

A Levinasian Ethics for Education's Commonplaces: Between Calling and Inspiration (Clarence W. Joldersma)

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Review of

A Levinasian Ethics for Education's Commonplaces: Between Calling and Inspiration

by Clarence W. Joldersma, New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014

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The final element of the ethical dynamics that give rise to education in formal schooling is the call of justice that comes from the world.... Education becomes completely visible when formal schooling is responsible to and inspired by the call of justice. (Joldersma, p. 117)

With these words, Clarence Joldersma concludes his book, underscoring its central theme of ethics, which “run[s] as a subterranean current” (p. 2) through each and every chapter, and in the conclusion to which he comes to the necessity of justice in education. It bookends the statement of the two major hypotheses outlined in the introduction: an ethical condition animates the dynamics of education, and education is always “a response to the call of justice” (p. 3).

Joldersma's book is timely, coming out in an era when education is strongly focused on utilitarian learning, controlled by benchmarks, outcomes, assessment, *etcetera*, an era when education is ruthlessly driven by the corporate and business models and their pressure to “build capacity.” An era, Joldersma writes, when education is “increasingly dominated ... by non-educational interests, including corporate profiteering through high-stakes testing, developing human capital for a globalizing economy, and domesticating compliance through a surveillance bureaucracy” (p. 113). Can Joldersma's reflection in this book help move schooling toward a more responsible, hopeful and just education, which would respond to the call of “the vulnerable of the world and the fragility of the earth” (p. 117)? How realistic is this “ethical hope” (p. 21) Joldersma advocates throughout his analysis?¹

This book is built on a solid framework, articulated through a remarkable interconnection and congruence of concepts clearly established in the introduction. The first lines immediately set an unambiguous distinction between “formal schooling” and “education.” Focusing on high school and undergraduate institutions, Joldersma's aim is to explore “education in the context of formal schooling” (p. 2). To that end, he skillfully structures his book around Schwab's “commonplaces of school” described in *The Practical* (1969): learner, teacher, subject matter, and milieu. It is a specific concept of ethics which supports the foundation of this book, based on Joldersma's fine understanding and novel use of Lévinas's key notions of ethics, justice, hope and responsibility, introduced in the first pages, further discussed in the first chapter, and revisited throughout the book, through his systematic analysis of learning, teaching, curriculum, and institutions.

¹ In a previous publication on Clarence Joldersma's book (Eg ea, 2015), I discussed the challenge of hope.

In the first chapter, Joldersma develops his concept of transcendence as related to what he calls “time immemorial” (p. 12)² and “time unforeseen” (p. 17). He further elaborates on this notion by skillfully connecting these two understandings of time to “form transcendent conditions for the present” (p. 11). One can “experience them only indirectly ... as traces, not fully present” (p. 10), and Joldersma names them “call” and “inspiration” (p. 4). The call refers to being “called to normative responsibility” and critique, and inspiration to “being inspired with a hope that motivates to action” (p. 4). It is through these two experiences that he means to interpret Schwab’s education commonplaces, on the premise that “call” and “inspiration” constitute their “structural conditions” (p. 4). Those themes will run throughout the chapters, articulated with Schwab’s “common places of school,” each chapter addressing respectively Learning, Teaching, Curriculum, and Institutions. Articulating his reflection around those concepts, Joldersma maintains a solid cohesion throughout his text with the strong themes of the “call” and “inspiration,” supporting his theoretical assertions with a sound use of current events.

Several important themes are skillfully articulated with the preceding concepts. In the second and third chapters, Joldersma describes the activities of learning and teaching as intersubjective relations. He sees learning occurring when the student experiences “a deep relation” (p. 30) to the teacher as Other, where he or she is unique for the teacher, and is inspired in welcoming the disturbance coming from the teacher as Other, which Joldersma links with ethics. According to him, “being a learner at its deepest, is being someone who welcomes an external disturbance, an inspiration that is ethical” (p. 23). Parallel to learning, teaching is when the student is the unique Other for the teacher, which Joldersma links with responsibility. In this conception of teaching, “at its deepest” (again, p. 44), the teacher experiences “a call to responsibility,” coming through the student as Other.

The metaphors of vision, listening, and tactful touch are deftly developed in the fourth chapter, where the world is introduced as a third element, a third “Other.” In his argument concerning curriculum, Joldersma affirms that each discipline “can also be viewed as so many different places for listening to and tactfully touching the world,” and “the categories of the curricular canon [are] so many ways of listening to and tactfully touching the world” (p. 86). Based on two concepts introduced by Lévinas, “listening” and “tactful touch,” Joldersma points out what is inadequate in the representational model of knowledge, calling upon the metaphors of understanding as “grasping” and “coming to grips with” (pp. 68-70 and 88-89),³ to which I would add “getting it,” and even “com-prehending.” Joldersma quotes Lévinas: “The hand delineates a world by drawing what it grasps from the element” (in Joldersma, p. 68) and “Earth and sky, hand and tool, body and other, condition knowledge and begin in an a priori way” (in Joldersma, p. 72). He points out that in the search for knowledge, understood as I call it “com-prehending” and “getting it,” the learner is hampered by the physical limitations of his or her own body, and the limited horizon of his or her world, “the implicit horizons of earth and sky,” which Lévinas calls “forgotten horizons” (in Joldersma, p. 72). Joldersma writes: “Cognition is conditioned by the incarnated, the embodied, the corporeal” (p. 72). He urges us to go beyond this representational knowledge, skillfully working the concepts of call and inspiration in the curriculum, revisiting subjectivity and responsibility, and introducing the notion of the teacher’s “trusteeship” (in particular, pp. 83 and 103).

I like how Joldersma connects his introduction of the world into the curriculum through listening and the tactful touch—thus introducing “an ethical orientation” (p. 81)—to Lévinas’s notion of “the third” and its relation to justice. This concept is developed in the fifth chapter, on institutions. In a previous essay, I discussed how Lévinas moves from ethics to justice by introducing a third “other” (Egée-Kuehne, 2012, p. 33), a move which Joldersma describes very clearly, for him the “third” being “other students” or the world.

² See also Lévinas, 1989, p. 84.

³ See also Lévinas, 1989, p. 76-77 for example.

In this same chapter, he makes a very cogent point about the aporia inherent in the institution: “while formal schooling is irreplaceable as a way to respond to the ethical call to responsibility, orienting action toward justice, it is also continually disrupted in that response by the same conditions that make it possible” (p. 89). Hence Joldersma’s words: “No responsible response to the call of justice is totally just” (p. 105).

Yet, with Emmanuel Lévinas and Clarence Joldersma, are we not striving to respond to the call for a just education? At the heart of education, do we not find Lévinas’s understanding of ethics as the “face-to-face” encounter with the Other, the student? And with all students, with the insertion of the “other others,” do we not find Lévinas’s movement toward justice, in which there may be the “idea of a possibility” of a just and equitable education?? Can we find this possibility by integrating Lévinas’s understanding of ethics, justice, and responsibility in an education increasingly driven by the corporate business model of profit and self-serving? It may be that, through a reading of Lévinas and his concepts of dis-interestedness and “the proximity of human plurality” (Lévinas, 1999b, p. 101), educators may understand the question—and the risks it carries—of the violence inherent in the struggle to affirm oneself and “the right-to-be”(Lévinas, 1985, p. 52),⁴ to protect one’s “place in the sun,” a concept also found at the heart of American education and of all education driven by the corporate and business model.⁵

For Lévinas, this raises several questions which Joldersma addresses very clearly. In particular, it raises the inevitable question of justice, when it is necessary to weigh, think, and judge within a relation of proximity, when everything is owed to each and every other, demanding the impossible, that is, “a comparison of incomparables” (Lévinas, 1999, p. 142). Thus the movement from ethics to justice is triggered by the entrance of the third (other students, or the world outside school in Joldersma’s education context) on the scene of the intersubjective relation between teacher and student. Lévinas wrote: “[I]t is ... the presence of a third party next to the Other, which condition[s] the law and establish[es] justice” (1985, p. 89). As noted by Joldersma (p. 98), in the development of Lévinas’s idea of justice, the sharing of responsibility is not dependent on the arrival of the third, but is already part and parcel of one’s responsibility to the Other. In *Totality and Infinity* (2004), Lévinas argues that the Other already carries a “third,” that is to say another Other: “The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other” (p. 213; cited in Joldersma, p. 98).

Lévinas’s concepts of ethics and justice have raised many questions.⁶ The most salient and frequently-voiced concern his writings about an ideal deemed impossible to achieve in an age of “dis-aster – an age without a guiding star” (Cohen, in Lévinas, 1987, p. 26), in a world which has lost its markers and has gone awry, in which “[t]here [is] no longer any measure to contain monstrosities” (Lévinas, 1996, p. 120). In his model of ethics and justice, he argues that responsibility to the Other implies responsibility to all others, which for him leads to responsibility for social justice, a concept in which he later included nature and the planet, the world—a move Joldersma makes in his own reflection when in Chapter 3 he emphasizes that teaching “must ... be connected to the world through the hope for justice” (p. 60). It is further developed in subsequent chapters, especially in Chapter 4, where he sets the world as the “third” whose call “creates a kind of responsibility that can be called *trusteeship*” (original emphasis, p. 82), and he describes teachers as “trustees of listening to and tactfully touching the world” (p. 82).

Although coming from different angles, both Natasha Levinson (2015) and Nicole Note (2014) see a problem in extending Lévinas’s concept of responsibility to the world. In her response to Joldersma’s book in

⁴ See also *Otherwise than Being* (1981), in which Lévinas discusses the concept of *dés-intér-essement* at length; *Ethics and Infinity* (1983); and *Outside the Subject* (1993), in particular in “The Meaning of Meanings.”

⁵ I have discussed Lévinas’s concepts of “*dés-intéressement*” and “proximity” at greater length in Egéa-Kuehne, 2003a, 2003b, and 2012.

⁶ See for example Jeffrey Dudiack (2001), Adriaan T. Peperzak (1993), and more recently Nicole Note (2014) and Natasha Levinson (2015).

“Author Meets Critics,” pointing out his references to responsibility and considerations of justice toward “those who have little voice in society and around the globe, the marginalized, the vulnerable, the poor” (Joldersma, p. 88), Levinson expresses her concern about two points. First, these considerations mostly come at the end of each chapter, with “the feel of something added” (p. 4), albeit with a longer list each time, as in a crescendo culminating at the end of Chapter 5 with the most extensive list to which must be added the physical environment,

in the context of a society that is filled with pain, suffering, woundedness. It is precisely in the cries and tears of suffering—the hunger of those who are without food, the struggle of those for whom there are no jobs, the pain of the abandoned in refugee camps, the poverty of inner city squalor, the ailments caused by industrial pollution, the danger to those ostracized by their communities, the destruction of civil world, the danger of sweatshops working conditions, the increasing gap between rich and poor, the gays and lesbians shun by our communities—where call and inspiration show up. (Joldersma, p. 111)

Second, Levinson is concerned about the magnitude of the task “trusted” to teachers and to schools, without a roadmap as it were. She writes: “It is not clear how the analysis that precedes the call helps us grapple with it” (p. 4).

Through another perspective, Note (2014) focuses on the “impossible possibility of environmental ethics,” and the difficulty and controversies around applying Lévinas’s concept of ethics in the human context to environmental ethics.⁷ She notes that Burggraeve (2008a) believed that Lévinas was aware of this difficulty, “of the risk of reducing the Other (albeit a non-human Other) into his horizon of understanding” (Note, 2014, p. 15, n. 2). Besides its daunting scope, this task of an ethical response to nature appears impossible inasmuch as Lévinas himself could not answer whether animals and nature could be “Others,” eluding being predictable, or perceivable, or thematizable. So Note turns to Lévinas’s concept of the “discreet Other,” the feminine in general (man or woman) which he briefly introduces in *Totality and Infinity* (2004, p. 154-156). What she finds particularly interesting and helpful is that Lévinas’s “discreet Other enables us, irrespective of gender, to fathom an additional and distinctive access to the world, creating the conditions for an ethical response to come about” (p. 8). Basing her reflection on the distinction Lévinas makes between sense and signification, and on the actual experiences of two students, she asks: “Could it be that ... we are invited rather than commanded to stop and look more attentively, with greater attention, ... to stop [attempting to make] the Other the same?” (p. 10).

To Levinson’s and Note’s concerns about whether justice can ever be achieved for “the vulnerable of the world and the fragility of the earth” (Joldersma, p. 117), we find in Joldersma’s book a response of unshakable hope and faith in the power of working towards justice. He writes: “The hope that arises in the world transforms into action” (p. 116). Certainly, he is aware of the gap between “the call for responsibility that comes from the student as other” and “the hope for justice that comes from the other others of the world” (p. 114). For what some deem a futile and impossible hope, he finds support in Lévinas’s texts, and also in Derrida’s.

Lévinas was convinced of the paramount importance of justice, and situated it at the core of “first philosophy,” which for him was ethics. He also saw that demanding justice for the Other was a return to a profound morality which defies ideology. In his model of ethics and justice, he argued that responsibility to the Other implies responsibility to all others, which for him leads to responsibility for social justice. With

⁷ Other authors have explored Lévinas’s notion of “the face” as a basis “to ground an environmental ethics” considering “the vulnerability of other living bodies” (creatures, earth), including but not limited to Lévinas, Wright, Hughes, and Ainley (1988), Roger Burggraeve (2008a, 2008b), Christian Diehm (2003), Adriaan Peperzak (1993), and Ted Toadvine (2003).

Lévinas, we can bring to education this “idea of a possibility,” and the promise of an ideal of education. Once more, I would like to recall the episode of St. Exupéry’s Little Prince asking for the drawing of a sheep—a Little Prince who is satisfied only with the sketch of a box where he is told a sheep is asleep. Remembering this episode, Lévinas declared: “I do not know how to draw the solution to insoluble problems.... I have no idea other than the idea of the idea that one should have.... I have the idea of a possibility in which the impossible may be sleeping” (Lévinas, 1999, p. 89).

For Jacques Derrida, a student of Lévinas’s, this condition of possibility simultaneous with the necessity of a condition of impossibility is closely linked to the notions of promise, of hope, of faith—a promise which can manifest itself only where there is disruption, where there exists a gap between, in this case, the present state of education and the possibility of an ideal of education, of a just education. In fact, it is in this very gap that education would be shaped. Without this gap, without this disjunction, education may simply believe, in all good conscience, that it has succeeded, that its duty is fulfilled, and therefore it may lose “the chance of the future, of the promise or the appeal” (Derrida, 1994, p. 28), that is, the chance of its own possibility. Conscious of this gap, Joldersma sees “[l]earning as an *educational* activity [which] emerges in the dynamic between the inspiration to hope coming through the teacher and the call to responsibility coming from the world” (original emphasis, p. 114). In this gap, Lévinas sees a possibility in which “the impossible may be sleeping” (1999, p. 89), but, wrote Derrida, “there is no responsibility that is not the experience and experiment of the impossible” (1992, pp. 44-45).

This line of reasoning is not limited to theoretical thinking or to knowledge in its general sense. As Lévinas showed throughout his life, as teacher and director at the *École normale israélite orientale* (ENIO, Paris, France), if met with responsibility, it is a thinking, a hope which, as Joldersma argues, calls for action, strives toward a possible future, which—because it is always in the making—remains a dynamic force and a promise of something to come. He writes: “The hope that arises in the world transforms into action” (p. 116). This hope stems from a sense of responsibility toward the Other, from a response to “the call of justice that comes from the world” (Joldersma, p. 117). Inspired by our non-indifference to “the vulnerable of the world and the fragility of the earth” (Joldersma, p. 117), we are moved into action. This tension between the state of education today and the hope for a more just and responsible education constitutes the force behind a thinking which “calls for the coming of an event, i.e., calls precisely for that which ‘changes’” (Derrida, 1999, p. 257), that which helps shape an education based on the respect of the Other, where violence would have no place, and responsibility would be the foundation for learning and teaching, for designing curricula, and for leading institutions.

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