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## Thinking with Spinoza about education

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### Introduction

Thinking with Spinoza about education involves thinking with and beyond his authored texts, situating his work within the tradition of Western thought, and exploring his contribution to the philosophy of education. This endeavour also involves taking up the multitude of secondary sources that have already put Spinoza to work in diverse and divergent manners, building on previous applications and interpretations of his ideas to show their relevance to contemporary educational problems.

The task of thinking with Spinoza today demands both a close historical reading of original texts and the courage to make sense of concepts that originated in entirely different conditions. Key Spinozist terms such as intuitive knowledge, essence and eternity, for example, must be historicized while also being put to work in thinking through new problems (Lord, 2015; Voss, 2017). Spinoza's thought is "a living anomaly that anticipates and can construct a different path for the development of thought and liberty" (Negri, 2013, p.15). This living anomaly continues to provide conditions that subversively open new paths for thought. New readings emerge, and bring forth new relevance. Deleuze (1988,1990), for instance, helped articulate issues with Hegel's reading of Spinoza, underscoring the affirmative and constitutive nature of Spinoza's naturalism, while Sharp (2011) moves away from humanist readings and finds textual support for an ontology of inhuman forces.

Thinking with Spinoza about education is a practical affair that involves weaving historical threads together to make sense of the textured fabric of teaching and learning across different times and spaces. Authors in this collection resist a "charitable reading" that falls prey to the desire to imagine that "Spinoza got it right". For instance, Spinoza has been considered the democratic philosopher of the multitude, but it is evident that his theory of power (as affect, and as directly corresponding to a particular image of right) troubles simplistic associations between his political theory and radical democracy (Kwek, 2015). Instead, each author, in their different way, performs careful readings and historical analyses that creatively build the case for the contemporary relevance of Spinoza's concepts through a method that seeks the incongruences as well as the sympathetic lines of thought (Melamed, 2013b).

Following in the spirit of Spinoza's practical philosophy, the authors explore such questions as: How can Spinoza's work support a robust ethical framework for contemporary education? How does Spinozist ontology help us to study student agency as distributed across material-affective assemblages? How can education

research attend to the more-than-human? How might Spinoza's notion of power and *conatus* be used to make sense of power relations in schools? And how can Spinoza's adherence to the concept of necessity help us theorize the contingency of learning? These questions are addressed by modulating Spinoza's concepts in a new milieu, reshaping and reanimating them through a contemporary encounter with his thought.

### **Key themes**

Spinoza's (1632-1677) monism, in which mind and body are expressions of one substance, was developed as an alternative to Cartesian dualist ontology. Spinoza identifies God with nature, rejects providence, and insists that humans are subject to the same laws of nature as is everything else. He argues tirelessly to separate reason from faith, to separate religion from state, and to defend the liberty of thought and speech. He was ostracized for his radical ideas, although his work subsequently influenced many thinkers, including philosophers, ecologists, sociologists, activity theorists, and political activists.

Spinoza's arguments find their pragmatic strength in his turn to the individual and their actions in relation to others; that is, in the individual's enslavement to passions and the possibility of attaining freedom through collective belonging (Dahlbeck, 2016; Duffy, 2006). Thus, LeBuffe (2010) argues that Spinoza offers a "moral theory" as part of his political theory and critique of religion. Joy is the threshold emotion that marks this collective achievement, distinguishing intuitive knowledge from mere reason. Joy in learning is not simply a means by which we affirm knowledge, but pertains to the content or essence of such knowledge (Curley, 1969, 1973). In other words, only intuitive knowledge is knowledge of the actual essence of nature, an essence that refuses capture by any human image. Intuitive *self-knowledge* becomes entirely singular then, insofar as it pertains to the unique essence of the particular modal expression in which we participate (Soyarslan, 2013). And yet, this singular essence is also shared and *transindividual*, in the spirit of a new seventeenth century naturalism or empiricism (Martin, 2008; Negri, 2013).

Spinoza posits *conatus* at the center of this ethics, a term that designates a body's power to affect and be affected. Although *conatus* is associated with individuals and their attainment of perfection, it is not the simplistic and reductive Hobbesian will to persevere in itself, but rather the perseverance of perfection more generally (Youpa, 2003). *Conatus* is not focused only on the achievement of the organic body, but on a more general worlding process. This leads to insightful complications for those who extend the notion of individual and *conatus* to the state, larger communities, and institutions, as it suggests correlations between self-destruction and milieu-destruction that might be relevant to our current concerns with the Anthropocene. Rice (1990) suggests that Spinoza's concept of the individual (and individuation) can be extended to think more complex physical bodies (perhaps ecological and cosmological), but should not be applied to sociological or political 'bodies'. These latter bodies, he claims, are for Spinoza structured according to human laws deduced from "human passional interaction" and thereby must be considered distinct from the laws of nature (Rice, 1990, p.278). This point is crucial

if we are to avoid metaphysical reification of social aggregates and sustain the openness of the political collective.

Deleuze (1988, 1990) characterizes Spinoza as a materialist, an immoralist, and an atheist. Spinoza would doubtless have refused such characterization, and yet Spinoza is explicitly anti-humanist in his refusal of anthropocentrism and in his pursuit of a more-than-human image of thought (Melamed, 2013a). Rather than celebrating human will and transcendent ideas, Spinoza directs our attention to the body and the *movement* of thought, emphasizing how thought is non-human and how all matter has the power to affect and be affected in varying degrees. Rather than subscribing to a morality of transcendent values, Spinoza proposes an ethics of encountering without judgment, an affirmation of joy and the devaluation of moral law. And in the spirit, if not the name, of atheism, Spinoza submits to a rigorous scientific approach and resists the all-too-easy turn to mystification when constructing his metaphysics.

Building on, but diverging from, Deleuze's interpretation, contemporary readings of Spinoza often emphasize a relational and inclusive ontology in which the more-than-human collective is theorized and recognized (Braidotti, 2013). Spinoza offers an ethics well-suited to the current shift in the social sciences and post-humanities, as scholars turn to the intensive force of bodies and the expansive movement of non-human thought (Bennett, 2010; Dolphijn & Van der Tuin, 2012). This paradigm shift troubles conventional theories of learning, moving beyond notions of "distributed learning" that have been pervasive across the last century (Sorensen, 2011). Scholars in education have mobilized this approach in their study of affect and resistance (Hickey-Moody & Malins, 2006). And yet, the question of what constitutes an *ethics* adequate to the new paradigm shift remains underexplored and demands attention.

### **Overview**

This collection pursues the lines of thought described above, rigorously attending to the nuances of the original texts, while tracking significant implications of Spinozist thought in current education policy and practice. We are confident that this special issue makes important theoretical contributions to the study of education, because the authors respond to the burgeoning interest in Spinoza within education research. This work builds on the many interdisciplinary networks of Spinoza scholarship – see, for instance, the online Spinoza Research Network <https://spinozaresearchnetwork.wordpress.com/> - and further develops the insightful reworking of his ideas by scholars such as Gilles Deleuze, Etienne Balibar, Antonio Negri and feminist scholars such as Genevieve Lloyd, Moira Gatens, Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, and Elizabeth Grosz.

We received about 40 abstracts in response to the call for this issue, reflecting the growing interest in this topic. Abstracts were submitted from all over the world - Israel, Saudi Arabia, Ireland, England, US, Canada, France, Spain, Brazil, Australia, Chile, and Germany. The selection of just eight articles was difficult. The articles included here cover a range of topics pertaining to the ethico-political project of

education. The eight authors are accomplished scholars in philosophy, four working in philosophy departments, and four in education departments.

The first article in this collection, by Maxime Rovere, describes Spinoza's own education in Amsterdam under the tutelage of the Jesuit teacher Franciscus Van den Enden (1602 - 1674). Rovere shows that Van Den Enden used theatre and drama as part of his pedagogy, and that such pedagogy may have partially shaped Spinoza's theory of affect and embodiment. She argues that this pedagogy addresses children's emotional investment in ideas and utterances, shifting the focus from titles and honours to more affective dimensions of learning informed by a commitment to collective practices of feeling and thinking.

The second article, by Aislinn O'Donnell, elaborates Spinoza's philosophical arguments in order to show precisely how they serve to shift discourses and frameworks in philosophy of education and educational policy and practice. O'Donnell argues that a properly Spinozist understanding of education focuses on the practice of experimentation that undermines idealist images of perfection and draws attention to more-than-human learning events.

The third article by Cristiano Rezende, performs a close exegetical reading of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* from the perspective of Spinoza's gesture toward "a doctrine of children's education". Rezende argues that the emendation of the intellect entails a pedagogy directed at the immanence of error and mistaken belief, grounding education in the "correction" of the body, but without the usual moral demotion of the body that typically accompanies such learning.

The fourth article, by Michael Roth, tracks the Spinozist lineage through Vygotsky's social psychology, arguing that Vygotsky must be studied as a Spinozist philosopher of embodied learning. Roth argues that thinking with Spinoza about learning sciences, technology and mathematics can help to open up a post-constructivist research agenda in education.

The fifth article, by Joanna Dennis, examines the development of co-operative schools within the United Kingdom, which have proved popular with teachers and parents. Using a theory of co-operative power developed from Spinoza, Dennis explores how these schools have emerged, with and against recent reform agendas, using narratives of hope and resistance.

The sixth article, by Ian Leask, unpacks Althusser's use of Spinoza in his political framing of education as the ultimate "ideological state apparatus", mapping the links between imagination and ideology. Leask argues that Spinoza's thought can help to shift our attention away from the individual teacher who struggles against this apparatus to the class as multitude and primary unit of pedagogical practice.

The seventh article, by Maria Tamboukou, draws on Gatens' and Lloyd's (1999) use of Spinoza to argue that education can be an ethico-political practice, 'a collective process of *becoming-free*' (1999, 146). She analyzes archival material produced as part of the women's worker education movement in New York and Paris spanning the period 1830-1950, to examine the role of joy and affect in educational empowerment.

The final article, by Lesley LeGrange, questions the aspirations of the Deep Ecology Movement to expand morality to the more-than-human world using Spinoza to critique the anthropomorphizing of nature. LeGrange argues that Deleuze's Spinozism can be read as preserving the ethico-normative distinctiveness of the human and he argues that this distinctiveness is central for (post)human education.

Finally, Anna Hickey-Moody offers a brief synthesizing response to the collection, focusing on the ways in which the articles explore Spinoza's thought about the role of reason and imagination in teaching, learning and education policy. This encounter with the articles collected here provokes us to continue the task of thinking about education with the living anomaly of Spinoza's thought.

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