

# Education: Understanding, Ethics, and the Call of Justice

Clarence W. Joldersma

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**Abstract** Education is interpreted as something basic to our humanity. As part of our primordial way of being human, education is intrinsic to the understanding's functioning. At the same time education involves an originary ethical relation to the other, unsettling the self-directed character of the striving to live. And because of its social setting, the call of many others, education orients one to the social, to the call of justice.

**Keywords** Understanding · Ethics · Call of justice · Improvisational handiness · Distantiation · Interpretation · Affordances · World · Earth · Conatus · Primordial way of being human · The other · Inspiration · Enjoyment · Anxiety

Many discussions of education, including my own, involve critiques of formal schooling (Deakin Crick and Joldersma 2007; Joldersma and Deakin Crick 2010). However, in the very possibility of such criticism lays the idea that education is not the same as schooling, instead forming an implicit frame from which such critique can be launched. In my own case I have often argued that schooling needs to heed more clearly the call of ethics and justice (Joldersma 2002, 2006, 2008a, b, 2009a). This critique suggests that something more basic frames schooling, something that we might call education.

In this essay I will focus directly on education as such. I will sketch out a more fundamental understanding of education, depicting it as something intrinsic to the very fabric of being human. I will first connect the notion of education to a primordial way of being human, something I will call *understanding*. I will join this to the idea that an originary relation with others calls one's understanding to account, something I will call *ethics*. Connecting education to understanding, a primordial way of being human, in the context of an originary ethical relation, brings to view its basic character. These two will jointly create the possibility of interpreting education as something fundamental.

To interpret education in this manner requires a brief foray into primordial ways of being as humans. As I have developed more fully elsewhere, humans are living creatures

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C. W. Joldersma (✉)  
Education Department, Calvin College, 3201 Burton S.E, Grand Rapids, MI 49546, USA  
e-mail: cjolders@calvin.edu

constituted from anonymous earthly elements (Joldersma 2008a). It is as if the fabric of the earth folded back onto itself, forming localized points of bounded interiority. Biologically and existentially, humans are complex systems of stable organization in dynamic relation with an external milieu. The system's boundary makes room for a certain level of freedom from its exterior. But the continued achievement of such interiorized freedom itself relies on life's heightened complexity, including a dependent, dynamic relation with its surroundings. This means that the independence of freedom paradoxically necessitates continual renewal and structural vigil against the inexorable forces of its surroundings to which it would otherwise yield. As such, human embodiment is novel independence that is at the same time heightened vulnerability, a duality of bodily intentionality. This pre-conscious intentionality can be thought of as *conatus*, the striving to live.

Striving to live occurs on earth. As such, *conatus* shows itself in two distinct, albeit related, modes. On the one hand, it involves a primal freedom that manifests itself most basically as enjoyment (Joldersma 2008a). Primordial freedom involves enjoying one's connection to the earth, marking the freedom of an independent interiority that finds itself in an environment through the joy of incoming sensibility. On the other hand, *conatus* involves a dependency that shows itself as anxiety. Primordial dependence involves being anxious about life's inescapable exposure and vulnerability to earth's potentially threatening forces (Joldersma 2009b). Precisely because the freedom of independence is conditioned by openness, the generosity of support of an enjoyable earth simultaneously is felt as the threat of a rumbling contingency to that life by that very same earth. The *conatus* associated with human embodied life is based simultaneously in a qualitatively novel enjoyable independence and in an emergent heightened anxious dependence. Enjoyment and worry are modes of being situated on earth (see also Joldersma 2009c).

The modes of striving to live on earth color the way we find ourselves living in a world. A world is a web of meanings within which humans are embedded and which are formed and reformed by our interactions with our environment. The meanings associated with living in a world show themselves most basically as possible affordances for engagement with our surroundings. Affordances are manifest prototypically through our handiness—exploring, touching, seeing, grasping, moving in, and manipulating our surroundings (see also Joldersma 2005). Through such handiness, which includes all our bodily engagements, the surroundings disclose themselves as possibilities to satisfy our strivings for life, enhancing the security of enjoyable living and dampening the threat to life of earth's vagaries. Meaning is most deeply the possible relations and practices associated with our safekeeping of earth's generosity, enhancing our enjoyment in security, while keeping at bay its threatening contingency, diminishing our anxiousness in vulnerability.

Perhaps because humans are a generalist species, living in a variety of bioregions in which we did not originate and for which we are not necessarily natively well suited, we cope in a less than determined way. By coping I mean enacted handiness aimed at enhancing life's security and reduces its danger. Perhaps precisely because humans are generalists, we are on the one hand able to *exploit* the amazing variety of habitats while on the other are not *instinctively* able cope well for life and flourishing. Although the success of coping is grounded in biologically-structured sensorimotor interactions with the milieu, it is something non-instinctive and improvisational. This generalized, contingent handiness supplements the lack of hard-wired nature. Because handiness is improvisational and non-instinctive in character, its generalized anticipations constitute what can be called *understanding*.

Understanding has an anticipatory character, something that situates humans in a meaningful world. Understanding's disclosures are provisional and possible, revealing the

world's *possible* affordances and our *possible* actions of improvisational handiness. Precisely because of its anticipatory character, understanding does not supply ready-made ways of engaging one's surroundings. Or conversely, because handiness is not instinctual, it is constituted through the possible ways our surroundings are available for use and interaction. Colored by the modes of anxiety and enjoyment, the possibilities of the understanding are embodied in the improvisationality of handiness, affording possible new meanings, anticipating possible new uses of things, interpreting the ways that the world shows itself for novel roles, actions and constructions. Understanding's anticipatory character is a forwarding projection of contingent possibilities for ever more successful ways of underdetermined coping. Understanding is, in this interpretation, a primordial way humans are in the world (see also Joldersma 2009c).

The understanding's anticipatory possibilities are not mere bare engagements with the world; instead, human handiness is oriented towards the creation of *dwelling*s. Dwellings are successful mediating structures that protect against earth's rumbling contingency while harnessing the resources of earth's generosity. The modes of anxiety and enjoyment orient the understanding's disclosure of possibilities towards the meanings associated with dwelling. At its most basic, the possibilities of availability—including material, place, use, relation, purpose—are meaningful in connection to ways of dwelling. Actual dwellings are the result of enacted handiness that have committed to the affordances disclosed in understanding. Although we rightly think of homes and other immediate shelters as dwellings, they extend to the dizzying array of possible and actual social structures, interaction patterns, institutions, organizations, regulations and practices. The creation of successful dwellings is not based in something instinctive, however, but as enacted improvisational handiness. As such, constructing dwellings forms the goal of handiness, a way of being intentionally within the world. Understanding is the embodied intentionality that anticipates the world *as* something so that dwellings can be successful in their mediation. Understanding is central in our primordial way inhabiting a world and living on earth via dwellings.

The mode of conatus we identified as vulnerability reveals also an original openness to other humans. Relationships with others take us into the realm of the ethical. By *ethics* I mean to indicate an asymmetric relation where the other human, as *other*, has a rightful claim on oneself. More strongly, the ethical breaks through the *self-directed* preservational character of conatus by calling one to responsibility. The core of the ethical relationship involves being responsible to another human, precisely as other rather than as a being like oneself. This shows itself in the understanding. The particulars of one's improvisational handiness, the understanding's projective possibilities, are not present ready-made, full-blown, let alone as if emerging entirely from within. Instead, from the day we are born, the increasing success of one's enacted handiness arises in openness to others, from interactions with their own improvisational prompts. Fundamental to understanding is human interdependence—a reliance on others for developing increased discriminations of our surroundings, improving the possibilities of improvisational handiness in creating successful dwellings. The very character of human understanding discloses the permanent possibility for, and inescapability of, human interdependence. The ethical thus manifests itself with respect to the understanding in a relation to the other that falls outside of one's anticipatory possibilities. As an ethical relation, the other is precisely outside of the reach of one's provisional interpretations of the world, while legitimately breaking through the particularities of those interpretations by calling them to account.

Of course, there is never just a single other with whom one has an ethical relationship. There is a third, a fourth, and a fifth. The ethical relation to any one other human is always

in the context of others, third parties we could call them (see Joldersma 2009a). This takes understanding beyond the individual ethical relation, into the realm of justice. Justice is a question of treating *each* other responsibly in the context of *all* the others. Justice requires comparison between others, even though each is unique and incomparable. The requirement of justice thus gives rise to conscious deliberation, reflective consciousness, a thoughtfulness that distances oneself from the immediate, singular responsibility. Justice is the collective call of *each* other on oneself, and by thoughtful extension, on each other human. The call of justice is the composite pull of all the ethical claims that each other makes on all the others, situating the ethical relation into a social matrix, the responsibility one has to *each* other in the context of *all* the others. Earlier I noted that social structures are ways of dwelling together, sedimented results of improvisational handiness that have remained over time in the quest to enhance a refuge for enjoyment and to diminish the hazards of life's vagaries. But dwellings can also rightly be interpreted as responses to the network of ethical claims of each other on all the others, that dwellings are also always situated within the call of justice.

Implicit throughout this entire discussion is education. Education is the contingent, non-instinctual, formative, dynamic development of understanding that occurs as we live with others in order to dwell together justly. We can identify education with both the understanding's non-instinctual anticipations of meaning for successful dwelling and its need *for* and responsibility *to* the other in the context of others to dwell with justice.

The improvisational, anticipatory character of the understanding reveals its educational necessity. Understanding's non-instinctual quality means that its continued development depends fundamentally on contingently acquired new anticipatory meanings. Its anticipatory nature, as possibilities, reveals understanding as something general, where the particulars of its projective possibilities require non-determined, i.e., educational, development. This includes the need to refine one's improvisational handiness and to add to one's repertoire of sensorimotor intentionalities. The modes of enjoyment and anxiety that orient understanding are not enough, but require education for successful mediating structures and practices that shelter. To live successfully on earth requires being educated about how to create dwellings. Successful living requires that one's understanding is developed in such a way that one's agency in creating stability and security of dwelling can be successful. Understanding fundamentally involves education. Because of understanding's nature, education is itself a central feature of the primordial condition of being human.

The primordial character of education is revealed in the understanding's inability not to be influenced by something incoming. The standing possibility of being disturbed discloses the understanding as a space for possible new meanings, new uses of things, and new ways of interpreting the world. The troubling character of such disturbances is their intrusion into the complacencies and settledness of one's interpretations of the world, including the adequacies of one's action in the world. One's enjoyment of settledness can always be disturbed by something coming from the outside. The freedom associated with the understanding's independence can always be called to account from a site outside of one's anticipations. More strongly, the possibility of being questioned is a core feature of one's understanding—current interpretations and possible actions are always vulnerable to being upset. Education names this permanent inability to refuse disturbance. Education's primordial character is thus situated in the possibility of being disturbed, involving something incoming that disquiets before one has the ability to judge its propriety. Education is grounded in an inescapable exposure to something that comes in from the outside,

a disturbance I have called inspiration (Joldersma 2008a). Inspiration breaks up the naïveté of one's understanding, showing its impermanence and contingency.

Inspiration uncovers education's mode of action. Disturbances in one's understanding does not by itself lead to more successful enacted handiness. Rather, inspiration shows possible inadequacies through a process of *distantiation*. More adequate interpretations of the world require a distancing from one's current provisional, partial, and possible understandings, something that happens by having one's own interpretations and actions called to account from the outside. This creates the space for arousing a critical posture towards oneself with respect to one's anticipations. Being called up short creates a gap between the projective possibilities of the understanding and one's naïve enjoyment of current anticipations. It is the process of distancing that makes disruptions into educative possibilities. Education occurs when an outside influence pulls one away from one's own current understandings. Being disrupted creates a space for questioning oneself. Distantiation is what makes possible being a question to oneself. Inspiration marks an originary, educative interdependence.

Inspiration, the disturbance that distances oneself from one's self-satisfaction and naïve enjoyment, typically comes from a relation to another *human being*. It is the other's calling one to account that creates the distance exposing the finitude and partiality of one's understanding. The relation to the other puts education into the realm of the ethical. The ethical inspiration that constitutes education involves the other, as a teacher. The other, as teacher, is located outside of one's understanding (Joldersma 2002, 2008a). The teacher has a rightful claim in calling one's anticipations to account. The core of this educational relation involves being responsible to the other precisely as teacher. Being responsible is disclosed through the distantiation that undermines one's felt self-sufficiency. The rupture of one's enjoyable understanding is directed, in being answerable to another human. More strongly, the distancing relation arising from the other *decenters* the self-centeredness of one's understanding in the struggle to live. Education is thus situated, fundamentally, in a relationship to another human being, as other. Education involves an asymmetric relation to someone who is outside of one's understanding. That is, the other is not just one of the projective possibilities within the anticipatory structure of understanding. Instead, the other who calls one's understanding to account, is located outside of one's expectations and anticipations, i.e., outside of one's world. It is precisely from that distance that one's understanding can be called into question. Education can thus be construed as something for which one is structurally never quite ready. Being ready means being able to assimilate the incoming into one's current interpretations of the world, without significant change. It means being able to anticipate what is incoming. But that is the opposite of educationally being disturbed by something, being called into question. Education is always a little belated, precisely because it is a response to a teacher's questioning, unexpected and unforeseen. Education occurs, it seems, only when one arrives a little late to the teacher's disturbing intrusion.

Of course, for education to be ethical, the teacher's claim must not be felt as violent; instead, it must be welcomed (Joldersma 2011). Welcome returns us to the metaphor of dwelling, here expanded as the place from where one is hospitable to something incoming. Dwelling is a home, the comfortable place of familiarity from which one welcomes, a porous boundary where something or someone on the outside is invited in. The possibility of welcome shows oneself to already be dwelling somewhere, a particular place of meaningful familiarity. Without the familiarity that epitomizes one's dwelling, there could be no welcoming the disturbance of other as teacher, no educational hospitality for strangeness. That is, one must already, through the anticipatory structure of the understanding, be living

in a meaningful world, a world interpreted in particular ways through enacted improvisational handiness. Without an anchor in such freedom and independence, there would be no education, for then one could not welcome the distancing force of its disturbance. This invitation is also what makes the disturbance ethical, and as such, educational. The possibility of education means that one goes willingly against the grain of one's own freedom in understanding. As such, education is always hopeful. Hope is the expectation of something new and better beyond what one can anticipate. Thus the welcome associated with education is welcoming the unforeseen, something that comes from beyond the anticipatory projections of one's understanding. Hope is expecting something which one cannot foresee, an embodied response to inspiration. The ethical that helps constitute education involves such hope, through welcoming the disturbance that comes from the other as teacher.

Because of its relational character, education occurs in a social context. One's ethical responsibility to the other as teacher is compounded and divided by the existences of others as possible teachers. *Each* other human can be an other, someone located outside of one's understanding, who might call one's interpretations up short. With respect to one's understanding, there are other others who also stand outside of one's anticipations. This fundamental plurality rightfully divides one's attention and responsibility, showing the need for thoughtfulness. One's thoughtfulness requires further distanciation, away from the particular call embedded in each educational relationship, giving rise to a more fully-orbed reflective consciousness that deliberates about how to limit responsibility to any particular other in order to do justice to the other others. Education in its social matrix involves the responses one makes to the composite pull of all the claims made by many others as teachers. The educational response to any one other as teacher is thus social in character, situated in justice. The need to weigh and deliberate one's being questioned shows education's social character to be connected to the call of justice.

But the call of justice intrinsic to education goes further. The ethical disturbances of education also invite one to reorient one's interpretations and actions outwardly, for the sake of others, towards the welfare of third parties. The possibility of justice in the collective success of human dwelling depends on goodness, an inversion of one's striving for oneself, a reorienting of oneself towards the flourishing of others. The call of justice shows up when the others' claims on oneself appeals to one's goodness (see also Joldersma 2009a). The ethical interruptions involved in education unsettle not only one's personal striving for enjoyment, but also the very inward-directedness that is intrinsic to conatus. The ethical calls from others invite one's thoughtfulness to work on behalf of others, an appeal to a strange goodness within. Education involves calling attention to the goodness that might flow from oneself, with generosity. The spirit that animates education is an outward-directed distribution of responsibility across the network of relationships among humans, a continuous interruption of self-interested conatus with the goodness of one's concern for the welfare of others as other—those with whom one has little in common (see Joldersma 2009b). It turns out that the interruption required for understanding's development is also an entreaty to join others in being responsible for third parties, an appeal to one's goodness.

My interpretation of education is an attempt to see it as something basic to our humanity. As part of our primordial way of being human, education is intrinsic to understanding's functioning. At the same time education involves an ordinary ethical relation to the other, unsettling the self-directed character of the striving to live. And because of its social setting, the call of many others, education orients one to the social, to the call of justice.

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