An Ethics of Rhythm and the Philosophical As-If

Educational Aporia and Reimagining Justice as Interdependence*

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An Ethics of Rhythm¹

A conception of justice is dependent on thinking justice – that is, a conception of justice that is at the same time situated in time and place but also located at places that do not exist (yet). Investigation into how a powerful notion of justice could be restored today is needed for two reasons: Firstly, because the world is fundamentally changing and calls us to be historically informed and at the same time adjust to new crises and challenges for an uncertain future. Secondly, a basic feature of pedagogical relationships is that there is always a present interdependence. Dependency relations as a starting point for justice is, for instance, discussed by Eva Kittay in her *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (2020).

This interdependence may take different forms. According to Mathisen (2015), Rudolf Steiner sees rhythms as a way of being and of relating, intending to create an atmosphere of solidarity and mutual respect in classrooms: “I would say that a musical quality must pervade the relationship between teachers and students” (Mathisen, 2015, p. 58) quoting Steiner 2004, p. 106). Seeing teachers as both “conveyors of prepared learning contents, but also as fellow humans sharing the time spent together at school in a fuller way” (Mathisen, 2015, p. 58). The relation between listening and participation or interrelation could be visualized as a rhythmic variation, or “rhythmically sustained relation” (Mathisen, 2015, p. 58) between someone talking and listening, being silent and repeating or remembering what the other has said (a kind of “mental sleeping” or wondering as Steiner frames it), and shifting tempo into a faster talking-speed. Where Steiner, however, connects this to his holistic understanding of the spiritual self and the developmental stages of a child, I find his call for increased fine-tuned listening and sensitivity for the other useful not only in a dialogue reminding us to be aware of how the tempo changes when you listen and when you speak, respectively, but as an existential ethos.

My argument is that listening to rhythms and following rhythms is a fundamental feature of educational justice, at the same time it informs a deeper

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understanding on the norms embedded in being together and being prepared for the unknown future. My hypothesis is that these two perspectives on educational justice will function as a relevant critique of current educational policies on educationalization and neo-liberal tendencies of seeing school as a primary socio-economic contributor to society.

**Living Together as Rhythmic Lives**

In a collection of lecture notes, *How to Live Together. Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces* (Barthes, 2012), Roland Barthes looks for the idiorhythmic life, which he sees glimpses of first and foremost in classic novels and texts. It is an invitation to think through how we can live together with respect for different life forms and rhythms, different individual life rhythms, and with the sufficient distance that a community requires (Barthes, 2012; Stene Johansen et al., 2018). Barthes introduces the concept of ‘idi-orhythmy’ (from Greek rhutmos) and systematically reviews both classical texts such as Thomas Manns’ *The Magic Mountain*, Defoes’ *Robinson Crusoe*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky, as well as actual and imagined places such as the monastery, the colony, a room, but also principles and conditions such as utopias, events, bureaucracies, marginalities, and beginnings, all of which promote fantasies about life rhythms and interactions between people and places. Barthes’ originality is shown first and foremost in how he shifts attention from living together as a confrontation between the self and the other to the question of rhythm, process rather than outcome, and finality (Tygstrup, 2018). Rhuthmos “is a rhythm that allows for approximation, for imperfection, for a supplement, a lack, an idios: what does not fit the structure, or would have to be made to fit (…) Now, only a subject (idios) can ‘delay’ rhythm – that is to say, bring it about” (Barthes, 2012, p. 35).

In Barthes’ exploration of life rhythms, the concept works as a prism to describe and critically reflect on literary and actual places where coexistence and interaction between rhythms are lived out. By uncovering some of the rhythms of life created in different communities, we see both how wonderfully organic and well-structured some places seem to be, and how vulnerable and alienated other life situations are. The individual rhythms of life are a “flexible, free, mobile rhythm” (Barthes, 2012, p. 35) that stands out in contrast to the disrhythmy (heterorhythmy) of others. Barthes gives, for instance, one striking example of an imposed life rhythm of a child:

> From my window (December 1. 1976), I see a mother pushing an empty stroller, holding her child by the hand. She walks at her own pace, imperturbably; the child, meanwhile, is being pulled, dragged alone, is forced to keep running, like an animal or one of Sade’s victims being whipped. She walks at her own pace, unaware of the fact that her son’s rhythm is different. And she’s his mother! (Barthes, 2012, p. 9)
In this example, the reader imagines both a disharmonious relationship between the mother and the child, as well as being reminded of possible alternatives, preferably and more desirable life situations. The coming-to-be-fantasy about a different way of relating between a mother and a child, still interdependent, but respecting the child as well as the mother, could be a ground for addressing present norms for educational justice. Our desire to be respected as an individual with life rhythms, shifting in time and place, stands out in opposition to our living together in an organized society with thoroughly regulated institutions and life schemas, appealing to flexibility, attentiveness, and a listening mood. Rethinking, exploring, and understanding how we live together respecting others’ personal boundaries, needs, and integrity, and how to organize different institutions and communities with respect for diversity, should therefore form a continuous part of the essence of educational justice and its arguments.

Rhythm arises, or becomes visible, when it meets power, according to Barthes. At the same time, the individual rhythm opposes power and wants to be flexible; i.e., it is not the case that an authoritarian social rhythm should be imposed on us. But the individual is also set in motion through participating in the rhythms of society; it is created in and it creates a coexistence with others. Idiorrhythm, therefore, has two interpretations (Tygstrup, 2018, p. 229); it refers both to a break with a common rhythm (the individual creates a rhythm that also creates the community), and it refers to the fact that it is the rhythm of the community that creates the individual and that we must live with and together in a social rhythm and a community.

Kittay and the Labour of Loving Relationships

According to Kittay (2020), the existence of caring relationships is not only an expression of love but also her starting point for criticizing classical liberal theories of justice for omitting responsibility for dependents outside the political, belonging to the citizens private rather than public, concerns (Kittay, 2020, p. 84). Conceptions of equality start from an interdependence surrounding all humans, a similarity identifying all persons, and not from the individual asserting characteristics pertaining to that person (Kittay, 2020, p. 31). However, for something to be a moral and political claim to equality, it has to be a certain kind of dependency, and to Kittay, this dependency is found in the relation between a dependent and her caregiver, as a connection-based equality rather than an individual-based one. This reconceptualization of equality to human dependency has thus moral obligations for social and political organization. “The nesting dependencies extend beyond the state, for these are nested in larger regional and global economic and political orders” (Kittay, 2011, p. 119).

But what are the moral claims of a relational subject, and on what normative grounds can we accept contextual reasoning and responsiveness as bases for moral judgements Kittay, 2020, p. 66)?
Rhythm towards an Uncertain Future

The concept of rhythm is itself aimed at an uncertain future. When rhythms are repeated in a body, by a child being pulled by his mother or a student repeating arguments for a theory, there is always a new event that takes place. A “repeated” rhythm is not a repeated sameness but is always rhythm differentiated, always potentially “poly-rhythmic” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). A rhythm is simultaneously something that occurs every time and again, and is thus a promise of a new beginning, a becoming. A hug can never be exactly the same as another hug, a played note can never be played exactly the same way again, given that it is a new voice that sings it, a new finger that hits the piano key – so, too, an educational relationship can never be fully controlled. There is always a new imitation: even if we repeat something, reread a text, for example, something new enters the world.

In other words, rhythm happens with some kind of intention in relations, not as a blind repetition, nor as an impulse (Brighenti and Kärrholm, 2018). At the same time, our individual lives, more than anything, are repetitions in a largely similar rhythm, wanting a life dominated by repetitions – and, as Barthes says, repetitions are rhythmic.

Rhuthmos, Paideia, and Ethical Dilemmas

I am not primarily concerned with how the use of rhythm can renew and stimulate didactics and different learning situations, the possibilities that lie in using rhythm awareness, body awareness, play, and improvisation as tools in pedagogy, but on the other hand, I see rhythm as an existential. That is, I am interested in describing the existence of de facto different rhythmic lives and communities, as these serve as critical lenses through which we may observe and reveal unjust practises, suppression, and power hierarchies.

As I see it, ethical insights are expressed primarily, but not exclusively, in our actions, in our way of being, and are dependent on us continuously justifying our actions – and, moreover, that they are first and foremost about ongoing reflections on the durability of these reasons. At the same time, ethical dilemmas are constantly and thus currently at stake, and have to be justified within different contexts in different parts of the world at different times. At the same time, the question of justice for, in, and through education is basically an ethical issue. How should we act, and how should we live together?

My first suggestion on the way forward to an ethics of rhythm is about not only respecting but also creating rhythms that facilitate a relationship between people; at the same time, an investigation into the rhythmic presence in interpersonal relationships can shed a critical light on conditions for togetherness, recognition, and, ultimately, love. And here I distinguish between flexible and shifting conditions and more or less predetermined bodily or material contingencies.

My second suggestion is that an ethics of rhythm can shed light on what promotes and inhibits recognition between people across our vulnerable
lives and the need for a renewal of a philosophy of pedagogy. Here, I argue that philosophy itself has contributed to a certain oblivion regarding how we follow and create rhythmic societies and the demand for an idiorrhythm in opposition to power, and that “safeguards a flexible, free and mobile rhythm” (Barthes, 2012, p. 35). I argue that we need a more profound and fine-tuned listening attitude as a philosophical-ethical turning point and guideline, stimulated by imagination of different and unknown rhythmic lives.

Barthes understands the Greek word for education and learning, *paideia*, as a way of exercising and stimulating the imagination and a ‘fantasmatic’ thinking. All of us academics, he stresses, should – at least once a year – set out to conduct a research project induced by a fantasy, unfolded by experiences and imagination. Barthes shows us that imagination is not the opposite of reason, of the rational and logical; rather, through imagination, we can experience counter-perceptions, opposites, and ambiguous scenarios, images and counter-images. In Barthes’ thinking, imagination is an open source of knowledge. Living together is not only something that happens in a place, but it also happens in time, and through imagination, a transcendence of place and time occurs – through chronotopos or temporal imagination (Stene Johansen et al., 2018; Bondevik and Bostad, 2021). Imagination requires a place, a scenario. Barthes compares the imagination to an abrupt floodlight where the imagination leads the way and sheds some disruptive light on selected fields. Simultaneously, there is no direct transition between literary simulations and moral actions, according to Barthes. It is the philosophical space of opportunity that opens up and with a certain normative requirement perhaps to look for, look around, and imagine more or less harmonious communities – and, in this way, a space of solidarity may emerge.

**Rhythm and Time**

Rhythm is closely connected to time. A rhythm happens in time – *expressing* time, one could say. Our bodies are rhythmic in the sense that they are always in motion. Here, we can for a moment lean on Aristotle and his four types of motion or change: the quantitative change (our body grows, we put on weight or lose weight, our hair grows, it falls off) and the qualitative change (we develop identities and habits and change characteristics, from being diligent in a subject or learning to knit, then get a disease and have to learn it all over again—it goes more slowly, time passes and rhythms are changed). And the third type of change is change of place: we may move to another country where the rhythm of life is different and we have to adjust in one way or the other, learning to live with it, or we are refugees having to flee and finding ourselves in a reception centre in a foreign country with an unknown circadian rhythm (dinner at five and not at nine, the light goes out in the corridor at ten). And the last of the Aristotelian types of change of motion is the substantial change: when we change fundamentally or existentially from being alive to being dead. Then, we are no more, and our rhythm of life ceases into complete rest.
And as I see it, placing a concept of rhythms (inspired by Barthes idiorhythms or individual life rhythms) in time, or as time, provokes a normative scale and a mapping or measuring indicator seems to emerge; being diagnosed with a developmental delay for a child, for instance, signifies a specific standardized life rhythm. And the consequences of different kinds of standardized divisions into time and time limits, duration of school hours, length of free time in relation to children’s life rhythms, etc., appear essential to education. So, we must ask ourselves: In what way could time as a qualitative measurement of progress promote or hinder educational justice?

A Room of Harmony or Disharmony

To create a rhythm is also a verb, closely connected to harmony or harmonious forms and structure, as, for instance, seen in My School by Tagore, where education and upbringing are characterized as a form of harmony. An ethics of rhythm linked to education as a pedagogical room (Bostad and Solberg, 2022) calls upon us to ask how our bodily rhythms may constitute a room with certain harmony or disharmony, whether the distance between people in different public places and in institutions like schools are regulated so as to maintain and also preserve human integrity, or whether the experience of living together and respecting different life rhythms, different expectations and needs, desires and longings, cannot be taught or translated from one culture to another – only seen as an invitation to investigate how much distance we can tolerate in interpersonal situations, in everyday life, and in social spaces (Bostad, 2018).

In Marxist terms, being alienated as a human being is partly due to the structure or system of labour and profit, where being unable to practice solidarity towards your neighbour is embedded in the system: alienation resembling what, according to Barthes’s conceptual apparatus, may be labelled an ‘architecture of hyper-distance’, an overgrown or ‘muted distance’. In other words: what forms of alienation prevent or promote just education, and in what way is this about respecting life rhythms and ‘time autonomy’? The concept of distance (Bostad, 2018) is seen as a prism through which we are aware of the inflicted alienation – as, for instance, seen in the monastery where the distance between young boys and older monks is part of the routine that both prohibits and stimulates the desire after bodily closeness and thus creates alienation between people to prevent human desire: this is another backdrop of increasing community engagement and community participation – as well as increasing spaces for interacting.

In Barthes’ more complex concept of distance and bodily rhythm, it is also the child who guides the mother, at the same time wanting to create distance, which I interpret as respect for boundaries.

Pedagogical Tact and Rhythm

Now, let me turn to Herbart’s use of the concept of pedagogical tact, which could be said to refer to the ability of an educator/teacher to interrelate
pedagogical theory and practice, or between pedagogy as a science and the art of education, with the individuality of the single case. Herbart introduces the concept of tact in “The First Lectures on Pedagogy” (Die ersten Vorlesungen über Pädagogik) in 1802 (Herbart, 1964). He argues that tact can only evolve from practice and is “a quick judgment and decision, not proceeding like routine, eternally uniform, (…), it at the same time answers the true requirements of the individual case” (p. 20) and, further, is “a mode of action which depends on the teacher acting on (his) feeling and only remotely on his conviction, a mode of action rather giving vent to his inner movement, expressing how he has been affected”.

And along with this, I will elaborate on how tact forms itself in the teacher and how it is performed in practices within special education institutions. Transferred to the pedagogical relationship between, for example, a mentally disabled person and a pedagogue, we can say that there is a precedent if the teaching is based on a predefined, theoretical framework and does not primarily start with listening to the other’s rhythm. The one central source of knowledge is listening, we can say, while the secondary is theories and methods.

At the same time, there is a basic hermeneutical insight here: what we experience while listening is largely made possible through our newly experienced horizon of understanding. This progress and decline are nevertheless not a counter-argument against separating primary from secondary knowledge bases: having listening competence or rhythmic competence is therefore a prerequisite for being responsive in the individual situation (see also Weisethaunet, 2021). We can say that a newcomer in a classroom cannot be included and understood theoretically but must be read, felt and experienced.

The Boy with the Cloth

Peter is 17 years old and arrives at a boarding school institution for youth with disabilities, with an assistant named Knut. Peter has very restless body language and holds a large square of light cloth in front of his face. Knut tries to hold Peter’s hand but has to let go several times when Peter runs away from him. Knut looks tired. Peter makes a stream of loud noises that vary between exclamations and repetitive mumbling. It is Peter’s first day in the boarding school, and he is unfamiliar with the staff and the other students who live there. One of the older and experienced female employees walks over to Peter and leads him into the living room. She sits him on her lap and begins to sing into his ear as she rocks him slowly from side to side. Peter still has the cloth in front of his face. After a while, he calms down a bit, but a few minutes later, he breaks out of her lap and strikes out with his arms and kicks his legs on the floor. Another female employee with yet many years of experience has been sitting and watching and now approaches Peter. She sits down next to him and lifts him into her arms. She, too, sings into Peter’s ear as she rocks him from side to side. The same thing happens: Peter calms down for a while before he becomes restless again and breaks free. A third employee, also with many years of experience, takes over, sitting Peter on his
lap. As it continues, the employees take turns holding Peter, and after a while, the rhythm of the rocking calms him down. Knut sits next to him and watches. After a few days, Peter is more relaxed. The music is used more systematically by scheduling a time thrice daily when Peter is invited to sit next to or on the lap of one of the employees while they sing in his ear. After a few weeks, they replace the cloth with a toy animal – a monkey with soft fur.

This story about the ‘boy with the cloth’ is a single example of how rhythms are redirected by professional teachers: how singing in the ear and using a lullaby that soothes and provides care and warmth respectfully follows another person’s rhythm. Here, we also see a parallel to the pedagogy of music. Practicing a listening attitude is a question of listening to, and trying to understand, the premises of music itself (Weisethanuet, 2021) – and in school or in a pedagogical relationship, being responsive to the other person’s own experiences, feelings, and life situations are fundamental.

A Rhythmic Justice

We can think quite concretely: when initiating a lesson in sign language for a deaf-mute girl, we must, together with her, explore new and often unfamiliar ways of understanding something. Her rhythm has a different rhythm, we might say. The rhythmic justice rests on a recognition that there is no obvious way for her to learn a new sign, and we must recognize that different children are not necessarily better at communicating than others simply because they follow or imitate the traditional signs. At the same time, tact has a double meaning: it can be dogmatic, to keep pace, but also tactile, as in being touched by the other.

Being a good educator, according to Herbart, “is solely this – how tact forms itself in him (so as to be faithful or so as to be false to the laws enunciated by pedagogic science in its universality?)” (Herbart, 1964, pp. 20–21). “It is only performed during practice, and by the action of our practical experiences upon our feelings. This action will result differently as we are differently attuned. On this, our mental attuning, we can and should act by reflection” (Herbart, 1964, p. 21). Pedagogical imagination is “a practice for what is in the making, which is created in that which is fulfilled, when a question gives an unexpected answer, or a relationship is confirmed or denied by a new insight and cohesion” (Lovlie, 2015).

In reform pedagogy, we see arguments for how the child’s own pace, its natural development and exploration, is fundamental for teaching: the child should give the teacher the instructions she needs, as seen for instance in the works of the Norwegian reform pedagogue and school leader Anna Sethne (Løyte Harboe, 2021)

The Ethics of Listening

In his essay “Ecoute” (2012), Barthes describes listening as an act of creativity, it re-creates music with the body. According to Barthes, being together
(ensemble) has a double meaning, referring to an orchestra, but also to the ensemble as a metaphor for life – where we, in occasional glimpses, experience a fine-tuned interaction as a collective (Refsum, 2018). Barthes seems to imply that to listen is to be sensitive both to your own biorhythm and to others, and to be present: the sound is simultaneously in our ears and at the same time in the room, intimate and social.

The interdependence between the listener and the one who listens expresses relational responsibility as well as new beginnings. Listening to silence is part of a rhythmic attentiveness to body language in caring for persons with severe mental disabilities. Creating rhythms to facilitate the mentally handicapped and following their rhythms enhances and fosters recognition and respect. Listening in the sense of taking the other seriously, following alongside an interest in and focus on the other (and here lies the critique of a philosophy of pedagogy), requires both knowledge and a culture of attitudes and respect for the unknown (see also Kristeva, 2008; Kittay, 2009, 2020; Lindemann, 2010; Bostad and Hanisch, 2016; Grue, 2019; Hanisch et al., 2021).

An Existential Relationship

In her writings, Julia Kristeva has emphasized the unknown and foreign in every human being, and that we are ‘foreign’ to ourselves, as well (for example, in her books Strangers to Ourselves (1991) and Letters to the President: On People with Disabilities (2008)). This can be interpreted in several ways: first, that we need to see ourselves through the eyes of others to see what we do not normally see; secondly, in order to understand oneself, one must have an idea of oneself seen from the outside; or thirdly, that our identity is constantly changing, and therefore we also become strangers to ourselves (Bostad, 2010).

According to Kristeva, it is not the case that man has a fixed or unchanging identity, nor is it the case that there is an ideal identity or a norm that everyone can or should strive for. Rather, we are all affected by a changing world. This perspective that we find in Kristeva can therefore emphasize the insight of the discourse of formation or Bildung that is so important today: we must, as I see it, avoid one-sided education based on performance goals or pre-defined rhythmic-regulated settings, or the belief in absolute goal achievement; it is the process that takes place that initiates a deeper reflection – often a learning of something we previously took for granted – towards a greater trust and commitment to the outside world. At the same time, defining or setting up ideals for personal development and growth is something that can hinder, discriminate against and suspend the freedom of people who fall outside the stamp of normality.

Kristeva emphasizes that it is necessary to see a society (or a nation) as a melting pot of strangers in order for it to be regarded as an almost-free society. At the same time, this political relationship will be reflected in an existential relationship: living with others, with strangers, confronts us with how we
want to be part of or avoid the unknown in others. Seeing oneself in the light of the foreign also leads to a self-reflection of oneself, either as more similar or more different, as stronger or weaker, and we try to restore order by incorporating the unknown into what we already know. Kristeva emphasizes how categorizing others as strangers or as different protects us from the unknown in ourselves.

**Towards an Ethics of Rhythm?**

As we have seen, rhythm arises, or becomes visible when it meets power, according to Barthes. At the same time, the individual rhythm opposes power and wants to be flexible, i.e. it is not the case that an authoritarian social rhythm should be imposed on us. But the individual is also created through participating in the rhythms of society; it is created in, and it creates, a coexistence with others. Idiorrhythm, therefore, has two interpretations (Tygstrup, 2018, p. 229); it refers both to a break with a common rhythm (the individual creates a rhythm that also creates the community), and it refers to the fact that it is the rhythm of the community that creates the individual and that we must live with and together in a social rhythm and a community. What does the rhythm of recognition sound like? In this chapter, I have tried to apply a concept of rhythmic pedagogy to the human way of life and interpersonal relationships. That we live different rhythmic lives opens up fundamental challenges about how we can think about educational justice today: how do we live together and at the same time recognize different rhythmic lives? How can we be inspired to live more spontaneous and less repetitive lives? How can we be more alert to differences and uniqueness? And, as I see it, pedagogical philosophy can show us a more humane life through examining, experiencing, and better understanding a rhythmic presence in our interpersonal relationships.

**Notes**


2 In 1977, the French literary theorist Roland Barthes, newly appointed professor at the College de France in Paris, introduced the concept of ‘idiorrhythm’ in his opening lecture on the semiology of literature; the title of the lecture was “Comment vivre ensemble. How to Live Together: Literary Simulations of Everyday Spaces”.

3 This story describes a real observation I had in 2018; it is rewritten; names are changed so as to preserve the involved persons their integrity and privacy.

4 ‘Den er mellomrommet, pausen og ettertanken del av det vi kaller pedagogisk fantasi. Takt er med andre ord en praksis for det som er i emning, som blir til i det den fullbyrdes, som når et spørsmål gir et uventet svar, eller et forhold bekreftes eller avkreftes ved en ny innsikt og samhørighet’. My translation to English.
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