

Spinoza as Educator: From eudaimonistic ethics to an empowering and liberating pedagogy

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Abstract

Although Spinoza's formative influence on the cultural ideals of the West is widely recognized, especially with reference to liberal democracy, secular humanism, and naturalistic ethics, little has been written about the educational implications of his philosophy. This article explores the pedagogical tenets that are implicit in Spinoza's writings. I argue (1) that Spinoza's ethics is eudaimonistic, aiming at self-affirmation, full humanity and wellbeing; (2) that the flourishing of individuals depends on their personal resources, namely, their conatus, power, vitality or capacity to act from their own inner natures; and (3) that the combination of the Spinozian conceptions of humanism, liberal democracy, eudaimonistic ethics, and the enlightened and sovereign individual constitute together the grounds for a comprehensive empowering and liberating pedagogy.

Keywords: Spinoza, empowering education, liberating education, humanistic education, eudaimonistic ethics

By conventional disciplinary standards, Spinoza is rightfully not considered an educator: he was not a teacher by profession, as a philosopher he never wrote a treatise on education, and one can hardly find references to his writings in academic courses on the history and philosophy of education. Nevertheless, by 'softer' standards or a looser usage of language, Spinoza is often regarded as one of the greatest educators of mankind. Very much like Moses and Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu, Jesus and Muhammad, Plato and Aristotle, Rousseau and Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, Darwin and Einstein, he belongs to a small and exclusive group of prophets, philosophers and scientists that have created and shaped the major cultural categories by means of which people perceive reality and give meaning and value to their experiences.¹

Spinoza's reluctance—conscious or unconscious—to deal with educational topics in his writings is perplexing. Because it has been customary in the history of philosophy for discussions of educational matters to develop from and follow discussions of metaphysical, epistemological and ethical issues, it strikes us as quite odd that Spinoza's ethical discourse does not extend its focus to matters of educational

philosophy and educational psychology. As William Frankena (1971) and Steven Nadler (2006) point out, as a philosophical system-builder Spinoza reaches his discussion on ethical issues only after laying the required metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological foundations. Very much like Plato and Aristotle before him and Rousseau and Kant who followed him, his ethical discussion ‘takes on almost every major area in philosophy: metaphysics, theory of knowledge, philosophy of mind, philosophical psychology, moral philosophy, political philosophy, and the philosophy of religion’ (Nadler, 2006, p. ix). Put more concretely, since ‘Spinoza’s ultimate goal is an explanation of human happiness in a deterministic universe, he needs first of all to investigate what exactly a human being is and how it fits into the metaphysical scheme of things’ (ibid., p. 122). His reasons for stopping short of addressing educational matters—grounded in his personal tendencies or in his deterministic metaphysics (in the light of which pedagogy might be considered useless and in vain)—we will probably never know. We can, however, explore educational elements, insights and implications that are inherent in Spinoza’s philosophy and are ‘waiting’ to be disclosed—and to this we shall turn now.

Regarding Spinoza as a key figure in the formative education of the West usually involves reference to his pioneering advocacy of liberal democracy, atheistic humanism, and *eudaimonistic* ethics. A discussion of his influence on the first aspect—that of modern liberal democratic life—can be found for example in Feuer’s *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*. Spinoza, it is argued there, ‘was the first political philosopher of modern times to avow himself a democrat ... [considering democracy] the best way to assure the liberties of man’ (Feuer, 1987, p. 102). We can also look at much more recent discussions of these issues in Rebecca Goldstein’s *Betraying Spinoza: The renegade Jew who gave us modernity* (2006) as well as in her ‘Reasonable Doubt’ (2006): an article in the *New York Times* on the relevance of Spinoza’s political theory to the West’s struggling with religious fundamentalism and quest for multicultural tolerance and pluralism.² With respect to the second aspect—of atheistic worldview—it is probably best to look at Yovel’s *Spinoza And Other Heretics* (1988) where Spinoza is presented as the first truly secular and free spirited philosopher as well as exerting major intellectual and moral influence on Kant, Heine, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. A less scholarly yet more important source on these matters—one that brings stronger evidence for Spinoza’s influence on the formation of atheist humanism—is found in the various manifestos of the American Humanists Association, which center on Spinoza’s main tenets of rationalism, naturalism, liberty, atheism, solidarity, and quest for this-worldly personal fulfillment and happiness.³

It is however on neither liberal democracy nor atheistic humanism that I would like to focus in this article. I have in mind the third of the three aspects, Spinoza’s *eudaimonistic* ethics,⁴ that can serve us best as a starting point for exploring educational insights in his philosophy, in general, and erecting a ‘Spinoza-based’ liberating and empowering pedagogy, in particular.⁵ The special appeal of *eudaimonistic* ethics to people and its direct relevance to educational theory and practice lie in its naturalist and commonsensical attitude. As explored and elaborated by various philosophers such as Arendt, MacIntyre, Norton, and Nussbaum, it is the kind of

ethical theory that begins with the simplest existential questions and most basic human concerns: How can I best live my life? How should I actualize myself—properly and efficiently—in order to live well, flourish, and be happy? How would my humanity achieve its best, so that my life would demonstrate both high quality and great success or blessedness?

In advancing, in the midst of the 17th century, a naturalistic, egoistic and enlightened ethical theory of self-actualization and self-affirmation, Spinoza 'left to the world a consciously new ethics ... a new morality' (Frankena, 1971, p. 85); a rationalist and perfectionist ethics of virtue that seeks personal well being, without reference to traditional terms such as holiness, 'ought', duty and sin; an ethics 'that represents a return to the ethics of the Greeks' (ibid., p. 86). It is clear, on this account, why the Jews in his Amsterdam community, at first, and the political and religious leaders of the general public, later, have considered Spinoza's ethical doctrine a danger and threat that should be fought and eliminated. It is likewise clear that his refreshing ethical theory, very much like Galileo's scientific outlook, would have a great appeal to educated and critical minds and become an important foundation of the whole modern ethos. In the words of Yosef Ben-Shlomo, what Spinoza offered to modern humanity is a philosophy of life that 'is relevant to all humans, deals with the most concrete aspects of life, and sets a way for a meaningful life and for overcoming our basic and common existential fears ... From this perspective, it seems that Spinoza's teachings offer the most serious alternative to the historical religions' (Ben-Shlomo, 1983, Preface).

Before we look more closely at Spinoza's *eudaimonistic* theory and how a liberating and empowering pedagogy can develop out of it, let us examine a few educative elements in Spinoza's writings, elements that can explain, at least to some extent, the direct appeal and attraction so many people around the world felt in encountering his writings. I am referring here to the fact that Spinoza has been chosen by thousands of people around the globe to be their most meaningful personal educator; not in the ordinary sense of an educator that is appointed by a school principal to teach a group of students, but in the deeper and more meaningful Nietzschean sense, as a personal example of wisdom and virtue that an individual chooses for himself or herself as a resource for his or her life-project and personal edification.⁶

The secret of Spinoza's Pedagogical Eros—that which makes him for many a 'companion for life', a source of vitality and inspiration, and a philosophical guide who challenges towards a fuller and more fulfilling life—unfolds itself when looked into with the diagnostic eyes of another philosopher-educator—Martin Buber. According to Buber, in 'The Education of Character' (1971), three traits characterize great educators. First of all, true educators inspire in students a feeling of personal trust; more specifically, a feeling that the educator is wholeheartedly there for them, and that the chief motive of the educator is to care for the wellbeing, self-realization, and growth of his students—as ends for themselves rather than as means for the accomplishment of religious, ideological or economical goals. Secondly, they instill in their students a sense of idealism; namely, that there exists in human life truth, goodness, beauty, integrity, justice, perfection, style, friendship and other

valuable qualities that are worth pursuing and can make human reality so much more meaningful and fulfilling. Finally, the influence of great educators is especially effective when the educator has no special intention to educate; it takes place by means of an existential dialogue in which educators affect the whole being of their students with their full presence as excellent human beings.

With regard to the first pedagogical trait, one cannot be mistaken about Spinoza's true caring for his student-readers. Whether one looks in the opening chapter of the *Improvement of the Understanding* (2000), where he invites us with great passion and intimacy to join him in the quest for edification and happiness, or in the later formulation in the *Ethics*, where he states that 'the good which every man who follows after virtue desires for himself, he will also desire for other men' (1974, IV, Prop. 37)—it is clear that his concern with us, his audience, arises from a humanist interest in enhancing the humanity of every individual and in establishing a society based on the principles of reason, liberty and justice. Very much like Nietzsche's Zarathustra,⁷ Spinoza doesn't wish to shape our character and form our worldview for the purpose of advancing some religious or ideological goal. Spinoza's pedagogical drive, like Zarathustra's, originates from an overflowing spiritual existence and a strong urge to actualize the vitality, wisdom and beauty which exists in most people only as a potential. As we shall see later, again like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Spinoza has no interest in herd-like and passive believers; he seeks sovereign individuals who can join him in the pursuit of a higher art of living.⁸

Regarding the second trait, there is wide agreement in philosophic scholarship that Spinoza has conducted the most complete and courageous attempt to form a philosophy of life that is edifying and enlightening in itself and could serve as a rationalist alternative to the mystical teachings of traditional religions. Very much like Ecclesiastes, Buddha, Socrates, and Aristotle before him, and quite similarly to Nietzsche and Camus after him, Spinoza repeatedly challenges his audience with the most fundamental questions of human existence: the meaning and end of life, the origin of human vitality, the essence of human dignity, and the road to the ultimate good and supreme happiness. Spinoza presents sensual pleasures, social status, and material wealth as possible keys for the good life and personal fulfillment, yet he negates them—in line with the arguments of Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—on the theoretical basis that they fail to actualize the distinguishing and higher qualities of humans as well as on the empirical ground that they fail to secure long term and stable happiness. The desirable alternative—in line with the philosophy of Aristotle and contrary to Nietzsche's—is to aspire for a life of intellectual inquiry and the pursuit of truth—a life that he characterizes as guided by 'the intellectual love of God'. The end product that Spinoza envisaged is very moving in its optimism: individuals that enjoy good health, tranquility and happiness, and a society that is blessed with a rational social contract that secures freedom, fairness, and peace.⁹

Coming to the third trait of true educators, we will deal with the special educative influence that arises out of existential encounters with the personality of the educator in his totality. In Spinoza's case, we should naturally limit ourselves to encounters via his writings and biographies. One major characteristic that readers

encounter in Spinoza's *Ethics* is the complete coherence or full correspondence in the relation of content and style. As is the case in the writings of Plato where the form of dialogue furthers the ideal of Philosophical Dialectics, or in the works of Nietzsche where the aphoristic style establishes the epistemological doctrine of Perspectivism, Spinoza's manifold styles of writing and modes of approaching his readers manifest his central doctrine of holistic humanism. At times, he speaks to us as a meticulous logician and 'hard headed philosopher' whose sole concern is with adequate and precise definitions, axioms, propositions and proofs. At other times, he approaches us directly and intimately, in the first person singular, elaborating and explaining issues in the 'notes' and 'corollaries', loosening up to the extent of addressing us passionately, and in a simple language, as if trying to persuade the readers to join him in an idealistic yet practical struggle for human betterment.

Spinoza is present to us not only as a multifaceted person who is engaged with the most fundamental philosophical and existential issues, but also as a man of personal integrity and intellectual honesty. In his philosophical arguments, as much as in his existential choices, there is hardly any room for compromises, pragmatic lies, or comforting prejudices. Philosophy, in Spinoza's case, is always rigorous and challenging; if reason finds no evidence for the existence of a personal God, then we should rid ourselves from this mystical belief and substitute it with a rational picture of reality. If religious leaders abuse their power to stupefy and manipulate the masses, their authority and influence in our public life must be limited. If it is as rational to care for the edification of others as it is for your own,¹⁰ then that care should apply to all humans and not only to those belonging to one's community or religion. And if it is the case that acquiring understanding rather than social status is of the greatest importance, then it suits Spinoza to philosophize humbly at his home rather than to get a professorship at a prestigious university.¹¹

In all the above examples, Spinoza is present to us as a sensible, temperate, sensitive, conscientious person with a radical commitment to truth and integrity. 'I judge a philosopher', wrote Nietzsche, 'by whether he is able to serve as an example' (1965, p. 18). In this test very few have passed with the success and dignity of Spinoza. To use Nietzsche's terminology, in his life and philosophy, Spinoza exemplifies the sovereignty and power of higher human beings: adding value and meaning to the world by virtue of exercising his personal resources, not for dominating others or achieving social status, but for personal edification via self-overcoming and self-perfection.¹²

Let us turn now from the pedagogical Eros that is embedded in his writings to the pedagogical themes that can be derived from his philosophy. As I noted in the opening paragraph, unlike other *eudaimonistic* theorists, such as Aristotle and Seneca before him and Maslow after him, Spinoza's *eudaimonistic* theory has hardly been considered to have pedagogical implications. In order to do justice to Spinoza's philosophy—to disclose and elaborate its pedagogical significance—let us begin by stating that common to all *eudaimonistic* theories is the premise that the gradual development and actualization of the potentialities that lie in everyone's inner nature would lead to higher states of personal and social existence. It further implies: firstly, that the development and actualization of our inner nature is guided

by a *telos* or vocation that is immanent in the nature of every human qua human; and secondly, that the perfection achieved in this developmental process is both subjective and objective, i.e. good human life that is manifested in wellbeing and personal happiness as well in excellence in the humanly distinctive realms of intellectual, moral, and civic life. In Spinoza's theory, just like in other *eudaimonistic* theories, 'in so far as a thing is in harmony with our nature, it is necessarily good' (Book IV, Prop. 31). In other words, as it is *reason* that Spinoza identifies as man's essential nature, all things that invigorate our power of rational inquiry and are conducive to understanding are good and useful for us—enhancing our reality as well as our perfection and happiness.¹³

There is, however, a unique characteristic in Spinoza's philosophy that stands as an obstacle—some would argue insurmountable—to any meaningful discussion of utilizing his ethical, let alone pedagogical, views. I am referring here to his world-picture: his metaphysical determinism, according to which everything in reality—Nature or God—is determined by a system of eternal causality; hence any discussion of free will, *eudaimonistic* ethics, or pedagogical initiative may seem meaningless and in vain.¹⁴ According to Spinoza's world-picture, 'in the mind there is no absolute or free will, but the mind is determined to wish this or that by a cause, which has also been determined by another cause ... and so on to infinity' (Book II, Prop. 48). In light of this—with many Spinoza scholars—we are bound to raise the question whether it is meaningful and altogether possible to engage in ethical and pedagogical discourse that aims at the initiation of people into higher modes of thought and activity. In other words, what kind of educational initiatives could make sense in a reality that is deterministic and with teachers and students who are incapable of autonomous deliberations and freedom of choice? Does the best that we can hope for consist in engaging our students with philosophical activities, thereby affecting them indirectly and hoping that these activities somehow become causes of edification for our students?

While not pretending to solve this problem, I will only posit here the dominant view among Spinoza's scholars—upon which I shall rely in developing my argument—that even within the framework of his metaphysical determinism, there is still room for achieving some measure of freedom and personal autonomy. The argument goes as follows:

- (a) Existence, according to Spinoza (long before Nietzsche and Foucault) is a perpetual struggle for self-preservation and self-affirmation (Nadler, 2006, p. 221), each person endeavoring to remain in his own being and act in accordance with his true and essential nature. 'The universe', in other words, 'contains a large number of things or modes which effect each other, each thing tries to preserve its being, but what it actually does is not the outcome of this endeavor alone—rather, it is the outcome of the interaction between its endeavor or power and the endeavors or powers of the things which affect it' (Parkinson, 1971, p. 11).
- (b) The *conatus* of every individual—the endeavor to achieve enough vitality or power for generating activity from one's inner nature rather than to be forced from external sources—is necessarily in conflict with such endeavors of other individuals; the

results of which are various degrees of freedom and autonomy—the extent to which an individual is active (relying on the recourses of his inner being) rather than passive (affected and determined by external forces).

- (c) The distinctive human way—by virtue of human nature—to preserve their being and increase their power and liberty in relation to other things consists in reaching higher levels of thought and knowledge and therefore conducting rational life that is generated and governed by reason (Hampshire, 1971). In other words, to be powerful is ‘to be the adequate cause of one’s own being’ (Nadler, 2006, p. 230), and the road to a higher life of wellbeing and autonomy consists of the individual’s ‘drawing on its own cognitive resources’ (ibid., p. 193) and ‘increasing the number of true and adequate ideas’ (ibid., p. 161).

If we combine this portrayal or characterization of Spinoza’s philosophy with the characteristics canvassed earlier of *eudaimonistic* ethics, it seems that a framework for discussing a liberating and empowering pedagogy has been established. As put by Gilles Deleuze, ‘man is not born free, but becomes free or frees himself—becoming a free or strong man’ (Deleuze, 1988, p. 70). And this freedom, as we have seen earlier, does not amount to the ordinary sense of freedom of will or choice, but rather to man’s ‘coming into possession of his power of acting, that is, when his *conatus* is determined by adequate ideas from which active affects follow, affects that are explained by his own essence’ (ibid., pp. 70–71). Another way of putting it, this time in normative terms, is that in his philosophy of power and freedom, Spinoza is challenging us with the ethical and pedagogical ideal of the sovereign individual: persons who are active creators and shapers of their life’s content and condition rather than passive products of their circumstances; men and women who utilize their rational, critical and autonomous thinking to establish themselves as authorities and rule for their deliberation and conduct.

With respect to the developmental process required for the accomplishment of personal sovereignty, it is explicated in the *eudaimonistic* framework that ‘as each thing possesses more of perfection, so it is more active and less passive’ (Spinoza, 1974, Book V, Prop. 40). Personal sovereignty, in other words, is a function of maturation and development. As the individual’s concrete mode of existence is determined by the balance of power between the inner factors of physical and spiritual vitality and the external factors of the natural and social circumstances, then we may say that in the framework of Spinoza’s philosophy sovereigns will become those who have developed the cognitive powers of rationality and critical reason—they will be better immunized against dogmas, prejudices, superstitions, superficial conventions, demagoguery, and other social mechanisms by which persons are manipulated and enslaved.

Like other advocates of perfectionist ethics and pedagogy—such as Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, and Montaigne, before him, and Nietzsche and Ortega who followed him—Spinoza is in an important sense a cultural elitist. After all, whether we are using Plato’s metaphor of the cave or employing the modern talk of ‘the initiation of the young into worthwhile and higher modes of thought and action,’ the point is that we hold the educators as individuals who achieved higher or more cultivated

modes of living and whose calling is to liberate others, of a cruder or baser nature, from the fetters of ignorance, passions, conformity and superstition.¹⁵ It is clear for Spinoza, as he states in the last sentence of the *Ethics* that ‘all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare’ (Book V, Prop. 42). Put differently, by the very nature of excellence or virtue, it would be unrealistic to expect many ‘persons who perfected their intellect and live according to the dictates of reason ... [as well as managing to lead] a life of moderation’ (Nadler, 2006, p. 231). The implication of this in the educational arena, is that despite our effort to cultivate as many sovereign individuals as possible, only a few will manage to overcome the ‘masses mentality’ and achieve an enlightened and sovereign mode of human existence.

This position on the part of Spinoza situates him between two distinguished elitist thinkers of the late 19th century. On the one hand, Spinoza posits a democratic and egalitarian kind of elitism, such as the one endorsed by Matthew Arnold: firstly, that the key to human betterment and cultural development lies in the cultivation of the quest for perfection as well as the engagement with the best that has been thought, done and created in the various spheres of human culture; secondly, that a sound and responsible educational policy should consist in good liberal education for all.¹⁶ This view seems to be congruous with Spinoza’s stance on these matters: ‘The highest good of those who follow virtue is common to all and therefore all can equally rejoice therein’ (1974, Book IV, Prop. 36). In other words, ‘men, in so far as they live in obedience to reason, are most useful to their fellow men; therefore, we shall in obedience to reason necessarily endeavor to bring about that men should live in obedience to reason’ (ibid., Prop. 37, Proof 1).

On the other hand, Spinoza recognizes—very much in line with the radical elitism of Nietzsche—that only very few would be able to achieve the kind of spiritual vitality that is required for establishing themselves as sovereign individuals—enlightened, autonomous, and authentic. As diagnosed in Nietzsche’s philosophy of power and later in the philosophies of Ortega and Sartre, the great majority of people are bound—because of weakness of their *conatus* (in Spinoza’s term) or out of existential laziness and ‘bad faith’ (in the terms of Nietzsche, Ortega and Sartre)—to adopt the comfortable and less demanding life of intellectual inertia and social conformity.¹⁷

Being a child of the 17th century, Spinoza could never entertain the thought that in his philosophizing he was ‘doing’ radical education and critical pedagogy. However, his harsh criticism in his *Theological-Political Treatise* of the stupefaction and enslavement of the public by religious leaders could mark him as a predecessor of 20th century radical educationists and critical pedagogues. Spinoza accuses religious leaders of conducting emotional manipulations on the people. They utilize the natural fears and anxieties that are common to all humans in order to inculcate superstitious beliefs about the will of God and the reality of Afterlife, and, thereby, bring people under religious authority and enslave them for the promotion of their leaders’ interests. By fostering in them the dispositions of docility, submissiveness, and conformity—which Nietzsche later termed ‘slave morality’—they manage, Spinoza argues, to ‘degrade man from rational being to beast, which completely stifles the power of judgment between true and false’; or even worse, ‘men who

despise reason, who reject and turn away from understanding as naturally corrupt, these, of all people, are thought to possess light from on High' (1951, Preface). Moreover, the great majority of people are driven by their false consciousness to 'fight as bravely for slavery as for safety, and count it not shame but highest honor to risk their blood and their lives for the vainglory of a tyrant' (ibid.). Reading these words in the Preface to his *Theological-Political Treatise*, one cannot avoid thinking about the similarities in content of passion found in radical and influential texts of the 1960's such as Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* and Postman and Weingartner's *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*.

In Spinoza's view, in order for people to achieve freedom from the degrading rule of ignorance and prejudice, the state should provide two life-affirming or growth-promoting conditions: the first, a cultural and political climate of pluralism and tolerance in which 'everyone should be free to choose for himself the foundations of his creed' (ibid.); the second, that the practice of education would focus on developing the cognitive capacities of the people—from the first level of confused ideas and shallow understanding, to the second level of scientific thinking and adequate ideas, and finally to the third level of intuitive understanding that is based on holistic and integrative knowledge.¹⁸ We may phrase it in the language of Spinoza, that the combination of political freedom and cognitive excellence would allow and enable the young to reach greater power of *conatus*—having better immunization against the influence of external forces and manipulation. We may likewise put it in the more colloquial language of Postman and Weingartner (1969): they equip students with better crap detecting kits.

Another pedagogical aspect that Spinoza introduced prior to modern educational theorists is his holistic humanism. Very much in line with the romantic and holistic naturalism of Rousseau and the pedagogical progressivism of Neill, Dewey, Russell, and Rogers, Spinoza insists on attributing importance not only to the cognitive but also to the emotional and bodily dimensions. 'Whatsoever increases or diminishes, helps or hinders the power of activity in our body', he writes, 'helps or hinders the power of thought in our mind' (1974, Book III, Prop. 11). The classical principle of 'a healthy soul in a healthy body' is reformulated in Spinoza's theory into the doctrine that mind and the body are just two different manifestations or attributes of one unity or being—whatever happens in the physiological order of the body has its parallel in the mental order of the life of the mind. We should further attribute importance to the role of the senses and emotions as crucial elements in our self-perception and emotional intelligence, without which a satisfying and successful life is not possible. The sensual and emotional experience of bodily and mental well-being, Spinoza contends, is nothing but the joy of accomplishing more happiness and blessedness in our life. It is worth noting here that this view of Spinoza, of the importance of cultivating joy and personal happiness, runs contrary to some orthodoxies of the historical religions of the West, which traditionally associate joy and gaiety with dangerous permissiveness and moral degeneration.

Contrary to the traditional ethics of humility and submissiveness and very much in line with the life-affirming and vitality-seeking ideals of Nietzsche, Russell, and Neill, Spinoza advocates passionate self-affirmation and self-edification.¹⁹ There is

nothing that irritates the spirit of such humanists more than the sacrifice of personal happiness and vitality on the altar of God or the State; it is joy and vitality that a humanist educator wishes for his students—'to free oneself, flourishing, expanding outward into the world' (Goldstein, 2006, p. 179). Moreover, we can easily imagine Spinoza's passionate and restless spirit speaking from the throat of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: '*Remain faithful to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! Poison-mixers are they, whether they know it or not. Despisers of life are they, decaying and poisoned themselves of whom the earth is weary; so let them go' (1968, 'Zarathustra's Prologue'); 'Lead back to the earth the virtue that flew away, as I do—back to the body, back to life, that it may give the earth a meaning, a human meaning' (ibid., 'On the Gift-Giving Virtue').

The last pedagogical component that will be addressed here belongs to the moral discourse concerning good versus bad and good versus evil. It is here that Spinoza posits a straight foreword atheistic view, according to which '*Good and Bad*, they indicate no positive quality in things regarded in themselves, but they are merely modes of thinking, or notions which we form from the comparison of things one with another' in proportion to their agreement or disagreement with the models of perfection that we have set for ourselves (1974, Book IV, Preface). 'By good' he adds, 'I mean that which we certainly know to be useful to us; by evil I mean that which we certainly know to be a hindrance to us in the attainment of any good' (ibid., Definitions 1 and 2); and one and the same thing can be good for one, bad for another, and completely irrelevant to a third. In light of such contentions, unless Spinoza was a rationalist and naturalist, we could have mistaken his position as moral relativism, subjectivism or even nihilism—the truth is quite the opposite.

In the context of his commitment to rationalism, naturalism and philosophy of immanence, Spinoza's views on morality, in general, and on the nature of good and bad, in particular, seem to be congruent with the school of thought that is currently called pragmatic humanism.²⁰ This philosophical position—of which John Dewey was one of the founders and which was later advocated by different thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Martha Nussbaum—seeks to integrate a cosmopolitan humanistic morality with a commitment to a liberal and multicultural democracy. In other words, the simple fact that all humans share a common human nature as well as an 'earthly habitat' creates the possibility for an objective and universal discourse concerning the factors that promote and inhibit human flourishing. In this universal or global discourse, which comprises numerous and different methodologies, the treasures of moral and pedagogical knowledge acquired by humanity should enjoy—very much like medicine, psychology and ecology—the status of objective validity. We know, for example, that there is room in human culture for a great variety of foods as well as of methods for constructing houses—yet there exists a universal method for measuring the nutritious value of foods as well as a universal method for measuring the strength and firmness of houses. Likewise, as in the cases of foods and houses, we are well aware that societies around the globe can develop different cultural contents—yet the universal values of human life, dignity, freedom, equality and rationality must be dominant in the life of every society for its citizens to flourish and achieve wellbeing. We have

relatively solid knowledge—to use Spinoza’s terminology and to draw on the UN’s Human Development Index—that these values are instrumental in bringing us closer to accomplishing the ideal of human flourishing that is immanent in our nature.

Spinoza does not limit himself to providing a definition of the ‘good’ and a methodology for its identification, but also discloses for his readers a list of desirable positions, dispositions, sensitivities, and behaviors that are to be cultivated in our self-edification and in the education of others. In the realm of social morality, Spinoza stresses the importance of ‘love thy neighbor as thou love thyself’. In his words: ‘the good which every man who follows after virtue desires for himself, he will also desire for other men’ (1974, Book IV, Prop. 37). The logic and justification of this virtue is not grounded in a theological and deontological altruistic imperative, but in enlightened egoism—that ‘a person is most useful to other people when he is rationally pursuing his own self-interest’ (Nadler, 2006, p. 242). Spinoza is of the opinion that, contrary to the belief that underlies the predominant egotistical and competitive morality, the conditions for the flourishing of any individual only improve with the improvement of the well being and personal fulfillment of his fellow citizens. On the interpersonal level, this understanding is translated into a caring concern that every member of society should enjoy the rights and opportunities for a dignified life. On the communal level, this understanding should be manifested in a social contract that is based on the virtues of human solidarity and social responsibility. In the words of Spinoza: ‘men who are governed by reason—that is, who seek what is useful to them in accordance with reason—desire for themselves nothing, which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind, and consequently, are just, faithful, and honorable in their conduct’ (1974, Book IV, Prop. 18).²¹

Notes

1. This point is manifested best in Heine’s famous contention that ‘all our modern philosophers, though often perhaps unconsciously, see through the glasses which Baruch Spinoza ground’ (Heine, 1964, 9, p. 84). Other good references on this point are the entry on Spinoza, written by MacIntyre, in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*; and the most recent book of Goldstein, *Betraying Spinoza: The renegade Jew who gave us modernity*.
2. This point is also stressed in Brinker (2004), where he states that: ‘Spinoza’s political philosophy is usually recognized as the first classical model of enlightened liberal thought, recommending a complete separation of state and church’ (p. 167).
3. See for example in the ‘Statement of Purpose’ of *Free Inquiry*, the journal of the ‘Council for Secular Humanism’ in the US, as well as in Paul Kurtz’s books (1982, 1988, 1994).
4. On the nature and characteristics of *eudaimonistic* ethical theories see: Hanna Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*; David Norton, *Personal Destinies: A Philosophy of Ethical Individualism*; and Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*.
5. ‘Of Human Freedom’ (book V), as a development from and overcoming of ‘Human Bondage’ (book IV), is the culmination of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. As put by Feuer in his *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, ‘The free man is the central conception of Spinoza’s ethics’ (p. 199). The same idea is conveyed by Yosef Ben-Shlomo, who states that ‘the liberation of man is the ultimate end of Spinoza’s philosophy,’ in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spinoza*, p. 50.

6. A conception that Nietzsche introduced in *Schopenhauer as Educator* and later developed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.
7. Nietzsche admired Spinoza, felt strong kinship with him, and even though he objected to his rationalism he considered him one of his philosophical ancestors. On similarities between their philosophies, especially between Spinoza's 'conatus' and Nietzsche's 'will to power', see Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics* as well as Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical philosophy*. On Nietzsche, in general, and on Zarathustra, in particular, as educators, see: Nimrod Aloni, *Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche's healing and edifying philosophy*; Jacob Golomb, 'Nietzsche's Early Educational Thought'; Haim Gordon, 'Nietzsche's Zarathustra as Educator'; Eliyau Rosenow, 'Nietzsche's Educational Dynamite' and his 'Nietzsche's Concept of Education'.
8. On these elements see Feuer, in *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, that 'to found a sect was far from Spinoza's intention; there was no longing in him for dociles, no craving for the reassurance of admirers' (p. 257).
9. True, complete and lasting happiness is what Spinoza declares to be seeking in the opening section of *On The Improvement Of The Understanding*, and it is in Book V of his *Ethics* that he portrays how the highest form of knowledge can provide personal well being and blessedness as well as social solidarity and cooperation.
10. Even though the acts of caring are motivated, according to Spinoza, mainly by cognitive considerations, the nature and implications of caring are not substantially different from the affective or feminine notion of caring advanced by Nel Noddings in *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*; that is, concern for and promotion of the well being and self-actualization of others.
11. Spinoza cherished most his intellectual independence and looked for no social status or a leading role in academia, hence he declined the opportunity offered to him to serve as a professor of philosophy at the prestigious university of Heidelberg. On Spinoza's personal integrity and intellectual honesty see for example: Joseph Ratner, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*; Irmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*; and in Rebecca Goldstein: *Betraying Spinoza: The renegade Jew who gave us modernity*.
12. In her recent *Betraying Spinoza*, Rebecca Goldstein, like most other commentators on Spinoza, stresses the point that in his private life—unlike many other great philosophers—'he was a lovable man' (p. 47), and she quotes from Russell's famous *History of Western Philosophy* that 'Spinoza is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers'.
13. De Dijn (2004) explains that we should consider Spinoza's ethical theory in the broadest sense as 'the pursuit of real well-being, real happiness' (p. 37), and that 'Spinoza's ethics, properly speaking, turns out to be more related to the issues of self-loss and self-realization—issues intrinsically linked to the search for a meaningful life' (p. 39).
14. Yakira (2004) phrases this problem as follows: 'How is it possible, we are endlessly asked, to reconcile human freedom with causal determinism and logical necessitarianism, both of which are doctrines that Spinoza adopts' (p. 70).
15. On some characteristics of the liberating or emancipatory approach in education see Soltis & Fenstermacher, *Approaches to Teaching*. See also on the nature of traditional and neo-humanist liberal education: Charles Bailey, *Beyond the Present and the Particular: A theory of liberal education*; Robert Hutchings, *Great Books: The foundation of a liberal education*; and T. S. Eliot, 'What a is Classic?'
16. See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*. On his views and their relevance to education see Nimrod Aloni, *Enhancing Humanity*, pp. 31–32.
17. On Spinoza's elitist views on the problems of 'common people', 'the multitude' or 'the masses,' see chapter 5 of Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*, as well as in Frankena, 'Spinoza's New Morality'. Nietzsche stresses this point in almost all his books, referring to the phenomena of 'Slave Morality,' and of the 'Herd Animal'; Ortega in his book on *The Revolt of the Masses*, referred to the 'mass man'; and Sartre addressed the man of the masses especially in *Anti-Semite and Jew*.

18. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza's theory of knowledge consists of three stages—sensual, rational-scientific, and intuitive-holistic. In his *On the Improvement of the Understanding*, he refers to four stages, in which the first two—randomly gathered information and the sensual—were later combined into the first stage presented in the *Ethics*. Yovel and Segal (2004) address this issue already in the Preface to their collection, speaking of *freedom* as the climatic stage that is achieved by 'a mature *ratio*'.
19. On Spinoza's philosophy of 'courage and self-affirmation' see Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, especially in ch. 1. Examples of the life-affirming approach and the importance of self-assertion in modern educational thought occur in: Nietzsche, 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra'; A. S. Neill, *Summerhill*; Bertrand Russell, *Education and the Good life*.
20. A term coined by Richard Bernstein, in *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, and later defended in his *The New Constellation: The ethical-political horizons of modernity/postmodernity*.
21. On this point it is worth quoting Steven Nadler from his *Spinoza's Ethics*: 'It is life guided by reason and based in knowledge where an individual does only what is truly useful not to himself, but also aids others in their own pursuit of perfection ... a moral philosophy that is virtue oriented. What matters most is not the actions that one performs or even the intentions that one has, but above all the kind of person one is and the character one possesses (p. 225).

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