

Educating for immortality: Spinoza and the pedagogy of gradual existence

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- Slide 1:

This presentation draws from an article (Dahlbeck 2015) that is part of a larger book project called *Spinoza and Education: Freedom, understanding and empowerment* (Dahlbeck Forthcoming). Rather than summarizing the article in full I aim to briefly outline two of the core questions dealt with in the book.

- Slide 2:

The two overarching questions dealt with in this presentation are:

What is it to be educated (from a Spinozistic perspective)?

How are education and ethics related?

- Slide 3:

The aim is to substantiate two general claims:

To be educated is to exist more

All education begins and ends in moral education

- Slide 4:

Beginning with the first question: What is it to be educated?

The short answer is that, for Spinoza, to be educated is to exist more. But what does this mean?

One way of taking on this question is to approach it by way of Spinoza's rationalistic understanding of the world. According to Spinoza's rationalism everything is explainable. Moreover, everything is explainable according to the same basic principles. Nothing is exempt from the governing laws of nature and insofar as these are intelligible, everything is intelligible and nothing is supernatural. Spinoza's metaphysics will not allow for different rules for different things (there is therefore nothing exceptional about humanity). Accordingly, nothing is unexplainable in principle – although explaining a particular thing may very well be beyond the scope of the limited cognition of a human being.

This means that existence is bound up with explicability for Spinoza. To exist is to be explainable, either through itself or through something else (Principle of Sufficient Reason). The more something can be explained through itself, the more it can be said to exist – i.e. the more reality it contains in itself.

Moreover, existence is connected with self-determination insofar as something that explains itself also causes itself to act. For Spinoza (like for Descartes), things are either self-caused or caused by something else.

God or Nature (Spinoza's substance) is completely self-caused and self-sufficient. Everything else depends on something else (to some degree) for its existence and its explanation. Substance (God or Nature) is in itself; finite modes are (inhere) in substance. This metaphysical set-up together with Spinoza's understanding of the essence of finite things (as the striving to persevere in being) introduces the normative starting point for Spinoza's ethics: that what is good is whatever helps us become more self-caused and more self-explained. What is bad is whatever hinders us in this endeavor. This means that Spinoza's ethical theory flows directly from his metaphysics.

Before dealing with the second question concerning ethics and education, however, let us return to the relation between understanding and existence. What is it to understand then? Understanding, for Spinoza, is connected with causation. To understand something is to know how it is caused. As Wallace Matson notes, for Spinoza, "to understand is to be able – at least in thought – to produce" (1990: 86).

E1a4: "The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause."

When we understand the full causal chain of an idea we become the efficient cause of that idea. The more ideas we cause the more self-determined we become. It follows from this that the aim of education (from a Spinozistic perspective) is to become more self-determined as self-determination and understanding are coextensive. The more we can explain our own ideas and actions, the more we can be said to exist. Education thereby concerns gaining a degree of freedom from external causes. We do this when we understand the causal connections of things in the world insofar as this understanding helps us explain ourselves.

Much like understanding, then, concepts like existence, reality and perfection are gradual notions for Spinoza. To exist is not an either/or kind of matter. To exist is to be explainable. The more we understand (i.e. the more we can explain), the more we exist. The more self-determined we become, the more perfect we become insofar as we strive to become more self-determined. In order to see how this is so it is helpful to look at Spinoza's so-called *conatus*-principle explaining the essence of finite things.

Spinoza's *conatus*-principle states that: "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in being" (E3p6). Note that to persevere is not simply to remain in existence, but rather to flourish in being: i.e. to perfect oneself by striving to exist (understand, cause) more.

Finite modes strive to persevere at the expense of one another and so this “innate principle of activity” (Nadler 2014: 43n) at once motivates them to preserve and perfect themselves as far as they can and pit them against one another in an ongoing struggle for more power. Since a thing’s *conatus* is conceived as its essence it follows that “no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its existence away” and that consequently “it is opposed to everything which can take its existence away” (3p6d). Hence, all things essentially strive to persevere in being at the same time, but since different things do this with different degrees of power, weaker forces are either diminished or destroyed when overtaken by stronger forces.

An increase in the power to persevere amounts to an increase in perfection. Spinoza equates a thing’s power with its degree of perfection and he understands perfection and reality to amount to the same thing (2D6). Accordingly, since perfection is a matter of degree it follows that reality is also gradual for Spinoza. Not only is reality gradual in terms of one object containing more or less reality than another, but reality is also gradual in relation to one and the same object over time. This is so since “a particular thing’s level of perfection and its essence [*conatus*] are one and the same” (Youpa 2003: 480).

A thing’s level of perfection (or power, or reality) is equivalent to a thing’s degree of self-determination. For Spinoza, a thing can be more or less real or perfect depending on to what extent it is determined externally. God or Nature is fully real, or perfect, in the sense that it is completely self-determined and self-explained (1p14 by 1D1, 1D3). Everything else is – to different degrees – determined or caused by external things acting as intermediary causes (1p15d by 1D5). In sum, the extent to which something can be explained through itself and to which something can cause things corresponds to its degree of reality.

How then do we affect our degree of reality? How do we become more real?

- Slide 4:

We become more real and more self-determined by increasing the number of adequate ideas we have access to.

Let us look closer at Spinoza’s understanding of adequate ideas

An idea is adequate in a mind when the mind in question has access to its causal explanation. Therefore, ideas are always adequate insofar as they are in the mind of God or Nature (since it is fully real). From the limited perspective of the mind of a human being, however, ideas are typically only partly explained, and hence tend to be inadequate.

When we lack all or parts of the causal explanation of an idea it is inadequate. Self-determination hinges on the acquisition of adequate ideas. The more adequate ideas we have, the more ideas we can cause, and the more we can be said to exist.

It is important to note that adequacy and inadequacy only make sense from the perspective of finite minds striving to perfect themselves. This goes to motivate why the foremost moral

imperative of Spinoza's ethics is that we should increase our degree of understanding about ourselves and the world so as to increase our own power of acting. It also, however, obviously raises imperative questions concerning our epistemological possibilities as finite things. That is, what kind of knowledge can we expect to gain about ourselves and about the world around us? And how, more precisely, do we acquire this knowledge?

This brings us to the question of the link between understanding oneself and understanding God or Nature.

When we understand things from the perspective of durational existence we always fall short of grasping the full causal chain. This is so because any one thing is always bound up with an infinite chain of intermediary causes. For Spinoza, our cognitive abilities are severely limited by our bodies. We can only understand finite things (including ourselves) insofar as they affect our bodies (because our minds parallel our bodies).

E2p19: "The human mind does not know the human body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the body is affected"

Spinoza's epistemology tells us that we gain knowledge about ourselves and the world through our bodily interaction with things in the world. That is, we can never gain knowledge in any other way other than through our bodies and the interaction between our bodies and external bodies. This is how new ideas come to be in our minds. When we encounter something our body changes in that encounter. These bodily changes, in turn, are paralleled by changes in our mind. Some of these changes in our mind are passive in the sense that they are caused by the thing we encounter, and some of them are active insofar as they are caused internally.

What, then, can we understand adequately? And how can we do this? This can be explained by the ability to reconnect ideas in the mind.

Typically we form ideas of external bodies without acknowledging our own limitations as knowers. That is we take our perceptions of things to represent the things we perceive as true. In reality, however, or so Spinoza tells us, what we perceive is a combination of the external body and the affective imprint it leaves on our body. Our understanding of things then result from a blurred impression of external things and the changes that we undergo as a result of interacting with the external thing. We can, however, through education learn to reconnect ideas so that rather than understanding things from the perspective of our haphazard encounters, we can understand them by way of the attributes that we share with them. That is, by tracing the causal chain of an idea of a thing, not to its efficient causes in terms of external bodies, but to the attributes expressing the thing, we may arrive at a more adequate understanding of it. In this way we can set up links between ourselves and the world, understanding things as fundamentally linked via attributes that we can understand adequately by virtue of sharing them.

Extended bodies have certain things in common. For instance, all bodies share certain properties such as being extended, and being constrained by the universal laws of motion and rest. Since this goes for all bodies, we may understand an external body – at least in part

– by virtue of already having access to the kind of information that we need insofar as we share certain defining features with all extended bodies. This way we can form adequate ideas to the degree that we identify commonalities between bodies and to the extent that we apply this way of understanding when we encounter external bodies.

This amounts to Spinoza’s tacit credo that to know oneself is to know God which may seem counterintuitive given that Spinoza’s naturalism (and the ideal of self-preservation) seems to leave little room for religious contemplation.

The ethical ideal of self-determination may appear to be at odds with Spinoza’s explicit claim that the “greatest virtue is to know God” (E4p28). For this to make sense, it is important to note that knowledge of God does not amount to religious mysticism for Spinoza. Instead it is attained through the increased knowledge of the affections of the body (E5p15) – the body being a mode, or expression of power, of God or Nature. It is, in this sense, a very practical matter of getting to know the workings of your own body as this knowledge will automatically amount to a deeper knowledge of God or Nature. Since understanding the body, for Spinoza, involves understanding the causal network of the body, and since God is the immanent cause of everything in nature, it follows that when we gain true knowledge of the object of the idea of our mind – our body – we will simultaneously gain true knowledge of its cause, i.e. God or Nature.

Since a human being has an intuitive understanding of what it is to be extended (by virtue of being a body) and of what it is to be a thinking thing (by virtue of being a mind), it follows that “every human mind necessarily has an idea of God’s essence, as conceived under those two attributes” (Marshall 2013: 37). Understanding oneself – as an extended or thinking thing – means understanding oneself as an expression of an attribute of God. Therefore, as Spinoza explains,

singular things (by 1p15) cannot be conceived without God – on the contrary, because (by p6) they have God for a cause insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which the things are modes, their ideas must involve the concept of their attribute (by 1a4), that is (by 1d6), must involve an eternal and infinite essence of God, q.e.d. (E2p45d)

To be educated, then, is to exist more and to exist more means becoming more self-determined vis-à-vis external causes. The path to self-determination is coextensive with increased knowledge, i.e. the acquisition of adequate ideas. The greatest virtue, it turns out, is to know God but the only way to get to know God is to understand oneself, not as a separate and supposedly self-sufficient entity, but as an expression (a mode) of the power of God or Nature.

- Slide 5:

Moving on to the second question – what is the relation between ethics and education? – we can already begin to discern the tight connection between morality and epistemology for Spinoza.

How are morality and epistemology related in Spinoza's philosophy?

When we understand things adequately we become more self-determined and self-determination is, at bottom, an ethical question for Spinoza.

In an educational context: by understanding things adequately, students can become adequate causes of their ideas and the more ideas they cause, the more they can be said to exist. This hinges on the notion that existence is gradual and so the aim of education from a Spinozistic point of view is to enhance the degree of reality of the student. Enhancing one's existence, for Spinoza, is a deliberative process since the more ideas a person is the adequate cause of, the more self-determined that person becomes. It follows that education, in aiming at increasing the degree of adequate ideas in the student, is at the same time aiming at maximizing the freedom of the student vis-à-vis external causes. Because freedom is conditioned by the enhancement of the student's understanding, all of education, from a Spinozistic point of view, may be approached in terms of a form of moral education. This is so since Spinoza subscribes to a form of *eudaimonistic* ethics where the ethical goal is to arrive at a better understanding of oneself and the world so as to acquire intellectual joy and the greatest virtue is to understand oneself and one's place in the world.

Moral education, then, is not conceived as a part or an aspect of education. It is not a matter of contemplating on moral laws but rather of getting to know the world better, using natural science as an instrument and living a life guided by reason. In this sense, all of education is subordinated to the overarching goal of facilitating the ethical development of the student. This corresponds well with the fact that "for Spinoza there is an intrinsic relationship between the pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of the good life" (Soyarslan 2013: 1).

How does Spinoza's understanding of freedom relate to all of this?

For Spinoza, the difference between freedom and bondage comes down to a difference between a life guided by adequate ideas and a life guided by inadequate ideas. Since this difference is gradual, it introduces a kind of educational ideal insofar as education may provide the instrument by which we can successfully transform ourselves from a life in bondage to a life in freedom. Spinoza comments on the connection between ignorance/bondage and understanding/freedom in E4p66s:

[W]e shall easily see what the difference is between a man who is led only by an affect, or by opinion, and one who is led by reason. For the former, whether he will or not, does those things he is most ignorant of, whereas the latter complies with no one's wishes but his own, and does only those things he knows to be most important in life, and therefore desires very greatly. Hence, I call the former a slave, but the latter, a free man.

What, then, is the relation between increasing our rational understanding of ourselves and living a good life?

As we have seen, what is good corresponds with what is conducive to an increased power of acting, so the challenge is to come to know, with more precision, what is beneficial for this

striving and what is not. In order to find this out, Spinoza claims that we need to understand our affects better.

Affects, for Spinoza, are changes in the striving to persevere in being. Either we change for the better – i.e. we increase in power – or for the worse – i.e. we decrease in power. These changes either result from us being acted upon or from us acting. When we are acted upon we experience passive affects and when we act we experience active affects. When we act we always increase in power and we experience this as a joy resulting from our ability to do more and to understand more. When we are acted upon, however, we may either experience joy if the encounter in question results in an increase in our power of acting, or, we may experience sadness if the encounter results in a decrease in our power of acting. This means that while active affects always result in joy, passive affects can either result in joy or sadness depending on the power of the object encountered.

In addition to joy and sadness Spinoza also introduces a third type of primary affect that he labels desire. Desire, Michael Della Rocca writes, “is simply the tendency to come to have an idea of a more powerful bodily state, an idea that itself is a more powerful state” (2008: 157–158). Desire, then, is what prompts us to strive for joyous encounters and to avoid saddening encounters. Accordingly, in E3p28, Spinoza proposes that “[w]e strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to sadness.” The primary affects thereby sets up a framework for Spinoza’s moral theory since they give us a good idea of what to strive for and what to avoid.

E4p22c: “The striving to preserve oneself is the first and only foundation of virtue”

From these primary affects – joy, sadness and desire – Spinoza continues to deduce a host of other derivative affects that we recognize as human emotions. Much of Spinoza’s exposition of the affects in Part Three revolves around facilitating the recognition of different affects as being either affects of joy or affects of sadness. This, in turn, serves as a practical guide to the striving for self-preservation insofar as this striving hinges on the individual’s ability to successfully recognize which affective encounters will lead to a greater power of acting (joy) and which will lead to a lesser power of acting (sadness). This is an ethical question for Spinoza since the practical concepts of good and evil corresponds with the successful and the unsuccessful acquisition of a greater power to act. And so, as Michael LeBuffe remarks, “[t]he theory of the affects serves Spinoza’s ethical naturalism by introducing explanations of ethical concepts, most importantly the concepts of good, evil, and perfection, in psychological terms” (2014).

Let us return to Spinoza’s naturalistic understanding of freedom

In order to understand what the moral consequences of this conception of human emotions are, it is called for to investigate Spinoza’s views on the human capacity to act and to influence one’s well-being given his naturalism. Spinoza’s understanding of freedom is both deterministic and necessitarian. He 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” (1D7).

Freedom for Spinoza is understood as one's power of acting. The only thing that can live up to this kind of freedom – by virtue of having absolute power of acting – is God, being both self-caused and completely self-determined. Humans, on the other hand, are externally caused modes and can therefore never attain freedom in this absolute sense. Instead, human freedom amounts to the striving for self-determination while recognizing that absolute power of acting is beyond the scope of human nature. It follows that freedom in relation to humans is not a matter of whether our actions are causally determined or not, but rather “*how* our actions are determined, by internal or external causes” (Kisner 2011: 18).

The striving for self-determination introduces Spinoza's foremost moral imperative insofar as it motivates his account of values. Since human freedom is the same as an increased power of acting, and since we already know that power and virtue amounts to the same thing (4D8), it becomes clear that what is good is simply what increases our power to act. What increases our power to act, in turn, is a better understanding of our affects so as to be able to recognize (with more precision) what will enable us to persevere in being. As is evident from his definition of virtue, it “lacks any peculiarly moral sense: anything good for us, even obviously amoral activities such as eating or drinking, contributes to our virtue” (Kisner 2011: 81).

Understanding what is conducive to our self-preservation is therefore a crucial part of education. Being able to distinguish between things that are only seemingly good for us (such as money or fame) and things that are truly good for us (such as an increased understanding) is the mark of an educated person.

- Slide 6:

The teacher as optimistic nutritionist

In his book *From Bondage to Freedom* (2010), Michael LeBuffe introduces a helpful analogy for describing the relation between joy and perseverance in terms of sweetness and nutrition. It is helpful because it paints a distinctly educational picture useful for understanding Spinoza's conception of conscious striving and for linking this with an account of education couched in Spinoza's account of the affects. In 3p28 Spinoza states: “We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to joy, or to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, *or* will lead to sadness.” On LeBuffe's interpretation, this does not mean that we always desire what is good for us (or always succeed in averting what is detrimental for us), however, since “I might, perhaps mistakenly, anticipate *laetitia* in other things and so desire them” (2010: 112). The key to understanding this mistaken view of the good is via the relation between joy/sweetness and perseverance/nutrition.

Since there is indeed a natural connection between sweetness (such as fruits) and nutrition (as there is between bitterness and poison) we become habituated early on into connecting anything sweet with nutrition. This, however, is an unreliable connotation since it turns out that there are many sweet things (such as candy) that cannot sustain us for very long and that are even harmful for us when we partake of them excessively. Since there is a useful

connection between sweetness and nutrition, however, it becomes a matter of distinguishing which kinds of sweet things are truly beneficial for us and which are only seemingly so.

Coupled with the fact that we do actually mistake these things is also the fact that we – even though we may know that it is not good for us – still opt for sweet things that are not nutritious insofar as we suffer from weakness of the will. Hence, there are two key elements to the relation between sweetness and nutrition that are important to keep in mind when we construe our educational account: one, we often mistake anything sweet for nutrition because we are conditioned to associate sweet things with nutrition in general; and two, we sometimes desire sweet things that are not good for us even though we recognize that they are in fact not. On LeBuffe’s account, the link between sweetness and nutrition can be used as an analogy for the underlying link between the things that we perceive to bring us joy and the things that serve our self-preservation in general, whatever these things may be. Much like with fruits and candy, the ethical enterprise of living a good life becomes bound up with identifying things that are both sweet and nutritious. In educational terms, then, this sets up two related obstacles where the first concerns having the student recognize what is truly good for him or her and to distinguish this from what is only seemingly good, and the second concerns having the student learn to act on this knowledge.

The fact that we commonly mistake what seems good for us (because it may be pleasant for the moment and because we suffer from a confused understanding of our desires) for what is truly good for us, sets the stage for one of the most central tasks of the Spinozistic teacher: to act the part of an optimistic nutritionist. This hinges on the notion that since I tend to mistake things that seem good for things that are truly good I may need the help of an optimistic nutritionist (i.e. a knowledgeable teacher) who can point to the things that are truly good for me and help me come to see the value of desiring these things – being more sustainable goods – rather than the pleasures that, at best, can only ever offer me temporary relief and, at worst, may give rise to passive affects like envy and hate. LeBuffe’s analogy of the optimistic nutritionist will help us describe – in more detail – the role of the teacher as someone offering reliable ethical guidance, and thereby assist us in fleshing out the account of how the teacher can help his or her students. LeBuffe summarizes the analogy of the optimistic nutritionist as follows:

Children always try to eat healthy foods, in a way, even though they don’t know it. As we all know they hunt around for sweet things to eat, and try to avoid bitter ones. The sweetest things that one can eat continually over a long period of time, though, like oranges and pecans, are really healthy. So, really, unbeknownst to them, they are hunting for healthy foods. *We can help them by showing them which foods really are healthy and convincing them of what is true, that those really are the ones that bring a life full of sweetness.* (ibid.: 113, my emphasis)

The notion that children – whether they are aware of it or not – always try to eat healthy foods hinges on Spinoza’s conception of self-preservation as a fundamental desire of every finite mode. In determining what will help us persevere in being we will, however, sometimes mistake things that appear to be similar – such as oranges and candy – for one

another. Since these things are really quite different they will not end up having the same effect and where one thing will aid us in our endeavors the other will not (at least not in a sustainable sense). The role of the teacher, in this context, is to habituate the student into associating sweetness with nutritious foods rather than with candy. This is done by helping the student come to understand why this is so – i.e. to come to see the truth of it by virtue of a scientific understanding of the world – as well as by exposing the student to different situations where he or she can safely practice this understanding and thereby conditioning him or herself to associate certain objects with certain affective changes. This last part concerns the assumption that if we can alter our cognitive state (by reconfiguring our understanding of some of the objects that we desire) we may also alter our affective state. Michael Della Rocca explains:

The cognitive nature of affects plays a central role in Spinoza’s account of the means by which we may destroy harmful affects or at least lessen their deleterious effects. Since a harmful affect – like any other – essentially involves beliefs, thoughts, and so forth, if we are able to alter the relevant cognitive state, we will thereby alter or even destroy the harmful affect. (1996: 243)

The key to reconfiguring our understanding of the things we desire is bound up with the intimacy with which we understand our affective responses. The more knowledge we gain about how we respond to different things and what our capabilities are given these interactions, the better our understanding is of what we require to persevere in being. Education, then, can come to play an important role for offering young people ample opportunities to discover how they respond affectively to different things and different situations and to frame these experiences in a scientific understanding of natural causation. This, in turn, can be turned into useful information about what we are like and what is advantageous for our striving to preserve ourselves, information that will be useful later in life when we come across similar situations. This is a crucial step toward attaining freedom of the mind and “[w]ithout a knowledge of what we are like, and thus of what we can and cannot do, we are liable to make damaging mistakes about how to live” (James 2014: 143). This aspect of habituation, where we reorder our ideas so that we associate the sweet and nutritious things with the good but not the sweet but non-nutritious, is connected with the aspect of learning to act on the knowledge that we gain about what is good for us even when we are tempted by the sweet but non-nutritious. By practicing this frequently we may overcome weakness of the will so that we tend to desire the truly good over the seemingly good in most cases.

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