

## *Spinoza as a Philosopher of Education*

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### **Abstract**

In at least two senses, it might be risky to put 'Spinozism' and 'education' together in the title for a paper. First, it is risky because, as any philosopher of education might quickly agree, education is something we believe that we should keep away from any kind of "ism". Second, it is also risky because Spinoza is at most a historical figure whose ideas, no matter how great are they, cannot give us what we actually need to meet the challenges of education in the 21th century. I want to argue that these two reservations though they are legitimate, are not valid in the case of Spinoza. Despite the fact that Spinoza is indeed a historical name and that there is 'ism' added to this historical name, the very nature of his philosophy may still make Spinoza a perfectly relevant point of departure for a new account in philosophy of education. Some of the widely discussed issues in philosophy of education, for instance, such tensions as value neutrality *versus* value imposition, self-interest *versus* responsibility or intrinsically *versus* instrumentally valuable aims of education, I argue, can be resolved and transcended through a Spinozistic understanding of reality. Besides, provided that Spinoza is not to be taken as a past master but rather as a possibility-to-come, education can come to be conceived as a non-totalitarian and open-ended search for truth. This paper aims to explore what I call these non-totalitarian hopes for truth and their relevance to current problems of philosophy of education.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, conatus, education, aims, desire, activity-passivity, joy, immanence.

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## Introduction

Two concerns are very fundamental in the discipline of philosophy of education: First, any 'ism' is not desirable if we really like to embrace a fully free, autonomy-driven, value-neutral and objective orientation in education. And, second, new challenges require new solutions, so any philosopher –no matter how visionary she was- cannot be considered as a reliable resource once and for all.

I completely agree with this. Yet, I like to argue that Spinoza is still an exception! In other words, I want to argue, one can stay in accord with Spinoza and yet she can still bring some fresh solutions to problems of education, i.e., political and ideological partisanship in education, value imposition and indoctrination, and self-interest at the expense of responsibilities or vice versa.

Spinoza is an exception, not because his work –Ethica- is basically a book on education. Quite the opposite, Spinoza is perhaps one of the rare philosophers who did not think and write anything specifically on education. However, exactly for the same reason his novel approach to metaphysics –that is 'immanence'- is large and flexible enough to inspire new ways of thinking about education, which is completely different from what Deleuze calls 'dogmatic image of thought'.

It is true that we are too modern to revisit some of the 17<sup>th</sup> century debates such as substance, God-Nature, attributes or conatus. But, at the same time we are as badly confused as our pre-modern ancestors when it comes to talk about 'how to live' and even more so when it comes particularly to teaching our children 'how they should live'. No doubt, we have some answers to all these issues and are sometimes even too self-confident about the reliability of our answers. However, most of the time we are very weak and defenseless against the objections that might come from some Nietzschean skeptics, Darwinian naturalists or contemporary neuroscience researchers.

Think about these questions: What is personal wellbeing? What is a flourishing life? Why should I be a good person –when it is not clear at all what it means to be good? What is the difference between 'being good' and 'living well'? What if Dostoyevsky is right i.e. 'no God means no transcendent punishment' and what if there is no God? Then should I do whatever I like to do?

Spinoza's philosophical program, which was developed mostly in Ethica and TTP, can be read as an invitation. This invitation is mainly concerned with some of our very fundamental assumptions which are responsible for our understanding of life, living, valuing and experiencing, and it attempts to replace them with better ones. Thus, these assumptions that Spinoza thinks we should drop do also have some direct influences on how we tend to conceive education, its aims, successes as well as shortcomings. For Spinoza, these assumptions are not only wrong but are also against joy, affirmation and power-to-be.

Please note that philosophers –particularly those of Enlightenment- do always want to free themselves from assumptions as much as possible. This is because of their strong motivation for certainty. Remember Descartes: His motivation in starting with

‘cogito’ was of this kind... A firmest ground which relies on no assumption and is not refutable.

Spinoza, unlike Descartes, gives us his assumptions at the very beginning. Axioms, definitions, postulates, etc. This is not to say that Spinoza does not take so-called motivation for certainty seriously. He rather takes it perhaps too seriously. Yet, his way of pursuing certainty or soundness does not require a no-assumption state for mind. He has his own assumption too. But, one of the distinctive aspects of his philosophy lies in here: His assumptions do not gain their truth value from a transcendent authority, so they are not in any sense dogmatic. It might be surprising to claim that Spinoza is not a dogmatic philosopher considered that he is always listed among 17<sup>th</sup> century rationalists. But, unlike other two founding fathers of rationalism (Descartes and Leibniz) Spinoza asks us to evaluate his assumptions by being strictly linked to this world, being in this world. In other words, given that there is only one substance and God-Nature is the unique plain of immanence where this substance is expressed in infinite ways, it becomes absurd to call Spinoza as dogmatic. He is rather a defier, a duelist or a bidder at best. He just asks us to think as free as possible through his system developed in *Ethica*, follow his assumptions, compare them with rival ones and see if these assumptions help us develop not only more truthful world view but also more joyful, affirmative and worldly one.

This last remark is important: Spinoza is not a pragmatic. Therefore his invitation is first and foremost about truthfulness. As a rationalist, he tends to conceive truth and happiness as one and the same thing. One cannot have an adequate knowledge of God-Nature and one becomes at the same time less flourishing.

Let me mention but briefly what these assumptions are and in what ways they are against joy, affirmation, happiness and virtue:

### **Assumption 1. Transcendence**

Transcendence is perhaps one of the oldest assumptions that has survived in different weights until today. The idea is simple: There is something that transcends this universe/world/reality and we need this transcendent reference if we are to make sense out of our lives in this world. In most cases this transcendent reference is God and the ways it is depicted evoke human beings: He has idea, purpose and motivation.

According to Spinoza we have no good reasons to assume that the idea of transcendence is true, nor is it necessary for human flourishing. He writes in E1 PROP. XIV: “Except God no substance can exist or be conceived”. (Spinoza, 1920, p. 12) This is the famous monistic thesis of Spinoza, where the term ‘God’ is synonymous with ‘Nature’. That is to say that there is only one substance (Nature), besides of which there is nothing to conceive.

Spinoza adds in PROP. XV that “Whatever is, is in God...”. (ibid, p.13) For Spinoza, belief in so-called transcendent God or power is merely a result of fear, the fear that is triggered and amplified by our ignorance of Nature. In fact, the more we know about nature and its law-like causal manifestations the less space remains for us to believe. Think about fairy tales of the past. Just until 200 years ago people across Europe used to believe that fairies do really exist. A.C. Grayling writes that until the end of 19<sup>th</sup>

century it was very common among people to believe that when there are something lost in or around houses fairies must have been responsible for this inconvenience. (Grayling, A.C., 2010, p. 236)

For Spinoza, the idea of transcendence is not only simply groundless, but it is also a barrier to human survival when it is accompanied with supernaturalism and superstition. In Turkey, until 50 years ago people in rural area used to believe that when babies suffered from diarrhea giving them water was unnecessary because angels were supposed to do it. As a matter of fact, diarrheal dehydration continued to play a very important role in infant mortality (25% of all infant loss in Turkey) until recently, and the cultural climate of transcendence and supernaturalism was possibly at work in shaping this superstition.

According to Spinoza God/Nature is a plain of immanence, where every finite things exist and act necessarily. Thus, in the Spinozistic universe there cannot be any event which is not determined logically and/or causally, nor can there be any event explanation of which is not possible in this one and the same plain of immanence. Therefore, it is always more rational, more justified and more healthy to try as much as possible to know more adequately about this unique God/Nature.

Thus we have reached the first assumption that Spinoza asks us to replace with transcendence: Monistic immanence is our best assumption at the moment.

### **Assumption 2. Anthropocentric teleology**

Spinoza writes at the end of the first chapter: "... that men commonly suppose that all natural things act like themselves with an end in view, and since they assert with assurance that God directs all things to a certain end, they say that God made all things for man..." (Spinoza, 1920, p.31) In all three monistic religions the conception of the God is anthropomorphic in the sense that he looks and acts like man, is anthropocentric in the sense that he arranges everything exclusively for human needs, and is teleological in the sense that he gives the nature a telos, purpose or aim. And it is also true that most people –if they are not specifically critical about religiousness– hold these assumptions regardless of whether they are strong believer or not. Likewise, our education systems help these assumptions survive across generations as they fail to emphasize that we in fact have no any single evidence to keep holding these assumptions. According to Spinoza all this has nothing to do with the truth, but is caused simply by ignorance and inadequate understanding of nature.

Moreover the assumption of anthropocentric teleology is not as innocent as it first seems. Unjustified belief in personal God, accompanied with the belief in his purposeful involvement with worldly affairs of men, is responsible for many contemporary problems including environmental crisis. It is always a quick move from "man is the measure of everything" to "everything is for man". As obvious, the latter is far from being peaceful against nature.

Still more interesting is our unjustified tendency to search for some ultimate end in our lives. The problem lies here: Our best theories tell that we fail to find any evidence in favor of the notion of 'ultimate end'. It has been almost canonical among well-known scientists to argue that evolution knows no telos. The only impetus at best

available in micro universe of living creatures, they report, that is the impetus of 'survival', is far from looking spiritually promising ultimate ends.

Spinoza, on the other hand, is well aware of these facts. His famous 'conatus' doctrine denotes the same truth: Every 'thing' (not only living things) necessarily strives to continue to exist, and that is the only 'purpose' if one will still need an ultimate purpose. Then, for Spinoza, life has no any previously given telos, nor would it be a truthful attitude towards God/Nature to be in search of any meaning beyond what exist at the expense of a joyful understanding of this unique God/Nature.

We thereby reach our next assumption: This world needs no further meaning than joyful striving to continue to exist, which is only possible by having more adequate knowledge of God/Nature.

### **Assumption 3. Free-will**

No doubt, whether free will exists or is just an illusion has perhaps been the most controversial issue for many decades. Therefore it is not possible at all to give a final answer to this problem in this piece of work. Yet, it might be argued that we are in no sense as certain as we used to be in the past about possibility of free will. We perhaps still feel that we (exclusively only human beings) are free authors of our life in the sense that we can at least choose some of the crucial aspects of our life, but we are certainly not sure if we are really completely free from environmental, genetic, or neurobiological determinants. About 350 years ago Spinoza once again was among the first kids who told that the king is naked!

As human beings, Spinoza claimed, we are not in any sense different from rest of the cosmos (including animate as well as inanimate entities) with regard to freedom to choose what encounters we will experience. Any encounter, for Spinoza, means affective change in our actual embodied beings, as well as in our minds simultaneously. Since all finite modes are simply modifications of the one and the same Substance (i.e. God/Nature) all strive to exist as much as possible in accord with the conatus doctrine. Out of this endless striving flourish our so-called life stories. In fact, in most cases what we think we freely designed is simply result of what encounters we had and what affects these encounters created on our lives. However, since we are aware of the effects of these encounters but not of the necessary causal chain behind them we easily welcome the illusive idea that we are free.

Western concept of education, to an important extent, is an output of this assumption which tends to see human beings as -what Spinoza calls- "kingdom within the kingdom". No doubt, we are still far from being certain about the possibility or impossibility of free will or the degree of freedom. But it is puzzling to see that the controversy has not arrived yet in philosophy of education at all. All this shows, I argue, that we are once again happy about our pre-established assumptions in education and we resist to possibility of replacing them. If we are to follow Spinoza, we should stop appealing to consequences. If belief in free will really turns out to be an illusion what better assumptions we can make to justify that our educational attempts will really help children have a flourishing life, that is a life which relies on truth, adequate understanding of Nature and joyful affirmation of reality.

Our best knowledge derived from the empirical works of various researchers are suffice to justify that (a) we have no good reason to assume any kind of ontological transcendence, (b) we have no good reason to assume that an anthropocentric teleology exists, and finally (c) we have no good reason to assume that human beings unlike all other things are free. Given that all these points are arguably well-established by our current scientific knowledge, Spinoza emerges as one of the most relevant philosophers that can be revisited for contemporary problems of philosophy of education.

Spinoza, on the other hand, does not leave us here totally hopeless. According to him, the fact that there is no any transcendent authority and we are equally on our own, like all other modes with no particular advantage of free-will in this world, where there is also no previously given telos, does not mean that we are destined to get lost. Conatus, the striving to continue to exist, is applicable for us as well, and, in fact, whatever we do is just an expression of this immanent conatic desire. All finite things (modes) encounter with each other necessarily as an effect of the same conatic power. The more we have adequate knowledge of God/Nature, the more we are active (strive better), and therefore the more joyful affects we get out of our encounters. The formula can be read reversely: The less we are aware of God/Nature, the less active we are and therefore the more sad affects act on us.

## **Conclusion**

The relevance of Spinoza for philosophy of education lies here: In what ways can we help children to have more adequate knowledge of the God/Nature so that they can affirm the world as it is and strive more joyfully, more active and more virtuously. The program outlined here does not need a so-called freedom of will, nor does it call for transcendence or teleology of any kind. It simply asks us to clarify first what we know as adequate as possible about the God/Nature and then create learning environments accordingly.

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