

Introducing the symposium: Spinoza on perfectionism and education

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Abstract

This paper introduces the symposium on Spinoza on perfectionism and education. It frames the key issue of Spinoza's perfectionism in terms of a perennial educational problem and introduces the different contributions to this special issue, where Steven Nadler's main paper is followed by a series of full paper responses by a group of Spinoza scholars and educational theorists. To round off the special issue, Nadler comments on the responses to his main paper.

Keywords

Spinoza, Maimonides, perfectionism, educational theory

Baruch Spinoza's (1632–1677) philosophical contributions have long been an essential reference point in philosophy and the broader humanities, but less well studied are the consequences of his thought for the natural sciences, in particular neuroscience, and social studies such as education. His radical ideas continue to inspire and encourage an ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue on the relation between God and nature, freedom and free will, mind, body and emotions, as well as between individuals and societies. The upshot of this dialogue could be said to have led to an ever-increasing awareness of the interdependence between societies, individual people and nature, and a clearer sense of

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the challenges we face today when we seek to perfect ourselves as active beings in communities fraught with conflict and social unrest all over the world. A prominent theme in Spinoza's philosophy is perfectionism; it is also a central educational concern insofar as it pertains to the cultivation of ethical people. To the extent that education involves moral and intellectual improvement, it may be argued to be aligned with a perfectionist endeavor, construed broadly. Spinoza's perfectionism is a peculiar one, however. It runs through his philosophical work – from his metaphysics to his political theory – as an ethical challenge prompting his readers to seek to make their freedom possible within the immutable limitations of political, cultural, and societal conditions as well as of conditions in nature.

In the early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, for example, Spinoza formulates perfectionism in terms of the lasting enjoyment of a human nature that understands the union that the mind has with the whole of nature, while also understanding the diversity within. In the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* he emphasizes the resulting blessedness of this knowledge rather than the understanding as such. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza states that 'since the intellect is the best part of us, we should certainly strive above all to perfect it as much as we can' (TTP 4, 10).¹ What it means to perfect oneself is further developed in the *Ethics*, where Spinoza connects the perfection of the mind with understanding the most perfect thing that there is for us to understand: God, or what amounts to the same thing, the all-pervasive causal principles governing the one substance we might call Nature. Accordingly, in E4p28d, Spinoza writes that '[t]he absolute virtue of the Mind, then, is understanding' and that '[t] herefore, the greatest virtue of the Mind is to understand, or know, God' or nature. To strive to promote and increase this form of deep understanding of the causal network that we humans are inevitably embedded in, then, is what appears to justify and propel Spinoza's perfectionist scheme.

Throughout Spinoza's work, perfectionism – and how it can be attained – therefore plays a central role in his political as well as his ethical theory. In light of this, it is surprising that relatively little has been written on this theme and its potential contribution to education. Put differently, it is curious that Spinoza's views on perfectionism and its implications for education and contemporary educational theory has not attracted much attention from scholars and commentators. In order to remedy this shortcoming, we have invited Steven Nadler, an internationally renowned Spinoza scholar, to expand on the philosophical background and import of Spinoza's perfectionism. Nadler argues for the importance of the idea of perfectionism in both Spinoza and Maimonides, while endeavoring to chisel out the particularities of Spinoza's perfectionism and its promise for human flourishing. He does so by carefully probing the dynamic relation between Spinoza's and Maimonides' perfectionist setups, identifying both similarities and differences in their work. While Nadler's piece is a philosophical treatment, it raises questions that are of great importance for education. Nadler's contribution offers a unique position, having written one of the most accessible and clear-sighted guides to Spinoza's magnum opus the *Ethics* (Nadler, 2006), as well as a celebrated contemporary standard in terms of scholarly Spinoza biographies (Nadler, 1999), among other influential works on early modern philosophy in general and on Spinoza's philosophy in particular.

The aim of this collection of papers is to discuss the value, significance, and relevance of Spinoza's conception of perfectionism in relation to Spinoza's overall philosophical system and for the practical purposes of teasing out its consequences for human flourishing, as well as framing it in relation to contemporary educational theory. In order to bring these aspects to the fore, we are pleased to have a group of renowned Spinoza scholars and educational theorists to respond to and interact with Nadler's contribution. Our aim is to engage in and to spark a discussion about the purchase and potential of Spinoza's perfectionism for education. Nadler responds, in turn, to these commentaries, thereby bringing some sense of closure to this addition to a lasting philosophical discussion that is far from exhausted.

Before briefly summarizing the different contributions to this symposium on Spinoza's perfectionism, it is appropriate first to say something about the educational upshot of taking on what would appear to be a purely philosophical problem. Insofar as contemporary education (*qua* public schooling) is concerned mainly with boosting results and promoting short-term ends dictated by the demands of the job market or of various fickle (and typically short-sighted) political desires, it does not address (or at least has not previously tended to address) the ethical core of human transformation in terms of perfectionism, at least not in relation to the works of Spinoza. We believe that Spinoza offers an untimely response to some of the perennial problems of education. His aim remains squarely on maximizing long-term flourishing and on establishing stable communities that can act as buffers for free philosophical debate. There is nothing outdated or obsolete about these ambitions. On the contrary, it seems as if we are living in times where we are desperately grasping for something solid to hold onto in terms of whatever can guide us toward unity and can help us avoid falling prey to various divisive strategies employed by various leaders around the world.

Spinoza's proposal invites questions however. Who will stand to benefit from the form of intellectual perfectionism that Spinoza advocates? How can Spinoza's ideas of perfectionism contribute to the possible endeavor of perfecting ourselves as ethical creatures, rather than becoming yet another divisive tool for those already in power to use for their own benefit? How can the intellectual love of God be conceived of as an attainable aim for people in general and not be packaged as an exclusive claim of select religious institutions? The list goes on. Questions such as these are addressed in the contributions to this symposium and we believe that the papers in this special issue can provide ideas for making sense of and evaluating the promise of Spinoza's perfectionism in relation to education. While some contributors only touch on education lightly or implicitly, they all provide tools immensely helpful for developing an educational vocabulary drawing on Spinoza's perfectionist scheme. As such, they provide resources for educational theorists to make use of and to grapple with in developing the conversation of perfectionist education further.

In the main piece of this special issue on Spinoza's perfectionism and education, Steven Nadler sets out to portray the peculiarities of Spinoza's notion of human perfection in light of the philosophy of medieval Jewish rationalist Maimonides, who Nadler argues provides an essential philosophical background for understanding Spinoza's ethical aim. Reading Spinoza through Maimonides, Nadler argues, can help explain some of the more obscure aspects of Spinoza's ethics – sometimes dismissed as confused and

overly esoteric – and thereby illuminate its practical consequences for human development. While both Spinoza and Maimonides connect perfection with the developing understanding and love of God, Nadler endeavors to illustrate how while for Maimonides the highest good is available only to a very select elite, the *summum bonum* of Spinoza's ethics is in principle available to everyone. As difficult as it is to attain, the intellectual love of God exists as a potential for all to enjoy the activity of having an adequate understanding of one's powers and causes and of living in light of this understanding.

In the first response to Nadler's paper, Johan Dahlbeck seeks to understand what the educational consequences of Spinoza's perfectionism (as laid out by Nadler) are. While Spinoza's conception of the highest good is in principle attainable by all, it still raises questions as to who would be in a position to pursue this ethical goal and what the social conditions for this striving would be. On Dahlbeck's reading, Spinoza's perfectionism opens up two distinct (albeit closely interrelated) educational pathways; one where focus is placed on the reeducation of passions so as to prepare for a social environment conducive to ethical flourishing, and one where the attainment of the highest good is pursued through the cooperation of rational individuals forming mutual friendships. The connective tissue between these two pathways is argued to be pedagogical relations that typically start out as asymmetrical relations based on the internalization of external rules of conduct, but that can gradually evolve into communities of friends who support one another's striving for human perfection.

Klas Roth discusses the possibility of perfectionism in terms of blessedness in the work by Baruch Spinoza and as discussed by Steven Nadler in his comparison between the work by Spinoza and Maimonides. Even though Nadler argues that Spinoza's views are inclusive and egalitarian, he does discuss whether blessedness is possible for the whole human species, and whether blessedness is possible through education. Roth, on the other hand, argues that blessedness seems possible for a few, but not the whole human species. He also argues that education can contribute to making it possible for those concerned to strive to become blessed, but that it does not seem to make it possible, as it stands; it basically seems to strive to render those concerned efficacious on the work-marked, on the one hand, and more or less loyal to the practices, traditions and narratives with the nation-states, or as expressed by Spinoza – an ordinary life rather than a life of the blessed, on the other. Finally, Roth formulates some ideas of what education can do and what those concerned would have to do to become blessed in relation to work by Spinoza.

In Matthew Kisner's response to Nadler's paper, Kisner takes a cue from Nadler in turning to Jewish philosophy as a strategy for unpacking and contextualizing Spinoza's philosophy in general and his perfectionism in particular. While Maimonides provides Spinoza with an intellectualist precursor in terms of outlining the intellectual love of God, Kisner proposes that Crescas offers a philosophical counterweight in terms of conceiving the love of God as primarily practical and moral. On Kisner's account, Spinoza navigates somewhere in between these two earlier Jewish philosophers, making the love of God both intellectual *and* moral. As such, Kisner contends that while Spinoza was certainly influenced by Maimonides in conceptualizing the highest good, he diverted from him in conceiving of human perfection as being a practical state of virtue. In conclusion, Kisner proposes that rather than opting for either an intellectualist or a practical

position, Spinoza was influenced by both Maimonides and Crescas in suggesting that human perfection be conceived as both a state of perfect knowledge and of perfect virtue.

In his response to Nadler, Michael LeBuffe starts off from a close reading of central passages of Part 5 of the *Ethics* concerning the love of God, focusing especially on teasing out the social dimensions of Spinoza's perfectionism. Rather than accepting a view where the ordinary love of God and the intellectual love of God are taken to involve two different affects, LeBuffe defends a view where they are rather considered the same affect understood in two different ways. The upshot of this interpretation is that it is compatible with a conception of human perfection where all people share in the same knowledge and love of God, albeit to different degrees. This reading emphasizes the sociable aspects of Spinoza's ethics, making it highly relevant for education and educational concerns.

Apart from Dahlbeck and Roth, Susan James too discusses the relation between perfection in the work by Spinoza and education in her response to the paper by Nadler, and she argues that 'Perfection depends on education', in particular a philosophical education. She discusses the transition between the three kinds of knowledge in the work by Spinoza, namely the transition between imagination, reason and intuition, and the role education plays in making such transition possible. James focuses in particular on the transition between reason and intuition, and she argues that even though such transition is a responsibility on the behalf of the individual, it is also a collective undertaking. Here, James agrees with Dahlbeck, that the latter requires friendship among those concerned, that is, a friendship which makes the endeavor of perfection possible in a community. Education, should, therefore, according to James, make friendship possible between those concerned, a friendship that makes the transition between the three kinds of knowledge possible among them.

In her paper, Julie Klein, further develops the idea of perfectionism in the work by Spinoza and Maimonides. Klein too draws on the idea of kinds of knowledge, in particular the shared idea of immediate intellection as the highest kind of knowledge. For Maimonides, the highest degree of knowing may also manifest as a further form of perfection, namely prophecy, which he conceptualizes as an overflow of intellectual apprehension through the imaginative faculty. Moses, whose richly intellectually informed prophecy founds a community, is Maimonides' most perfect person. Spinoza, for his part, denies any intellectual component in prophecy, though he acknowledges its practical power and concurs on the importance of communal organization. Both thinkers see human perfection as achieved through a complex educational path that involves simultaneous cognitive and affective development. They agree, moreover, that not everyone is suited or positioned to achieve great perfection; both natural and clearly social factors are at play. Whatever one's degree of achievement, the more we cultivate our powers of understanding, studying ourselves and the world, and the more we cultivate our desires, 'the more pleasure in living [we] experience'.

It is our hope that the discussion of Spinoza's and Maimonides' conceptions of perfectionism and their relation to education can help contribute to a better understanding of what education can and cannot do in relation to imagination and reason, and that the question of whether or not the cultivation of an intuitive understanding (as conceived by

Spinoza) should play a part of the educational endeavor of people can be further illuminated and debated. Whether the cultivation of an intuitive understanding is achievable for a few or the whole human species is, as evidenced in the included papers, not merely debatable, but against the woeful deviations from the pursuit of such an engagement in education as it stands, it raises questions of its possibility. Nonetheless, the pursuit itself should not be discarded; it should instead be encouraged, or so we believe.

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Note

1. All quotes from Spinoza's works here refer to the collected translations by Curley (Spinoza, 1985–2016).

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