p. 198). Far from being an altruistic teacher (in the sense of a self-sacrificing teacher), the Spinozistic teacher is always motivated by his or her egoistic striving for self-preservation and flourishing (much like anyone else). Because the success of this striving hinges on the moral development of the students, however, the self-preservation of the teacher is always conditioned by the overall moral state of the students. This may come across as a fairly counterintuitive conception of a good teacher, insofar as a good teacher is commonly depicted as an altruist, teaching for the sake of his or her students (and, in extension, for the sake of the betterment of society) but not primarily for him- or herself. Since self-seeking is conditioned by benevolence, however, Spinoza 'need not deny the *phenomena* of altruism. He is committed only to the view that the causal *origins* of these phenomena always lie in a single psychological force, which is the individual's own endeavor for his or her own self-preservation' (Garrett, 1996, p. 303). Hence, the Spinozistic teacher starts out by acting out the role of a moral exemplar, yet his or her reasons for doing so are not at all selfless but it is rather done so that the students may become more rational so that the teacher can emulate them in return.

⁶ In fact, for me to preserve myself I will *need* to destroy other things/bodies, such as the different foods I need to consume in order to vitalize and strengthen my own body.

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