la vie des idées

To Educate is to Teach to Die

by Benoît Peuch

Through a meditation on what might constitute a Spinozist education, Pascal Sévérac considers the passage from childhood to adulthood as that from one nature to another and organizes the rules of a good education around the notion of affectivity.

A review of: Pascal Sévérac, *Renaître. Enfance et éducation à partir de Spinoza*, Hermann, 156 p., 2021, 22 €.

Spinoza is not an author one usually comes across in books on the philosophy of education. Unlike some of his contemporaries like Locke or Comenius, he makes almost no pedagogical prescriptions, and the theme of childhood occupies only a marginal place in his work. Yet, while it is certainly problematic to ponder over education *in* Spinoza's work, there is nothing to prevent us from reflecting on it *from* Spinoza's perspective. In this spirit, Pascal Sévérac proposes an original reading experiment: To revisit the *Ethics* as a treatise on education. This reading requires that we treat the passages in which Spinoza evokes the condition of the child as the core of his work and that we assign to the rest of his thought the function of elucidating the conceptual depth of these fragments. On this basis, Sévérac shows that Spinoza's philosophy leads to considering the nature of the child as a problem: Before subscribing to the endless prescriptions, drawn from a naive reading of Rousseau, according to which education must "respect the nature of the child," one ought to ask certain questions. In what sense can we speak of the "nature" of the child? Does the child share this nature with the adult or is this nature specific to him? If the latter is the case, what does it mean to consider education as a change of nature?

The Learning of a Body in Equilibrium

The child is a paradoxical being. Unable at first to feed himself, to walk, to speak, he is terribly impotent. Endowed with exceptional plasticity, he never stops growing, changing, adapting, to an extent that largely exceeds the possibilities of the adult. How might we interpret this duality, whereby the child is a being who can do nothing, but who can become everything? Answering this question from the perspective of Spinoza implies that we first consider the child's condition as a bodily condition. One should recall that for Spinoza, the notion of the body goes beyond the simple material dimension of the individual and concerns more generally the way he is embodied in his environment and the way he is affected by it. In the child, this affectivity is expressed bodily through imitative behavior. From a Spinozist perspective, the specificity of childish imitation is that it is without preference: The child spontaneously imitates all those he sees. Spinoza speaks of *equilibrium*, a term that designates an affective neutrality opposed to the affective disequilibrium of the adult, whose passions lead him to privilege certain aspects of his environment while being insensitive to others. When the child imitates, he leaves his state of equilibrium for a while to reproduce the affective disequilibrium of adults. Here to imitate does not simply mean to mimic gestures, but to reproduce a certain way of being affected by one's environment. Sévérac also observes that this affective imitation is not merely behavioral, but also emotional: The imitation of behaviors related to sorrow or joy (facial contraction, crying or laughing, irregular or deep breathing, etc.) can be enough to elicit the emotional experience.

From these considerations, Sévérac draws two consequences for a Spinozist philosophy of education. The first is that this notion of equilibrium allows to positively consider the nature of the child in a way that distinguishes it from that of the adult: It is because the child and the adult are not affected by the environment in the same way that they can be said to be of a different nature. The second is that imitation, understood as *affective* imitation, makes possible a model of reflexive learning whereby the child individualizes himself through socialization. By dint of imitation, the child ends up internalizing certain affective forms, and thereby individualizes himself as a being with his own affective disequilibrium. Through this internalization, imitation can reverse itself into reflexivity: By recognizing in others an affective behavior similar to his own, the child becomes able to consider others as his fellow humans, which is to say, as beings who, like him, are subject to joy and sorrow. Let us point out, however, that this passage from imitation-equilibrium to imitation-learning presupposes a

theory that accounts for the way in which the child comes to appropriate the affective behaviors he imitates: To become a theory of learning, the theory of plasticity requires a theory of memory. While Sévérac clearly recognizes the importance of memory in education (p. 44), it is regrettable that he does not take the time to describe its conditions: Is memory simply the product of the child's organic development or does it already presuppose a specific social intervention?

To Die in Order to Be Reborn

While the purpose of education is to bring the child to abandon his childish nature in favor of an adult nature, this process cannot be understood merely by observing the organic development of the child. Having a body capable of doing many things is a necessary but not sufficient condition to rise to the status of an accomplished member of humanity: This body must also be connected to a rational mind.

From a Spinozist perspective, to educate the mind is not merely to inculcate intellectual principles. It is also to make the body more conscious of the way it is affected by its environment, and thereby to make its affectivity more reflective, even more intelligent: For a body endowed with consciousness is also a body that acts in accordance with what it reflects. According to Sévérac, this affective transformation can be thought of as a killing of the affective nature of the child. Such an interpretation evidently implies that one considers death as a process of destruction that does not exclude the possibility of a rebirth. This is illustrated in Spinoza through the example of a Spanish poet who, after he is struck by amnesia, is unable to recognize himself as the author of his former poems (p. 65): The affective life expressed in these works is no longer his own, but that of an individual who ceased to live when the thread of his memory broke. Despite the continuity of his organic existence, the amnesia caused such a radical rupture in his affectivity that all future life could only take the form of a new life. Now, according to Spinoza, this affective rupture resembles very much that which men and women experience when they pass from the state of childhood to that of adulthood: "A man of ripe age," he writes, "can only be persuaded that he too has been an infant by the analogy of other men.[1]" But the affective transformation produced by education is far from being as brutal and arbitrary as that generated by amnesia: It is a slow process that results in the emergence of rational affectivity.

[1] Spinoza, *Ethics* IV, proposition 39, scolie.

Sévérac proposes to consider this process of affective rebirth of the child as a work of "re-education" comparable to the work of the physiotherapist who patiently restores the stiff body to its full capacity through massages and stretching exercises. In the case of the educator, affective re-education involves the creation of an environment that can stimulate the child's affectivity while encouraging the development of his reflexive abilities.

Learning to Resist

For Sévérac, Spinoza prefigures the positions of modern pedagogues like Vygotski or Wallon by prompting us to consider the child as an innately social being (p. 88): Here the work of education is less to enable the child to enter the society in which he already finds himself—the society in which he was born—than to transform the way he participates in it. This transformation depends on how educators organize the child's environment to orient his affective becoming in a particular direction. In this sense, there is not only one form of education: Several arrangements are possible that can variously shape the becoming of the child. Sévérac identifies three models of education in Spinoza's work (p. 108).

The first is that of "*theocratic* education": It is exemplified by Moses teaching his people to show absolute respect for the authority of a punishing and rewarding God. For Sévérac, this education, which keeps people in a state of childhood by removing from them any desire for emancipation, could be qualified as totalitarian in our modern categories.

The second model, referred to as "*ordinary* education," brings the child to live in the pursuit of his own interest, to seek honors by envying those of others. For Sévérac, this individualistic education can be described as liberal or meritocratic.

The third model corresponds to what Spinoza calls "*good* education." It is based on a notion of honor different from that of the previous model: This honor is not tied to envy, but to a spiritual self-ennoblement linked to the realization of the desire for emancipation which implies renouncing the desire for the exclusive love of God (p. 114). Here, the emancipation of others is an essential component of individual emancipation. Sévérac calls this model "ethical education," but it would not be too

much of a stretch to say that he could also have qualified it as democratic. In my view, the most interesting contribution of the book lies in how Sévérac shows that this ethical education turns children into individuals who are inclined to resist the expression of despotic power (p. 110). What becomes clear here is that democratic affectivity is not characterized merely by a desire for equality, but also by a profound aversion to inequality.

Towards an Ethical Education

The reflection developed by Sévérac does not pertain to the history of the philosophy of education. It does not, for instance, explore how Spinoza's concepts resonate or clash with those of Comenius, Locke, or even Rousseau. At the end of the last chapter, Sévérac explicitly points us in another direction: The point is to draw insights from the philosophy of Spinoza that can increase our critical reflexivity on our own educational practices by inviting us to conceive of ways to make them more ethical. To think of education from the perspective of Spinoza is to think of it from the notion of affectivity, which is to say, from the way that the child individualizes himself through entering into a relationship with his environment. For the educator, the consequence of this proposal is that it does not suffice to conceive of educational practices in terms of efficacy to determine which are the *good* practices. The use of teaching devices based, for instance, on competition or rewards can certainly help the child to acquire certain targeted skills. Such devices, however, also encourage the child to act in an individualistic manner. Without abandoning the demand for efficacy, we must question the affective dispositions that our practices foster in our children or in students by asking ourselves how we can instruct them while also bringing them to act in cooperation with others rather than in opposition to them.

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