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Satan as teacher: the view from nowhere vs. the moral sense

Johan Dahlbeck 

Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

Abstract

To what extent should teachers promote the view from nowhere as an ideal to strive for in education? To address this question, I will use Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* as an example, illustrating the stakes involved when the view from nowhere is taken to be an attainable educational ideal. I will begin this essay by offering a description of Thomas Nagel's view from nowhere. Having done this, I will return to Twain's story, providing some further examples of how access to the view from nowhere comes to influence the educational process in different ways. I will then connect the educational question raised by Twain's story to two radically different versions of the exemplar found in the works of Benedict de Spinoza: the philosopher and the prophet. These figures will help illustrate how the striving for philosophical truth can sometimes be educationally inapt, as education always needs to account for humans being human, all too human.

KEYWORDS

Spinoza; Thomas Nagel; Mark Twain; the view from nowhere; the moral sense

In Mark Twain's (2012) unfinished novella *The Mysterious Stranger* (published posthumously in 1916), the character called Satan is cast in the role of a teacher of sorts. This essay sets out to critically discuss Satan's role as a teacher and the particular ideal of teaching that this character exemplifies. Before we get ahead of ourselves, however, let me just say a few things about the story. One day a mysterious stranger appears out of nowhere in the outskirts of a small Austrian village. He befriends a group of young boys playing in the woods and soon commences to teach them a series of unsolicited lessons about the cruelty of mankind and the unavoidability of suffering. The stranger introduces himself as Satan (he claims to be the favorite nephew of his namesake, the Satan of biblical renown) and explains that he is an angel far removed from the pettiness and all-round imperfection of humankind.¹ In fact, humanity, from the point of view of Satan, is more or less a derogatory term describing the defining features of those unwittingly smallminded creatures who are driven by their so-called moral sense; a sense which in reality is nothing but a psychological flaw typically

CONTACT Johan Dahlbeck  johan.dahlbeck@mau.se

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making them mistake right for wrong and good for evil in their inability to distinguish between the seemingly good and the true good. From the perspective of an angel, the things that most trouble humans – such as the anxiety of thinking about whether to die in this way or that – seem trifling and utterly pointless. Rather than elevating humans above other animals, this characteristic is what makes them the lowliest of all creatures. Accordingly, Satan reproaches the boys for unfavorably comparing humans with brutes as a matter of insult:

It is not pleasant to hear you libel the higher animals by attributing to them dispositions which they are free from, and which are found nowhere but in the human heart. None of the higher animals is tainted with the disease called the Moral Sense. (Twain 2012, 182–183)

Satan claims to view the world from a disinterested standpoint reminiscent of what Thomas Nagel (1986) calls ‘the view from nowhere’ and takes it upon himself to teach the young boys a few hard-earned lessons in how life appears from this difficult-to-inhabit point of view. While things initially seem promising, as the view from nowhere renders everything equally reachable, things soon take a turn for the worse as the boys prove unable to reconcile the neutral and disinterested view from nowhere with their own limited but passionate sense of perspective (their moral sense). The problem with viewing life from the omniscient perspective of the view from nowhere is that, while things appear more truthfully perceived, they also quickly lose any sense of value. As Satan himself notes, ‘Man is to me as the red spider is to the elephant. The elephant has nothing against the spider – he cannot get down to that remote level; I have nothing against man. The elephant is indifferent; I am indifferent’ (Twain 2012, 199–200). Arguably, pitching the view from nowhere against the moral sense in this way appears to invoke a false dichotomy.² After all, a prerequisite for Satan embracing his task of teaching the boys to begin with seems to be that he is not actually indifferent after all. It is sometimes unclear to what extent he is benevolently or malevolently inclined, but he is clearly not altogether disinterested (although he repeatedly claims to be). To be indifferent, for Satan, appears to be more of a rhetorical move than an actual mode of being, and while this destabilizes the seeming dichotomy between the view from nowhere and the moral sense, it does not mean that there is no tension between perceiving the world from a disinterested point of view and seeking to inculcate a moral sensibility insofar as the latter would inevitably need to be anchored in a specific point of view, even if its claims were universal as it were.

While the position of the view from nowhere is emotionally unattainable for the young boys (they are, after all, human, all too human), Satan gives them a small taste of what the view from nowhere would afford them through brief glimpses of the remote past and the distant future. These glimpses grant them a sense of a more complete understanding of the unfolding of events and of being able to ascertain how things follow unavoidably from one another. They

also see that what seems to be a present good may frequently turn out to be a future evil and vice versa. And so, saving a friend from immediate disaster and sudden death may turn out to condemn the same friend to years of suffering (and a prolonged process of dying from a terrible affliction). As Theodor, the narrator of the story, remarks: 'It is as Satan said, we do not know good fortune from bad, and are always mistaking one for the other. Many a time since then I have heard people pray to God to spare the life of sick persons, but I have never done it' (Twain 2012, 215). This hard-earned lesson leads to Theodor knowingly allowing his best friend Nikolaus to be drowned in an accident so as to spare him from years of suffering. While this seems to be the merciful thing to do (from the view from nowhere), Theodore cannot escape being tormented by his moral sense, chastising himself for having played an indirect part in the death of his friend.

Because the full view from nowhere proves unattainable for ordinary humans,³ who are always cognitively and psychologically limited, this raises an interesting educational question: to what extent should teachers promote the view from nowhere as an ideal to strive for in education? To address this question, I will use Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* as an example, illustrating the stakes involved when the view from nowhere is taken to be an attainable educational ideal. I will begin by offering a more fleshed-out description of Nagel's view from nowhere. Having done this, I will return to Twain's story, providing some further examples of how access to the view from nowhere comes to influence the educational process in different ways. I will then connect the educational question raised by Twain's story to two radically different versions of the exemplar found in the works of Benedict de Spinoza: the philosopher and the prophet. These figures will help illustrate how the striving for philosophical truth can sometimes be educationally inapt, as education always needs to account for humans being human, all too human.

For Spinoza, while understanding the world under an aspect of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*) is connected with a form of intuitive knowledge that is clearly desirable insofar as it amounts to a more complete understanding than we can reach through our sensory experiences or through logical deduction, it is not something that can be attained through mere habituation. On Spinoza's view (and we will return to and expand on this below), we always understand the world under the aspect of duration (*sub duratione*) as well. This is simply part of what it means to be a limited and finite being. That is, we can strive for an understanding less constrained by our limited point of view, but we can never rid ourselves of this limitation completely as that would mean abandoning our state of being finite individuals in the world. This will have important implications for Satan's potential as a teacher, as successfully balancing between these two perspectives is intimately linked with knowing (i.e. being able to judge) when to appeal

to students' moral sense and when to push students to adopt a more disinterested perspective on the world. Before digging deeper into this, however, we should first acquaint ourselves better with Nagel's conception of the view from nowhere.

The view from nowhere

In his *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel makes a basic distinction between what he labels the external (or objective) point of view and the internal (or subjective) point of view. The problem, as Nagel perceives it, is how to find a reliable way of bridging between these radically different points of view so that our general outlook on ourselves and the world we inhabit can benefit from and reflect both of these perspectives in a complementary way (rather than risk setting up an unbridgeable dichotomy). While the external point of view appears to be more truthful insofar as it offers a perspective that is less limited (in the sense that it is not tainted by cognitive bias) than the internal point of view, we simply cannot function as human beings from an exclusively objective standpoint. There may even be some aspects of the world that can only be made sense of from the internal point of view. There is an inherent tension here:

An objective standpoint is created by leaving a more subjective, individual, or even just human perspective behind; but there are things about the world that cannot be adequately understood from a maximally objective standpoint, however much it may extend our understanding beyond the point from which we started. A great deal is essentially connected to a particular point of view, or type of point of view, and the attempt to give a complete account of the world in objective terms detached from these perspectives inevitably leads to false reductions or to outright denial that certain patently real phenomena exist at all. (Nagel 1986, 7)

When someone succeeds in reconciling between the external and the internal standpoint, they gain access to the view from nowhere. In this way, they can remain secured in a point of view which allows them access to a perspective in the world, but without having this sense of perspective limit their understanding of the world. Such is the outlook of Mark Twain's Satan. Satan is a point of view in the world insofar as he refers to himself as *a self*, yet his self is not limited to his sensory perceptions or constrained by cognitive bias. He is a self with a seemingly unlimited scope and yet the reason he can communicate with the boys in the village is precisely because he is a self that can connect with other selves. It is the seemingly unlimited scope of Satan's self that makes him prone to mock the limitations of the boys. Yet without this connection between the different selves there simply would not be any means of communication between them, and Satan's disinterestedness would be complete and absolutely necessary (rather than a didactical tool to be used at will).

This is also what makes Satan's claim of disinterestedness appear to be more of a rhetorical device (as mentioned above) than a neutral statement of facts. Because he clearly perceives himself as a distinct *self* in the world, he is unable to rid himself completely of all traces of cognitive bias (as cognitive bias seems to be part and parcel of being a distinct self in the world). His scope of cognition may be significantly broader than that of the boys, but it is limited (and therefore interested to some degree) nevertheless. If not, he would be firmly placed in the external standpoint, meaning that there would be little reason for communicating with the boys to begin with. This, then, is clearly a predicament for the self-proclaimed disinterested teacher: being truly disinterested takes away any viable motivation to teach. Satan's disinterestedness therefore appears to be something more akin to a manipulative didactic technique employed to jolt the boys out of their false sense of comfort with being locked inside the internal standpoint. In this sense, Satan's teachings are somehow reminiscent of Rousseau's negative education in *Emile*. Satan carefully sets the stage for a series of lessons in humility, but he makes it seem as if the boys are the ones setting off all the major events themselves.

As we will see below, Satan's denial of the value of a distinctly human point of view (and specifically a moral sense) leads to some pedagogical complications insofar as it assumes that it is better to act as if we had access to a perfect understanding of the world when we do in fact not (and likely never will). From this standpoint, the internal perspective gives us access to at least one crucial aspect of the world, which is precisely the inevitability of our fragmented and limited cognition. While the moral sense may be inherently flawed, it is also possible to perceive it in terms of a tool that may be used (via the imagination) for promoting a kind of collective ethical striving that access to a more complete understanding of the world will not automatically yield. It is important not to interpret this as a dismissal of the value of truth-seeking, but as a somber reminder of the limitations of the truth in terms of its action-guiding potential. In discussing why Spinoza – who certainly did believe in the value of truth-seeking (and to whom we will soon turn in greater detail) – did not believe that adequate ideas are enough to conquer debilitating affects, Eugene Garver notes that '[k]nowing the truth is impractical; it produces no imperatives' (2010, 845). Still, it is evident that a fully subjective point of view leads to all kinds of dangerous prejudices and is therefore not a viable option. Nagel's view from nowhere is an attractive ideal precisely because it would allow a person to encompass both the internal and the external point of view:

The question is how limited beings like ourselves can alter their conception of the world so that it is no longer just the view from where they are but in a sense a view from nowhere, which includes and comprehends the fact that the world contains beings which possess it, explains why the world appears to them as it does prior to the formation of that conception, and explain how they can arrive at the conception itself. (Nagel 1986, 70)

While the view from nowhere seems to be an attractive ideal insofar as it succeeds in combining the best of two worlds, it may not be practically attainable (at least not to a full extent). What is more likely, perhaps, is that the striving for a more complete understanding of the world, may sometimes result in what Nagel calls the fate of a double vision. Nagel explains this as follows:

Double vision is the fate of creatures with a glimpse of the view *sub specie aeternitatis*. When we view ourselves from outside, a naturalistic picture of how we work seems unavoidable. It is clear that our beliefs arise from certain dispositions and experiences which, so far as we know, don't guarantee their truth and are compatible with radical error. The trouble is that we can't fully take on the skepticism that this entails, because we can't cure our appetite for belief, and we can't take on this attitude toward our own beliefs while we're having them. (Nagel 1986, 88)

The fate of a double vision is just what the boys are made to suffer repeatedly in Twain's narrative. They are thrown between a narrow moral sense that is fundamentally anchored in their internal standpoint and glimpses of a disinterested external view that causes their sense of agency and their sense of right and wrong to be momentarily displaced. The result is confusion and frustration rather than the kind of tranquility that may have resulted from understanding the self as part of the world without allowing the internal point of view to dictate the terms of this understanding. The boys are stuck between the desire to change things so as to fit better with their internal standpoint and being incapacitated by the sense of unavoidability that results from radically widening the scope of their understanding (however briefly). This does not improve their sense of agency and it does not allow them to enjoy the equanimity that could follow from having access to a more complete understanding of the causal networks in the world. Instead, it makes them feel insignificant, like genuine *selves* (with real desires and wishes) trapped in a disinterested universe. From this perspective, Satan's teachings (however truthful) appear sadistic rather than educationally valuable. In order to find out what is missing from them we need to take a closer look at how they play out.

Satan's lessons in humility

In this section I would like to look closer at two different passages from *The Mysterious Stranger* where Satan exploits the human inability to perceive things from the view from nowhere in order to teach the boys a lesson or two about how their lack of perspective causes them to confuse good and bad fortune with some rather dire results.

Lesson 1: the witch who dwells in heaven

The first passage concerns a woman who has recently lost her child and who, in her grief and sorrow, makes allegations against the emperor and the church for not allowing her to bury her child in the cemetery due to an unpaid debt to the village carpenter. When the boys see the woman's suffering, they implore Satan to intervene on her behalf. The boys want Satan to investigate all the different ways that her future could unfold and then put her on a different, more profitable, path than the one she is currently on. Satan responds by explaining that regardless if he were to pick a version where she lives as long as possible or if he were to pick her shortest available life-span, her life would still be filled with misery and suffering in either scenario. The one thing that he offers to do is to alter things so that three minutes of the present will be skipped over so as to improve her situation slightly. The boys, being blinded by their desperation to help the woman, agrees that if this is indeed an improvement, however small, then this is what Satan should do.

'It is done,' he said; 'she was going around a corner; I have turned her back; it has changed her career.'

'Then what will happen, Satan?'

'It is happening now. She is having words with Fischer, the weaver. In his anger Fischer will straightaway do what he would not have done but for this accident. He was present when she stood over her child's body and uttered those blasphemies.'

'What will he do?'

'He is doing it now – betraying her. In three days she will go to the stake.' (Twain 2012, 216)

This is clearly not the result that the boys had in mind when they begged Satan to alter the woman's future for the better. Instead of ensuring that she will live happier and more content, the alteration has doomed her to an imminent death. From the point of view of the boys, this is the opposite of what they would consider a change for the better, but from Satan's privileged position it is an improvement, just not in the way the boys intended. The lesson concludes:

We could not speak; we were frozen with horror, for if we had not meddled with her career she would have been spared this awful fate. Satan noticed these thoughts, and said:

'What you are thinking is strictly human-like—that is to say, foolish. The woman is advantaged. Die when she might, she would go to heaven. By this prompt death she gets twenty-nine years more of heaven than she is entitled to, and escapes twenty-nine years of misery here.' (Twain 2012, 216)

From Satan's perspective, it is better to avoid suffering than to go on living under such poor conditions. For the boys, the idea that they would kill people so as to spare them from further misery goes against all their moral intuitions and they quickly regret having pleaded with Satan to meddle with the poor woman's fate

in the first place. They learn the hard way that while their intentions may have been good, they could not foresee the consequences of even the slightest change in action and so they should perhaps not have been so quick to interfere.

Lesson 2: the happy mad priest

The second lesson concerns the fate of a priest who has been wrongfully imprisoned for theft. When he is acquitted of his alleged crime, Satan promises the boys that he will see to it that the priest gets to live a long and happy life to compensate for his imprisonment. Again, however, Satan takes advantage of the boys' shortsightedness in order to teach them a lesson in humility. While the priest is, for all intents and purposes, made happy, he is also condemned to a state of madness and delusion, thinking that he is the emperor himself. The boys' initial response is that Satan has deceived them, but when confronted Satan plainly denies this. Instead, Satan reproaches the boys for not understanding that the kind of happiness they wished for the priest cannot be combined with a realistic outlook on life. He lashes out:

'What an ass you are!' He said. 'Are you so unobservant as not to have found out that sanity and happiness are an impossible combination? No sane man can be happy, for to him life is real, and he sees what a fearful thing it is.' (Twain 2012, 234)

Again, Satan claims to have been doing the boys a service by relieving the priest of his faculty of reason. The motivation being that this will allow the priest to go on living in a happy and innocent state where he will remain untouched by such troubling thoughts as inevitably will haunt people who continuously contemplate the injustices and hardships of life. The boys asked Satan to make the priest happy, and he did so, although the boys never considered the fact that to be carefree is perhaps also to be unburdened by a clear perception of reality. Satan's lesson concludes thus:

'I have replaced his tin life with a silver-gilt fiction; you see the result—and you criticize! I said I would make him permanently happy, and I have done it. I have made him happy by the only means possible to his race—and you are not satisfied!' He heaved a discouraged sigh, and said, 'It seems to me that this race is hard to please.' (Twain 2012, 235)

While Satan's method of teaching may appear cruel and manipulative in its design, it hinges on a very simple premise. Satan allows the boys to experience, firsthand, the consequences of their decisions. Because the boys believe that their choices are fundamentally uncaused, and because they cannot anticipate the chains of causation that their different choices set in motion, they are at a loss when things turn out in a way they did not intend. Satan's lesson in humility is precisely a lesson in coming to understand how events and actions are entangled in infinitely complex webs of causation that are impossible to

reverse once they are set in motion. There is nothing magical about it, however. From the privileged outlook of the view from nowhere, everything makes perfect sense. In lack of this view, however, things look decidedly different. While this is a result of a deep-rooted prejudice, it is not a prejudice that can simply be shed at will. It is, if you will, engrained in the very fabric of the human condition – and, as such, it is an integrated part of being a self in the world. Satan’s inability to appreciate that the moral hubris that sometimes results from a lack of a wider perspective is part and parcel of what it means to be human, is what makes him limited as a teacher. This prejudice is, in reality, not a flaw to be fixed, but a natural limitation to be taken into consideration.

Satan’s unwillingness (or perhaps incapacity) to bring the view from nowhere and the moral sense in communication, calls for a more in-depth discussion of the tension between the two different vantage points. It is helpful to turn here to the philosophy of Spinoza in order to unpack the relation between the striving for an adequate understanding of the world and the necessarily prejudiced point of view of humans. Spinoza is relevant in this context as he devoted a lot of his work to grappling with the question of how we might approximate a full understanding (such as the view from nowhere) without at the same time underestimating our natural cognitive constraints as finite beings. Spinoza addresses the kind of prejudice we are dealing with here in a letter to G. H. Schuller. In the letter he is arguing for the illusory nature of ordinary free will. Spinoza claims that if a stone, set flying through the air by some cause unknown to it, was somehow conscious of itself, then surely it would believe that it was moving out of its own free will. He relates it to the human condition:

This is that famous human freedom everyone brags of having, which consists only in this: that *men are conscious of their appetite and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined*. So the infant believes that he freely wants the milk; the angry boy that he wants vengeance; and the timid, flight. Again, the drunk believes it is from a free decision of the mind that he says those things which afterward, when sober, he wishes he had not said. Similarly, the madman, the chatterbox, and a great many people of this kind believe that they act from a free decision of the mind, and not that they are set in motion by an impulse. (Spinoza 2016a, 428/Ep. 58, emphasis added)

In the two lessons rendered above, Satan takes advantage of this natural ignorance in order to trick the boys into thinking that they can design the future according to their desires and whims. It becomes cruel, however, when we recognize that this expression of ignorance is not something that the boys can be faulted with. They have, in fact, no choice other than to act as if they were free in precisely this sense. It is a phenomenological condition that follows naturally from being conscious of one’s appetites, yet ignorant of their causal origin.

On Spinoza's view, humans can conceive things in two radically different ways. They can conceive things phenomenologically as finite beings in a given place and time (*sub duracione*), and intellectually as parts of a greater network of necessary and infinitely complex causal relations (*sub specie aeternitatis*) (Spinoza 1985a, 610/E5p29s). While the second way of conceiving things is more adequate in that it does not distort the features of the world to fit with the idiosyncrasies of human cognition, the first, phenomenological way of conceiving things, will always remain with us as an integral part of existing in the world *qua* finite beings. As Chantal Jaquet notes, while '[t]he second way of conceiving implies grasping the inherence and necessity of things in God; it does not rule out the first one' (Jaquet 2018, 374). Further, '[t]he first one is an imaginative one, because [...] we can only have an inadequate idea of the duration of things' (ibid.). The fact that our imagination is necessary to compensate for an innate inability to account for the world in all of its complexity seems important if we wish to question the false dichotomy Satan sets up between the view from nowhere and the moral sense. A less sadistic teacher would surely take this into account when seeking to illuminate the basic mechanisms of the world. This leads us to two contrasting figures of the teacher: one that is omniscient and one that is not. The one that is omniscient perceives the world from the view from nowhere, and the one that is not must make use of the imagination precisely to compensate for an innate lack of knowledge. In Spinoza's vocabulary, these figures can be described as the philosopher and the prophet.

The philosopher and the prophet

In many ways, Twain's Satan is reminiscent of Spinoza's conception of a true philosopher.⁴ The true philosopher enjoys an adequate understanding of himself and the world, so that he is incapable of harboring any illusions about anything. Accordingly, in his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TIE) Spinoza suggests that if a thing's 'necessity or impossibility, which depends on external causes, were known to us, we would be able to feign nothing concerning it. From this it follows that, if there is a God, or something omniscient, he can feign nothing at all' (Spinoza 1985b, 24/TIE §53–54). In Part 4 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza introduces his model of human nature – the free man (*homo liber*) – whose freedom follows from a perfect understanding of natural causation. The free man is not undetermined (no one is, not even God), but he is fully aware of his determinations and therefore perfectly free not to worry and wonder about things to come. The free man conceives things *sub specie aeternitatis*.

The true philosopher *qua* free man is also unconcerned with good and evil as moral concepts such as these are only valid with regard to comparisons hinged on an inadequate understanding of the world. It is the incapacity to perceive the world adequately – i.e. to conceive of the world in terms of natural yet infinitely

complex processes of causation – that prompts humans to construct moral frameworks and rules so as to help them steer towards a common goal – of ethical and intellectual freedom – that they would not be able to navigate to without. Good and evil are modes of thinking rather than intrinsic values, and so they ‘indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves’ but are ‘notions we form because we compare things to one another. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad and also indifferent’ (Spinoza 1985a, 545/E4pref). For this reason, Spinoza writes (in a letter to Henry Oldenburg) that he ‘attributes to Nature neither beauty, ugliness, neither order nor confusion. For only in relation to our imagination can things be called beautiful or ugly, orderly or confused’ (Spinoza 2016b, 18/Ep. 32). The inability to live in the natural light of this understanding is the primary reason for why ordinary humans need to subject themselves to external authorities and to a common rule of law. As Spinoza somewhat laconically concludes in his *Theological-Political Treatise*:

Now if nature had so constituted men that they desired nothing except what true reason teaches them to desire, then of course a society could exist without laws; in that case it would be completely sufficient to teach men true moral lessons, so that they would do voluntarily, wholeheartedly, and in a manner of a free man, what is really useful. But human nature is not constituted like that at all. (Spinoza 2016c, 144/TTP 5 [20–21])

The natural inability to live always guided by reason is what prompts the need for another figure of authority, one that is distinctly different from the true philosopher. In his *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza portrays the prophet as someone who is uniquely gifted imaginatively and who can therefore accommodate his teachings to the affective constitution of ordinary people. The prophet is no philosopher, however, and the reason the prophet can communicate well with people is that he shares their inability of adequately understanding the world. The prophet’s way of communicating hinges on telling fictions that appeal to the imagination, something that would be unable to move a true philosopher, who – like the free man – is unable to feign anything about things that are adequately perceived. Ordinary people – being less-than-fully rational – tend to be unmoved by the truth (by E4p14), however, and must be appealed to via the imagination as they are ‘led more by blind desire than by reason’ (Spinoza 2016d, 508/TP 2[5]).

The reason Spinoza’s free man fails to live up to the standard of an action-guiding exemplar in the tradition of Linda Zagzebski’s (2017) influential neo-Aristotelian admiration–emulation model is because it makes little sense to emulate the behavior of someone fully rational when you are in fact not so yourself.⁵ Justin Steinberg offers a clarifying example (intended to elucidate the practical limitation of Spinoza’s free man as an exemplar):

For instance, even if an ideally rational person would have no need to study for a logic exam, it would be patently foolish for most young logic students to emulate the ideal or to take the description of an ideal agent as prescriptive for them. (Steinberg 2014, 182)

This seems to resemble the predicament of the boys being taught by Satan in *The Mysterious Stranger*. It doesn't matter how much the boys work on embracing an understanding of life emanating from a complete access to the view from nowhere, as they are always already limited by their own moral sense and their necessarily subjective point of view. Satan fails to recognize that understanding the world *sub specie aeternitatis* is not something that will automatically cancel out the moral sense as these are two parallel (yet complimentary) ways of understanding and relating to the world rather than a dichotomy. What they need, instead, is an exemplar capable of recognizing them as beings limited by their sense of perspective and who can offer them ways of reconciling their own limited perspective with a broader (less prejudiced) outlook, without requiring them to become something that they are not (and can never be).

In his political treatises, Spinoza prescribes a particular approach for accommodating those who are 'led more by blind desire than by reason' (Spinoza 2016d, 508/TP 2[5]). As a first step, Spinoza conceives of the prophet as someone who can make use of popular fictions so as to temper the passions and induce a sense of sociability in people who are unaccustomed to freely using their judgment in a manner guided by reason. This would serve to establish a sense of peace and stability, necessary for truth-seeking to be carried out without the threat of violence or other debilitating repercussions. This is only the first step, however, as it is conceived in terms of a necessary response to the disempowering affects at work in a people governed largely by passions. The second step is, as pointed out in a recent study by Mogens Lærke (2021, 147–166), to allow people to establish horizontal educational networks where they can freely exercise their natural authority to teach one another in a manner marked by a common interest in each other's well-being and in the promotion of a more adequate understanding of the world. As this paper is not conceived as an in-depth investigation of Spinoza's political theory and its consequences for education (I have done this elsewhere, see Dahlbeck 2021a, 2021b, 2021c), we should not get too bogged down in the particularities of Spinoza's conception of exemplarism or in the political role of education. The purpose is rather to illustrate how the view from nowhere and the moral sense can be reconciled in a manner that does not underestimate the many complications embedded in seeking to negotiate between the two different positions.

The immediate problem with Spinoza's philosopher *qua* free man (as well as with Twain's Satan), is of course that it is best taken as a thought experiment. No human being⁶ can ever fully (or exclusively) inhabit the view from nowhere, and

so there is no sense in which the figure of the teacher can ever embody this ideal (if indeed it is taken to be an ideal). This is not a big problem, however, as the figure helps us perceive more clearly some of the inherent limitations with how we tend to structure our everyday understanding of the world, and in particular it helps us see the dangers with assuming that our moral sense can map neatly onto a disinterested description of the natural world. The figure of the prophet is far from an unproblematic image of an ideal teacher, however. While the prophet may succeed in appealing to the imagination of many people, this ability can surely be used for both good and bad. If the prophet is motivated by passions of greed and ambition, then this ability will most likely be used to advance interests that are both self-serving and un conducive to social cooperation. What the figure of the prophet can help us see, however, is how the desire for truth-seeking needs to be reconciled with a will to accommodate teachings to the affective compositions of real human beings, rather than being modeled after an ideal version of what we imagine a fully rational person to be like. This means shifting the focus slightly from asking questions about how to teach about the world such as it appears from the disinterested view from nowhere, to asking questions about how the (necessarily prejudiced) moral sense of ordinary people can be educated so as to avoid merely reinforcing a narrow anthropocentric understanding of the world.

Educating the moral sense of ordinary people

As a teacher, Twain's Satan claims to be in the unapologetic business of truth-telling. He seems to care little for the psychological effects of, or the possible emotional damage caused by, his lessons. He exposes the boys to situations where they can learn through firsthand experience the impotence of being finite creatures in an indifferent universe. This leaves them enlightened to a degree, but also more than a little bit lost and disillusioned. One way of explaining this is by describing Satan as luring the boys into what Nagel terms the fate of a double vision, resulting in an 'insoluble conflict between subjective and objective conceptions of the same thing' (Nagel 1986, 86). Rather than seeking to bridge the gap between the external and the internal standpoint, Satan further increases it by setting up a series of situations that only serve to create a sense of cognitive dissonance and where the only available answer seems to be to attempt (in vain) to abandon the internal standpoint. This, however, would be to underestimate the importance of attaining some reciprocity between the different perspectives. Nagel explains that

the satisfactoriness of a new external perspective depends on whether it can place the internal perspective within the world in a way that enables one to occupy both of them simultaneously, with a sense that the external perspective gives access to an objective reality that one's subjective impressions are impressions of. (Nagel 1986, 77)

Beyond the inherent epistemic challenges, there are also important psychological aspects to consider here. While uncovering the truth can often be painful, an emphatic teacher should perhaps ask if there is a limit to the psychological pain that ought to be inflicted in the name of enlightenment?⁷ Dismissing the moral sense as an unfortunate side-effect of a cognitive and psychological deficit seems to disregard the fact that it may be possible to balance between truth-seeking and accommodating the truth to the moral sense and to the imagination of ordinary people. If truth-seeking and relying on a moral sense is conceived as incommensurable practices (as Satan indeed seems to do) then this would amount to heralding an educational ideal that would seem impossible to live up to (aspiring for one's students to exclusively conceive things *sub specie aeternitatis*) while at the same time denying (or disregarding) what would appear to be a natural fact of finite creatures like humans; that we are severely limited cognitively and that we need to compensate for this in part by relying on our imagination. Again, Satan deals with this by setting up a false dichotomy between truth-seeking and the moral sense, when in fact these seem to be parallel ways of connecting with the world, where both can be made to strengthen our understanding if we take care to guard against some of the harmful prejudices that our limited scope seems to invite. This is clearly where Satan's educational effort is wanting. He simply does not deem the moral sense to be worth educating at all. Unlike Twain's Satan, Spinoza offers an educational path towards the truth without bypassing the imagination and the moral sense. Directly after having explained that good and evil are not intrinsic values but rather modes of thinking (and therefore typically resulting in a prejudiced form of classification), Spinoza goes on to argue for their educational merit:

But though this is so, still we must retain these words. For because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature to which we may look to, it will be useful to us to retain these same words with the meaning I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, *I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model.* (Spinoza 1985a, 545/E4pref, emphasis added)

The answer, then, is not to dismiss the moral sense offhand, but to make use of it for the purposes of furthering a more adequate understanding of the world. Nobody can live their whole life from the disinterested outlook of the view from nowhere, but there may be ways of shedding some particularly dangerous prejudices and superstitions by practicing on inhabiting the view from nowhere

for short periods of time. Rather than leaving students to their own devices – as Satan does – the educator who is successfully balancing between truth-seeking and accommodating the moral sense, offers support by showing how the true good (that which furthers the striving for a more adequate understanding of the world) can be made to coincide with the conventionally good (that which is approved by social mores and conventional morality). This way, the path to a more truthful life does not risk becoming a path to disillusion, isolation, and despair, but is instead conceived of as a fundamentally collective endeavor geared toward gradual ethical and intellectual flourishing. This highlights the importance of educating the moral sense of ordinary people rather than condemning it *tout court*. It means embarking on a collective quest for building temporary bridges between the realm of the imagination and the view from nowhere so as not to forget that the moral sense is not to be confused with the truth (which is always necessarily disinterested in matters of uniquely human concern).

Notes

1. It is important to note that because the character of Satan is an angel he is placed somewhere in between humans and God. This is noteworthy because it means that Satan seems to inhabit both worlds so to speak. As we will see later, this is what, arguably, leads to a false dichotomy between the view from nowhere (which in the case of Satan is not as disinterested as it claims to be) and the moral sense (which is dismissed by Satan, yet seems to haunt him at the same time). This false dichotomy will be interrogated further below.
2. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for pressing me on this point.
3. Throughout this paper, ‘ordinary humans’ and ‘ordinary people’ are used interchangeably. These terms are not intended to be belittling or derogatory. They are simply used to describe all people who are less-than-fully rational and, as such, they represent a counter-position to the figure of Satan in Twain’s novella and the true philosopher in Spinoza’s work. As we will see, these figures are characterized by a fully rational understanding of the world and as such they are more-than-human, albeit sufficiently human to be related to and recognized as having some human traits and as being a ‘self’ in the world.
4. Qualifying the philosopher with the word *true* here is important as Spinoza is not referring to so-called professional philosophers or people who are involved with philosophy at the university in some capacity or other. These people are often just as irrational and motivated by passions as any other people. Instead, what he is referring to, is the kind of person who lives guided by reason and who, presumably, enjoys an understanding similar in vain to that of Satan in Twain’s story.
5. For a more developed discussion of how Spinoza’s exemplarism differs from the admiration–emulation model of Linda Zagzebski, see Dahlbeck (2021a).
6. I tend to think of Twain’s Satan as an enhanced version of a human being as he communicates freely with humans. This is clearly where his own parallel to the elephant and the spider (rendered above) fails. Presumably, one of the main reasons for why the elephant is utterly indifferent to the fate of the spider is that they do not share any meaningful way of communicating with one another.

7. Nigel Tubbs poses a similar rhetorical question occasioned by a reflection on the educational significance of Plato's allegory of the cave: 'If education is enlightening, unsettling and potentially destructive, is it right to teach for this? Is it right to teach for the shadows or to prepare the path out of the Cave?' (2005, 67).

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ORCID

Johan Dahlbeck  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1669-7132>

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