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To cite this article: Aislinn O'Donnell (2018) Spinoza, experimentation and education: How things teach us, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50:9, 819-829, DOI: [10.1080/00131857.2017.1382351](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1382351)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1382351>



Published online: 12 Oct 2017.



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Spinoza, experimentation and education: How things teach us

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on three primary issues i. The conceptual resources offered by Spinoza to challenge the idealism and perfectionism underpinning much educational theory and dominant educational imaginaries; ii. His descriptions of a non-ideal, practical and systematic approach to developing understanding that could be applied to educational theorising and practice; and iii. The potential for a different vision of education premised upon understanding the human as simply a part of nature. Decentring the human and treating affective and mental life as one would lines, planes, and bodies, as Spinoza claims we must in *Ethics*, invites another way of thinking about the politics and ethics of educational practice. Enacting experimental approaches to pedagogy produces new subjectivities and also invents new connections and relations between different bodies and different ideas. I argue that a properly Spinozist understanding of education would require it to be understood through practices of experimentation, in short, developing capabilities to compose relations in such a way that one also develops a the awareness of oneself as finite, dependent, vulnerable and as a part of nature. Seemingly paradoxically then, having understood how and that one is determined, and which bodies agree or disagree with one, one becomes more capable of agency and thus an ethical life.

KEYWORDS

Spinoza; education; experience; pedagogy; imagination; affect

Introduction

This essay focuses on three primary issues: i. The conceptual resources offered by Spinoza to challenge the idealism and perfectionism underpinning much educational theory and dominant educational imaginaries; ii. His descriptions of a non-ideal, practical and systematic approach to developing understanding that could be applied to educational theorising and practice; and iii. The potential for a different vision of education premised upon a decentred and singularised conception of the human that does not position the human as a 'dominion in a dominion' but instead seeks to understand it contextually, relationally and as a degree of power. For Spinoza, we should understand ourselves as singular things, complex relational individuals that are more or less active, and more or less capable of affecting and being affected. This presentation of a 'Spinozist' philosophy of education does not bracket his complex arguments about mind, body, the affects, experience, reason, thought, extension and God or Nature, even when it describes self-consciously anthropomorphic creative and experimental pedagogical strategies that are resonant with some of the feigning and imaginings that we find in Parts IV and V of *Ethics*. It argues that these strategies are introduced in order to effect a decentring of the human and aims to initiate an exploration of some of the ways in which non-human singular things might teach us. This approach remains faithful to Spinoza's philosophy of immanence which suggests that all individuals

are animate: 'For the things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are nevertheless animate' (E IIP13S) It outlines the implications of Spinoza's ontology and epistemology for classroom life, in particular his fundamental arguments that we are part of nature, that we are born into ignorance, and that we ought to deduce practices from the condition of human nature, such nature understood not in an isolated empirical manner but rather from the perspective of God. Gatens (2009a) explains the importance of beginning with God, or Nature when she says, '[a]ccording to Spinoza, we cannot know what we are—our limits, our powers, or our "good"—unless we have an understanding of the whole of which we are merely a part' (p. 5).

Much of this essay is spent elaborating the detail of Spinoza's philosophical arguments in order to show how they serve to shift discourses and frameworks in philosophy of education, educational theory and educational practice, and how they demand of us deeper consideration of the ontological and epistemological commitments expressed through policy and practice. A properly Spinozist understanding of education requires it to be understood in terms of heterogeneous practices of experimentation. Creating and enacting experimental approaches to pedagogy produces new subjectivities and also invents new connections and relations. This entails developing practices of composing relations in such a way that one develops a growing awareness of oneself as finite, dependent, vulnerable *and* as a part of nature. Seemingly paradoxically then, having understood how and that one is determined, and which bodies agree or disagree with one, one becomes more capable of agency. Composing joyous relations becomes the first aim of education, just as it is the aim of politics. It is through active affects that we develop our powers of reason (common notions) that allow us to discern the relations between our body and mind and other bodies. These practices of composition sensibillise us to our condition as bodies, and help us to understand that we exist *in* thought, rather than 'have' ideas as though the mind and ideas were different in kind. They work creatively with existing imaginaries in order to enable us to open to more expansive ways of thinking, feeling, seeing and experiencing. By focusing on the *Ethics*, I admittedly bracket consideration of Spinoza's own comments on education and his position in respect of public education (see Dahlbeck, 2017) but this is in order to focus on the pedagogical implications of Spinoza's philosophy, and to make some gestures towards a properly Spinozist philosophy of education.

Against universals: Perfection, reality and singular essences

Spinoza's swift dismissal of the idea of 'universals' as an illegitimate extrapolation from images offers a significant challenge for education, educational theory and philosophy of education. The analysis of 'universals' takes place in Part IV of the *Ethics* where he deals with the question of human bondage. Throughout the *Ethics*, Spinoza (1677/1985) criticises abstract imaginings, or 'universals', drawing attention to their arbitrary nature and the ways in which they merely map preferences whilst simultaneously making deeper claims to veracity and credibility; at most they are models that each of us constructs as a function of our individual preferences, histories, and dispositions. He remarks, 'They regard these universal ideas as models of things, and believe that Nature (which they think does nothing except for the sake of some end) looks to them, and sets them before itself as models' (E IVPref). Perfection evolved, he says, in the following way.

But after men began to form universal ideas, and devise models of houses, buildings, towers, etc., and to prefer some models of things to others, it came about that each one called perfect what he saw agreed with the universal idea he had formed of this kind of thing, and imperfect, what he saw agreed less with the model he had conceived, even though its maker thought he had entirely finished it. (E IVPref)

Thus such models are called more or less perfect 'more from prejudice than true knowledge of those things' (E IVPref). Furthermore, the 'idea that Nature sins or fails and produces imperfect things' is simply a 'fiction' (E IVPref). In E IIP40S1, *Transcendentals* and *Universals* are criticised as empty terms that are generated because bodies have been affected in different ways, therefore such terms do no more than express individual dispositions. Furthermore, Nature, he argues, does nothing for the sake of an end. By defining Substance or God as an *immanent* cause, he rejects any imputation of teleology, final

cause or purpose to Nature. Rather, what are ordinarily presented as final causes are, in fact, motivators, or efficient causes. There is no ultimate reason that any particular thing or mode exists, even if it can be understood, even in principle, through chains of causal determination. This is because the essence of modes does not involve necessary existence (my life, your life, this glass, that bumblebee)—they could just as well have never existed. Nor is there any aim or *telos* towards which things tend, including humans. In short, there is no ultimate perfection or end towards which any contingent thing aims. What are the implications of this for how we understand education?

If one were to revise commonplace understandings of the concept of perfection as a standard or ideal and re-define it, as Spinoza does, in terms of movements between greater or lesser reality, it would be difficult to make an argument for classrooms or educational policies that assess students against a general standard or norm because Spinoza's definition of a singular actual essence (*actualis essentia*) sees each student as being as perfect as he or she can be given how he or she has been determined, and thus no longer comparable with peers in competitive or normalising matrices. I am sympathetic here to Dahlbeck's (2016) careful appraisal of the risk of idealisation in education and the need for sensitivity to the actual living conditions of teacher and students. As a consequence, approaches to evaluation have to be responsive to the diversity of lived affective experiences and become more attuned to the possibilities of experimental pedagogies for extending our capacities to affect and be affected. We might then find better fictions to orient education's imaginaries, and come to witness an increased capacity for common notions (what Spinoza understands as true universals rather than abstract universals), or reason, through creating the conditions for agreeable encounters. This process would also involve the slow shift towards the intuitive knowledge of the self as a singular thing, a part of nature. Such experimental exercises in education would be premised on gradients rather than standards of perfection.

This is not a matter of will or control. Spinoza's philosophy does not equate autonomy with sovereignty, self-sufficiency and individualism. Instead his relational conception of autonomy recognises the social nature of the self (Armstrong, 2009). This position is clear from Letter 32 to Oldenberg in which he addresses the relation of parts and wholes through the example of the worm living in the blood. He asks Oldenberg to feign:

that there is a little worm living in the blood which is capable of distinguishing by sight the particles of the blood, of lymph, of chyle, and the like, and capable of observing by reason how each particle, when it encounters another, either bounces back, or communicates a part of its motion, and so on. Indeed, it would live in this blood as we do in this part of the universe, and would consider each particle of the blood as a whole, not as a part. (Spinoza, 2016, p. 19).

Armstrong (2009) argues that Spinoza thinks that although we initially imagine ourselves as self-contained wholes, if we 'could expand the horizons of our knowledge, we would be able to adjust our understanding of our status and see ourselves as parts of a more encompassing, internally integrated, and harmonious whole' (p. 50). She suggests that the two perspectives offer very different kinds of relations between self and other: one is isolationist, abstracted and delusional, imagining the self to have free will, and the other fosters the capacity for sociability and deepens understanding of interdependence and dependence. Lloyd (1998) comments on this in her elaboration of the education of the imagination.

To undertake the project of educating the imagination requires an experimental approach and creative methodologies that can take seriously what Amelie Rorty (1990) calls Spinoza's particularism and what Balibar (1996/1997) refers to as singularisation: given our embodied histories, associations, and *ingenium*—our individuality and temperament—each of us will have different dispositions and capacities. This requires a model of thinking about education as collaborative experimentation and singularisation.

'[E]ssence' does not refer to a general idea of humanity, an abstract concept under which all individuals are subsumed and their differences neutralised. On the contrary it refers to the power that singularises each individual, conferring upon him a unique destiny. (Balibar, 1985, p. 107)

An essence is not an abstract view on a thing; indeed Spinoza tries strenuously to avoid speaking of a human essence (or nature) (E IIA1). It is simply the acting principle of the thing, that without which the

thing cannot be or be conceived. Conversely, an essence cannot be conceived outside of the thing of which it is the essence (E IIP105). There is no hierarchy of essence over existence, and an essence does not have the status of being 'possible' before it is the essence of an actually existing thing (E IID2). It is an affirmation, not something to be subsumed under an abstract universal (E IIA1). So too, modes are not inherently passive: once they exist they have a power of acting and a capacity to be affected that is their *conatus*, their *actualis essentia* (actual essence) and an expression of God's power (*potentia*) to exist. Insofar as they are limited and finite beings, they are caused to exist by other modes and are necessarily constrained and limited, part of a complex network of relations. They exploit their power of existing by operating on reality (*operari*) but their power of acting (*conatus*) is understood as participation in the power of God as Naturing Nature—no longer wholly passive (Macherey, 1995).

How might classrooms look were experimentation to be the primary method of educators? They could become sites of ecological thinking (Code, 2006) displacing the centrality of the human understood in identitarian terms as a 'dominion in a dominion'. Depersonalising education by allowing for an intimate distance from the visceral undergoing of subjective life can open a space for more playful and lively encounters of bodies and ideas (Bennett, 2010). Classrooms could become places in which teachers recognise that a depressed or a bored mind is registered in the body, and a sick or compulsorily still body is registered in the mind, and begin to think more carefully about the relations of minds and bodies, reading them through a Spinozist register as indicative of variations in existence and power.

Body and mind: The remnants of dualism in classroom life

Philosophers of education seeking to engage productively with Spinoza's epistemology and non-dualist ontology would do well to begin with a critical reflection on the legacies of Cartesianism in classrooms, including the ways in which this legacy continues to shape pedagogical practice and educational theorising. To ascertain whether Cartesianism remains a force in educational and social imaginaries, it is useful to consider questions like the following: Are minds and bodies treated in classroom practice as though they were separate substances? Do we assume that minds can cause or even force bodies to do things (and vice versa); in short, do we presuppose causal relations, for example, through discourses on the will? Are minds treated as though they were immediately accessible to scrutiny? How is knowledge conceptualised? Is there any sense in which the body must be cared for as the object of the idea that is the mind? Does the presupposition that students (and teachers) have free will affect pedagogical approaches and expectations of education? Are bodies other than human bodies seen as relevant to pedagogical practice and if so, in what way? If we know the world directly, even if only partially, through our experience, how ought we understand education? And what is relationship between this approach and constructivism?

Spinoza states that 'the human mind does not know the human body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the body is affected' (E IIP19) adding, 'The mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body' (E IIP23) so what we experience through imagining is the way in which other bodies (and ideas) affect us in our specificity, that is, in respect of our individual stories and histories. This tells us something of our character and our capacities, and enables us to begin to locate the relations that will nourish us, 'composing' with our minds and bodies, as well as to identify those relations that destroy us. Such claims in relation to mind and body could have considerable implications for educators were they to be taken seriously and literally. Classrooms and schools would be designed with sensitivity to the ecological and experimental potentials of institutional spaces in order to create the conditions for more concrete and practical ways of operationalizing the diverse lines of singularisation of all bodies and minds. 'A body does not produce an effect without being affected by it: sensibility is a property of power, not a faculty which would be reserved for organisms' (Zourabichvili, 1994). Bodies cannot be understood separately from their affects and the capacities of bodies are expressed in their temperament (*temperamentum*): a complex matter for humans given the nature of our bodies and minds.

Spinoza claims not only can we not understand our situation without knowing adequately the nature of a body (E IIP13S), including our own, but that *ideas* differ amongst themselves and some ideas, or minds, contain more reality, or more power, than others. This is argued in E IIP11, 'The idea of any thing that increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our Body's power of acting, increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our Mind's power of thinking'. Zourabichvili 1994 explains by saying that 'physiology in Spinoza's sense *experiments* on singular bodies' (p. 90, my emphasis), distinguishing it from anatomy which posits an ideal schema.

Let's consider this in practice. Multiplying capacities to affect and be affected transforms at once the body and the mind, but because the individual body-mind is not simple it cannot be forecast which bodies and minds will have affinities with one another: the composition of relations is a complex, unpredictable and open affair. Growing our awareness of this helps to change the way in which we organise our encounters, including our teaching, helping us to move from chance encounters towards a deeper understanding of how relations are composed. We learn how the fluctuations of our affective lives stem so often from our passive vulnerability and reactivity in the face of contingent encounters, and the ways in which emotions and experiences are often precipitated by the confused ways in which we imagine other bodies and our own. Through this exposure to other bodies we come to understand how our openness and vulnerability can be transformed into that power of acting that is the capacity to be affected. As Hans Jonas says 'only by being sensitive can life be active, only by being exposed can it be autonomous' (cited in Armstrong, 2009, p. 54). The process of change begins by noticing what happens in the corporeal imagination, in particular the joys that we discover, even if by chance, and by slowly effecting the transformation of our understanding through the common notions, learning to separate affects from ideas so that we don't live out our habits of being viscerally, instead learning how bodies agree and disagree with one another.

Developing an ethical sensibility with the help of experimental pedagogies that engage with and stage encounters with non-human things, things that are at once extended bodies and thinking bodies, enacts education as a practice that involves decentring the self by singularising the self. In mapping genealogies of affects, and by understanding the relations that produce us and that we produce as we navigate our lives, we come to inhabit a world that we now see as both animate and animated.

That is why Spinoza calls out to us in the way he does: you do not know beforehand what good or bad you are capable of; you do not know beforehand what a body or a mind can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination. (Deleuze, 1994, p. 125)

The composite nature of bodies and minds means that where relations of agreement arise, these cannot be premised on sameness but involve dynamic tensions of differences that shift and are composite. '[O]ur sensibilities link us together in ways that can transform individual affect into shared social value with the potential to enhance human wellbeing' (Gatens, 2015, p. 13).

So too in classrooms, knowledge itself would need to be reconceptualised so that, as Yirimiyahu Yovel (1989) states, 'knowledge is more a mode of being than of having, not something we possess but something we are or become' (p. 159, my emphasis). Vigilant and sensitive educators tend to notice the ways in which the activities of thinking and being are expressed through the living encounters of students with their subject matter and with one another, in particular those moments when thinking 'wells' and 'something happens' both collectively and for each singular student. They are attuned to the liveliness and dynamics of the space of the classroom, to the intensities of engagement of students, to joyous encounters and the slow process of shifting from passivity to becoming active which is not a matter of personal agency but the expression of 'something absolutely anonymous or impersonal, a trans-individual singularity, "specific", indifferent to the particular and the general [...]' (Zourabichvili, 1994, p. 104). If education involves, as I suggest, a process of becoming-singular, indeed if one of its primary aims is to foster the becoming-singular of students, this student self will tend to experience herself increasingly depersonalised and decentred as she comes to feel and understand that she is a part of nature, but this, curiously enough, permits of a intensified experience of existence, an openness, and a sense of one's singularity beyond visceral habits and clichés of existing. The movement of

decentring and depersonalising strangely moves us not toward anonymity but toward 'thisness' or *haecceity*—this life.

Everything thinks: Imaginative experiments in education

Education like other human conventions and institutions is populated by images that both orient and describe practice. Such images, some philosophers (Negri, 1991; Lloyd, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998; Lennon, 2004) argue, are constitutive of subjectivities, experiences and reality. A partial, confused, albeit direct, awareness of the world through the imagination is constitutive of most of our experiences, our ways of thinking, our ways of understanding ourselves, and our ways of being. Indeed, Antonio Negri 1991 argues that the sea of the imagination is the sea of existence (p. 87): we live the imagination, but the imagination also creates worlds, literally and viscerally. Negri writes, 'Politics is the metaphysics of the imagination, the metaphysics of the human constitution of reality, the world' (p. 97), but the emergence of thoughts and ideas 'is an intensely indirect, mediated and reliable process' (Saar, Callison, & Gräfe, 2015, p. 118). This is underlined by Spinoza when he notes the difference between the way in which the soldier and peasant follow different associative lines when encountering a hoof-print of a horse in the soil. The difficulty with the imagination is clear: it experiences affects without understanding causes, and it inverts effects and causes. Nonetheless, it still tells us something about the relationships between bodies and between ideas. Each one of us has affective experiences determined by our individual histories, biographies, dispositions, and encounters. At a molecular level, each of the bodies that constitute us, have their own imaginary trajectories. Collective imaginative processes affect us as a result of the inheritance of collective stories, cultures, traits, affects, movements and gestures.

This concept of the imaginary as 'affectively laden thought patterns' (Gatens and Lloyd, p. 5) helps us to understand how different modes of being in the world constitute subjectivities and experience, that is, the imaginary worlds that we inhabit enframe our possibilities for experience by narrowing the range of encounters we will have and by closing us off to other ways of being. Different imaginaries, Lennon argues, 'are therefore tied up with different ways of responding to and acting in relation to our environment' (2004, p. 114). Our associational paths and singular stories also traverse the trajectories and lives of other bodies, just as they reflect and are constitutive of different kinds of practices, marking and expressing the sociality of our encounters. Gatens and Lloyd (1999) remark '[t]he social imaginary is constitutive of, not merely reflective of, the forms of sociability in which we live' (p. 143). The productive or constitutive power of the imagination stems from the ways that our individual stories traverse and are influenced and shaped by social imaginaries, in particular through mimetic and identificatory processes. Whilst much could be said of the ways in which the imagination can be interpreted in Spinoza's work, the readings offered by Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd invite us to think of the direct ontological power of the imagination through its 'direct and strong contact with bodily reality' (Gatens & Lloyd, 1999, p. 12) as well as enabling us to understand (classroom life) in terms of the composition of relations and the possibilities for becoming active. In respect of the latter, Gatens (2009a) thinks about this process not only in terms of 'utilisations and captures' but also 'sociabilities and communities', as she reflects on the question 'How can a being take another being into its world, but while preserving or respecting the other's own relations and the world?' (Deleuze, 1988, p. 126). Imaginings can either increase or decrease our powers of acting and thinking. Even if we come to understand the relations of bodies and the constitution of our own body more adequately, this does not mean that we will no longer be affected or feel the effects of other bodies on our own. The experience of understanding does not eliminate the experience of imagining, and the essence of each individual is both constituted by and constitutes its own milieu with distinct variations in its capacity for active affects. Central to Spinoza's insight is 'that modes of knowing imply specific ways of being' (Gatens, 2009b, p. 206).

By thinking of education as experimentation and understanding that we are as perfect as we can be given how we have been determined requires a different approach to teaching. If we take up the insights of *Ethics V*, the use of conscious and deliberately anthropomorphic pedagogical fictions might enable us to understand better ourselves as a part of nature, in education and otherwise, not solely

through the mode of experiencing oneself as a singular thing, *a Deo*, but by also imagining the lives, loves, affects and stories of all things. Such little experiments in imaginative sensibility help to precipitate the experience of ‘common notions’ through an ecological approach that undoes the centrality of the human whilst simultaneously expanding our capacities to affect and be affected through feigning. It offers humility and a sense of perspective on our all-too-human condition.

This is perhaps unfamiliar territory for many contemporary philosophers. As Hodder (2012) and Ingold (2016) point out, we scarcely look at things. We humans are far more interested in humans and their society, and thus fail to consider the ways in which things make society possible, and how society and things are co-entangled. We fail to see how things depend on and are connected with other things, temporally, in their lineages, materially, symbolically, and spatially. Humans could never have evolved without things and this is not just because we are technological beings. We exist in heterogeneous assemblages and are bound to one another through various clusters and relations of bodies that themselves shift and evolve and become. Matter has its own vibrant materiality, coalescing and decaying: we know, for example, that artefacts need to be cared for. By thinking from the perspective of the thing, from the genesis of matter, and by reflecting on the co-constitutive nature of our entanglement with the world, understanding how knowledge co-evolves with the changing nature of our bodies in relation to the world, the centrality of the human is displaced and a more expansive and relational conception of assemblages of bodies supports us in thinking about the ways in which we are moved pre-cognitively.

Sharp (2011) pushes this further following Zourabichvili (2002, 1994/2012) in arguing that it is vital to think not only of a physics of bodies but also of a physics of thought. If we hold on to the sense that individuals endeavouring to persevere in their existence can be understood from both the perspective of body and the perspective of mind, each of which is an expression and manifestation of the same reality, then we must think of ideas as we think of bodies: ideas, just like bodies, strive to persevere in existence. There are ecosystems of ideas and we have to create the conditions and environments for ideas to flourish and to open to other ideas in relations of agreement rather than consensus. This “materialism” of ideas [...] underscores the exigency of joining forces to counter harmful ideas and the ways of life that correspond to them’ (Sharp, 2011, p. 58). Guattari (1989/2000) argued in *The Three Ecologies* that psychic, mental or affective life can be polluted and contaminated, or strangled by dominant ideas. Like any eco-system, collective mental life needs the lively interplay of plural ideas which includes the nonhuman ideas of other things, that is, other parts of nature. Of course, to describe the minds of other things in terms of human cognition is to err, not in kind, but in degree, for Spinoza, because of the complex organisation of human bodies and of human minds. Yet, even the stone is a mind. It perceives, resists, and has different qualities and capacities from other stones, not only due to size but materiality, as any of us know when we pick up and touch marble, granite, limestone, or slate. If the problem of mental liberation from visceral, reactive, associational and clichéd habits and patterns of thought requires finding ways of extending and developing the power of thinking, then Sharp (2011) asks us to also ‘[i]magine our ideas as living, growing, and changing things that may also require revision, critique or pruning’ (p. 74). This involves affirming that we are ‘in thought’ and that like bodies, ideas endeavour to exist and act; ideas, like bodies, need other ideas. This involves two moves—nourishing counter-ideas ‘amenable to our striving’ (Sharp, 2011, p.83), and starving certain hegemonic ideas that stifle growth and create sad passions.

If we are sensitive to this, and if we believe that things create people as much as people create things, we could begin to be more careful about our assemblages of bodies in, for example, citizenship education, in particular the role of non-human bodies and ideas in the fabrication of exclusionary identities. If things are not inert but play an active role in drawing people together, then such symbiotic co-dependency can also invite other elements such that they can shift sensibilities, or even offer a less human perspective on matters of common concern. Additionally, the idea of, and commitment to, singularising things, including ourselves, moves us from relations of enslavement and commodification of things, heightening instead the sense and sensitivity to the ways in which all things have their own lineages and stories. *Every thing thinks.*

Concluding comments

Adopting the perspective of the environmental humanities and material eco-criticism, Serpil Opperman (2013) initiates a series of anthropomorphic gestures, imagining things telling their own stories from a first person perspective. This is a matter of lyrical choreography. Other choreographies map the stories and traces left by things that will come to be deciphered in thousands of years, things that shape future histories, like coagulated plastic bags in the earth's oceans. By personifying objects she thinks we can catalyse an ethical sensibility that allows for the co-creation of cultural meanings rather than imposing or attaching to a dominant viscous narrative that clusters some bodies and excludes others. So too, Tamboukou (2016) argues that memory is not a mental activity, but rather that it is embodied, selective, with habitual lineages of body memories that bind us to the world, and we can explore how these can be inflected, renewed and expanded where they have rigidified, dessicated, or become too certain of themselves, by opening to other encounters with bodies.

What does this mean in a pedagogical setting? Deleuze (2003) uses the example of swimming 'as a conquest of existence' (p. 5), saying 'not to know how to swim is to be at the mercy of an encounter with a wave' (p. 6). He details the different moments of learning to swim, splashing about, getting smacked by a wave, reacting to the effects of encounter with the sea. But then if one knows how to swim, this means one has *knowhow*, a sense of the rhythm. Diving at the right moment, breathing at the right moment, is the art of composition of relations. He says: waves and loves, it is the same thing. This deeper knowledge of encounters where the rhythm of bodies is composed directly with other bodies expresses concretely what is common between bodies. And finally, with the third kind of knowledge we understand ourselves as degrees of power, or intensive quantities. Yet we live all three kinds of existence at once to varying degrees.

In order to see how this might work in classroom practice, let's consider some examples of open existential experiments in material sensibility, unashamedly anthropomorphic exercises that, when successful, open humans, including children, to their affinities with non-human things. Part of the power of Spinoza's thought results from the defamiliarisation and estrangement that we are asked to undergo as part of coming to understand our condition, but this is a complex affair given our investments and identifications. It can be difficult to find ways of enacting an ecological approach to our world, an approach that helps us to see ourselves as things amongst things, interested like all things in preserving ourselves. By shifting from normalising therapeutics and archaeologies of the self towards experimental practices that reveal a world of singular things we also find a way of returning to ourselves, so to speak, and sweeping away some of the illusions that we hold about ourselves as humans. A creative reinterpretation of Spinoza supports deliberate feigning through acts of material imagining and storytelling because it can open up the kind of intimate distance that we need to experience ourselves as singular things, allowing us to extract ourselves, even temporarily, from our visceral identities and familiar narratives. Pedagogical exercises can offer a poetic and humorous lens through which to understand the self, something which brings its own comforts and a perspective that is more expansive. What then would happen were we to see classrooms as sites of pedagogical experimentation? How might experiences of singularisation be precipitated through a range of world-disclosive relational activities?

It is interesting to observe how even young children welcome exercises that involve long silences and slow explorations of the material world, or the opportunities for animistic engagement. As an educator, what is perhaps most moving is the way in which curious little pedagogical experiments can reveal who each singular child is: they are no longer individuals, collections of creatures in a designated age cohort, but are encountered, perhaps only for a moment, through an experience of akin to that of eternity, as *this* child, unique, precious, utterly singular. In our 'Art and Philosophy in the Classroom' project, Katy Fitzpatrick and I sometimes begin by asking students to touch surfaces slowly with different parts of the body, noticing the different qualities of material things. We choreograph together everyday movements or gestures of our bodies and of non-human bodies, like trees or plastic bags billowing, asking them to move their skin slowly across different surfaces in order to attune them to paying attention to their experiences, and seek out material resonances with non-human things. We

might then ask them to choose a thing, sculpt what it evokes in white plasticine, curate it as a ready-made, and imagine and write its biography in the first person. We ask: *What might it say? What stories can it tell? What are its hopes and dreams? Who might the thing be talking to? What kinds of things might it like to spend time with? What is it connected to? What are its wider relationships and interactions (wood, story of the world ...)? Imagine what this thing might do or feel or think when you are not there?*

- *What is it made of?*
- *Where has it been?*
- *What does it feel when it touches other materials?*
- *Whose hands has it passed through?*
- *Has it changed identity?*

One child writes of a lump of Blu-Tack (sticky tack) 'I am screaming in agony because people keep tearing me apart. I keep getting moved from pocket to pocket.' Another writes,

Hi. My name is Peter. I am a piece of paper, well, actually half a piece of paper. Well, I was a tree but then some man made me into paper. I preferred being a tree, but you can't have everything.

Another child says,

I am a battery. My name is Tesco. I am 1111. I have a really long life. I don't have any legs. I am made of metal. I am scared of exploding and leaking. I rely on humans to keep me out of the fire.

Imaginative existential experiments in material sensibility attune bodies to the resonance of other bodies with our own, allowing us to be affected differently through the animism born of these experiments: noticing the gesture of a lampshade, feeling the exhaustion of worn tiles, imagining bones and nails as having perhaps more affinities with rocks or fossils than flesh, or the affinities between the texture of flesh and silk or linen. It allows us to understand ourselves under the attribute of Extension, composed of an infinity of bodies, and to understand our perception as direct lived awareness of the encounter of our bodies in their complexity with others. It allows, even if anthropomorphically, for some understanding of the affective life of the most primitive things, shifting sensibility and perception from one centred on visceral subjectivities and all too human concerns to a more attenuated and humble understanding of both minds and bodies as differing from one another in complexity, but not in kind. In this respect, anthropomorphic strategies are not adopted to make things more 'human' but rather to dismantle human exceptionalism and help us to understand the affinities of our bodies and minds with all of those in nature. In this regard, the aim is to displace the discourse of agency to that of powers to affect and be affected, the powers that all existents or modes have to some degree.

If we take up and inflect Johan Dahlbeck's (2016) proposition here that 'to be educated is to exist more', it can be argued that the primary task for educators is to create potentials for existence through new encounters of minds and bodies that give rise to different experiences. This may allow for a deeper understanding of the genesis of things, and of ourselves as singular things, determined by and participating in what he calls *Deus sive Natura*, or God, that is, Nature, the immanent cause, or substance. We have to begin with the infinite and displace our illusion of centrality in order to understand ourselves as finite things, dependent, and always constituted by a complex organisation of relations of diverse bodies. Decentring the self, in Spinoza's sense, can be effected through pedagogically staged encounters with the world that allow things to teach us, revealing the resonances of our bodies and minds with those with which we might previously have felt no sense of kinship. Perhaps the aim of education is nothing other than this experimental practice of depersonalised singularisation, an exercise that not only awakens us to our human condition, but that sensibilises us to the aliveness and vitality of a world that is divine and animate, and opens us to experiencing ourselves as part of the immanent non-teleological creativity of Naturing Nature or what Spinoza calls *Deus sive Natura*, God that is Nature, of which we are but a part.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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