

# *The Meaning and Significance of Moral Disquiet and Other Related Phenomena: Fear, Distress, Critique, and Tact*

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## Abstract

In this text, I explore the phenomenon of moral disquiet as an existential phenomenon with its invariant qualities. This intention makes the paper both methodological and educational. The reason I consider it worthwhile to explore moral disquiet and distinguish this phenomenon from other phenomena is twofold. First, I want to establish a reliable phenomenological research basis and an argument for moral disquiet as an educationally relevant quality. Second, as an educationally relevant quality, moral disquiet must imply phenomenological clarity to avoid confusion with other phenomena that are similar but not the same. I start by exploring the two words ‘moral’ and ‘disquiet’ that constitute the phenomenon ‘moral disquiet’. I explore the word disquiet in relation to three related phenomena: fear, distress, and critique. Then I investigate the connection between moral disquiet and tact as presented by van Manen. Finally, I bring in methodological and epistemological arguments to try to substantiate what I have been doing and why the phenomenon of ‘moral disquiet’ is a highly significant educational issue.

**Keywords:** Moral disquiet, phenomenology of practice, professional practice, event, responsibility

## Interruptions

*Water drips from the sink  
It repeats itself again and again  
(as if to be sure that I listen)  
The sound does not bother me, at least not directly  
It has probably been there for a while, without me noticing it*

*I count seconds between each drop  
until I think I know its rhythm and tempo  
If it's delayed a fraction of a second, I notice it  
and wait for its next step  
– the next drip*

*It becomes kind of immersive,  
as if the sound demands my attention,  
intervenes my presence in such a way that  
it almost feels like it is a part of me,  
a disruptive, invasive part that calls for me to do something  
– anything to stop the dripping.<sup>1</sup>*

In everyday living and practices, we often experience interruptions in our daily flow. For example, a sound, a vision, a thought, or another human being interrupts us. Interruptions come in many shapes and forms. Some are expected. We foresee them and are waiting for them. They happen on a regular basis and are organized in time and place, like the alarm clock, the school bell, or our phone ringing from time to time. We may be used to these interruptions in such a way that we miss them when they do not occur. Other interruptions are random and unpredictable. A visitor knocks at our door when we are about to leave the house or go to bed. Or, we suddenly become aware of a recurring, invasive sound, like water dripping from the sink that calls on us to do something. Some interruptions please us. The visitor might be a dear friend we have not seen for a while, a beloved relative, or a surprising flower delivery. We might be interrupted or surprised by a child's or a student's sudden seeing of something – their recognition of something that before was hard to grasp. Such interruptions tend to make us happy. However, others may not.

Lisa, a kindergarten teacher student, tells of an episode that disturbed her:

*It is the weekly hiking day in kindergarten. I walk together with two children a short distance behind the rest of the group. We are in no hurry. We take stops along the way and talk about what we see and things that come to our mind. It is sunny and the atmosphere is harmonious. I feel that I have an overview of the situation as we move towards our regular hiking place. Then, suddenly, I hear a harsh voice, and my attention shifts. "You never listen. Why don't you ever listen to instructions?" It is an assistant raising her voice to one of the children.*

Lisa's temporal state of being is immediately interrupted by something from the outside – a loud voice grasps her attention, and she turns to the concrete event that is unfolding in the now. What she sees and senses make her uneasy. But what is this sudden turn of attention? What is it that uneases her?

### **A break of continuity**

The sudden turn of a situation and a state of being is recognisable as a common, everyday life experience. Most of us can recognize the lived experience of overhearing a parent correcting a child in what we perceive as an inappropriate manner. We can also recognize the lived experience of running into an overheated discussion at the office. Such experiences might make us wonder: Did I just hear that? Did she really say what I think she said? What happened there? In such situations, we are forced to stop our flow of action because someone or something calls for our immediate attention (Torsteinson &

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<sup>1</sup> Written by the author.

Saevi, 2022). Our immediate understanding of the world, how we suddenly find ourselves in situations like that, is “sensed or felt rather than thought – and it may not even be sensed or felt directly with attention” (Gendlin, 2018, p. 196). It can rather be bodily sensed, as a tight feeling in the stomach or in the chest. Or, it incorporates our whole body. Heidegger (1962/2008, p. 174) refers to the way in which we find ourselves as *Befindlichkeit* [sich befinden] (Gendlin, 2018). The term is often understood as a feeling, affect, mood, or a state (of mind).

Gendlin, however, emphasizes that *Befindlichkeit* refers to “the kind of beings that humans *are*” (2018, p. 195, emphasis added), the aspect that makes it possible for us to experience moods, feelings, and emotions at all. It is “both inward and outward, but before a split between inside and outside has been made” (p. 195). Hence, our understanding of the world can be implicit and bodily felt, as an interruption rising with the lived experience (and thus the human being) (Gendlin, 2018). This also means that every situation is experienced differently by different people, precisely because what we understand is related to who and how we are. What is interruptive to one, might thus be out of sight for another. Etymologically, the word ‘interruption’ means “a break of continuity”<sup>2</sup>, and the verb to ‘interrupt’ derives from the 14c Latin *interrumpere*, meaning “a breaking apart, break through, break in upon [or] disturb the action”, from *inter-* (between) and *-rumpere* (to break)<sup>3</sup>. According to Merleau-Ponty (2000), we are inextricably linked to the world around us. In a sense, we *are* what we perceive. We are the sounds we hear, the images we see, and the time and place we are embedded in. A change in the world, a break of continuity, is thus a change *in* and *of* our being.

In the example above, the continuity of Lisa’s sense of self was disturbed, and her attention turned to the assistant and the child. The interruption and her sense of self is not inwardly oriented or related to something that might irritate her, like an intrusive sound that she wants to turn off. Instead, her attention and concern are directed towards the child, another being, as a personal call. She tells: “Perhaps it was only me that was upset by it. I don’t know... No one else responded. But this situation keeps coming back to me”. Disturbing experiences often come back to us and make us (re)think, (re)reflect, and (re)consider the experience. We might say that such an experience haunts us through constant reminders. Perhaps we refrain from acting and later wish we had acted, like Lisa, or we act and regret our action (Torsteinson & Saevi, 2022; 2023), or feel that something is undone. Disquieting moments seem to repeat themselves and continue to interrupt. They linger with us. What is it with interruptive events that continue to revisit, (re)interrupt, and bother us?

### **Moral Disquiet as Lived Experience**

In phenomenology of practice, we draw attention to experiences as lived through pre-reflectively (van Manen, 2014). This means that we explore a phenomenon, like moral disquiet, as *lived* in the moment of the now - before we can reflect on it. Life is experienced before it is thought, van Manen (2014) reminds us: “The past is always too late to capture the present as present” (p. 59). In our “always-too-lates” also lie our

<sup>2</sup> [interruption | Search Online Etymology Dictionary \(etymonline.com\)](https://www.etymonline.com/dictionary/interruption)

<sup>3</sup> [interrupt | Search Online Etymology Dictionary \(etymonline.com\)](https://www.etymonline.com/dictionary/interrupt)

inadequacy and the indispensable point that we will never know the full meaning of our encounters with the world and its phenomena (van Manen, 2014). When thinking of past experiences, we momentarily distance ourselves from the experience itself, as the past is made into an object to our reflections and the *lived* quality of the event is gone. It will always be a looking back (van Manen, 2014). However, to “grasp” the meaning structures of a phenomenon as *lived through* is exactly what a phenomenologist tries to do by constantly questioning and staying with the phenomenon over time.

To Lisa, a rupture intervenes in her flow of time. She says: “It was like I forgot time and place. My attention was drawn to the event ahead of me, and I have forgotten what happened before and afterwards. But *that* situation stands out; the assistant’s words, the look on the boy’s face, the unease I felt, everything”. She is disquieted, but by what? Is it the fact that an assistant raised her voice to a child? Is it the words she said or the look on the child’s face? Was it the unexpectedness of the event? Her own regret for not responding in the moment? Or, perhaps all at once? And what distinguishes the lived experience of moral disquiet from adjacent phenomena, as fear, distress, or critique? To explore the phenomenon of moral disquiet, I gathered experiential material through interviews with thirteen third and last year students in three different professions; nurse education, social work education and kindergarten teacher education. The students<sup>4</sup> were asked to remember and retell an episode from their periods of practical training where they had been disturbed on the behalf of others. The examples they shared were transcribed, carefully analysed, and seen in relation to each other. In this paper, my concern is to do an eidetic reduction. In other words, I will see moral disquiet in relation to similar but different phenomena that appeared in the interview material and/or might be confused with it in everyday speech as well as in research. This helps reveal the phenomenon’s invariant qualities and is called “the process of variation in imagination” (van Manen, 2014, p. 228).

### **What is *moral* in Moral Disquiet?**

When experiencing moral disquiet, we are often taken aback of the event. We feel responsible on behalf of the other but might be unable to act as we see no possibility to ease the situation in the now (Torsteinson & Saevi, 2022; 2023). In the aftermath, we might regret that we did not act or wish we acted differently. But what does the word ‘moral’ mean in this context? The Cambridge Dictionary explains morality as “a set of personal and social standards for good or bad behaviour and character” or “a quality of being right, honest, or acceptable”<sup>5</sup>. The definition resonates with our understanding, but is there more to moral(ity)? Bauman (1993) adds another aspect to moral(ity) when he makes a distinction between ethics and moral(ity). To him ethics is understood as written rules, regulations, and laws, while moral(ity) is related to (moral) *practice in practice*. Moral anxiety “provides the only substance the moral self could ever have. What makes the moral self is the urge to do, not the knowledge of what is to be done; the unfulfilled task, not the duty correctly performed”, he says (p. 80). In this sense, we can never be entirely sure that our response to the world is “right” or “good” (Løgstrup, 2007). Even if our intentions are good and our response seems appropriate, we cannot fully overlook the

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<sup>4</sup> The students` names are fictitious.

<sup>5</sup> [MORALITY | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary](#)

consequences of our actions – neither in short nor in long terms. Bauman (1993) continues,

This uncertainty with no exit is precisely the foundation of morality. One recognizes morality by its gnawing sense of unfulfilledness, by its endemic dissatisfaction with itself. *The moral self is a self always haunted by the suspicion that it is not moral enough.* (p. 80)

Bauman's understanding allows moral(ity) to be an event in Romano's (2009) sense of the word, as a moment that is given to us – a possibility. Events, he says, "*are precisely nothing other than [the] reconfiguration of my possibilities, in which I am given the capacity to understand myself differently, by letting myself declare who I am through events*" (p. 54). Moral(ity) in this sense is both an opportunity to "see" something else and more and an opportunity to act – to step forth as an *I* (Biesta, 2020), more than something we *are* or *have* inside.

### **Moral(ity) as Event**

Moral(ity) as a possible act is seen in the movies of the Dardenne brothers, as acts that might come from anyone, unexpected and unanticipated. "The child" (Dardenne and Dardenne, 2005) describes the young couple Bruno (20) and Sonia (18) and their newborn son. To ease their economic situation and earn some quick money, Bruno decides, when Sonia is absent, to sell their baby on the black market. The one they have can be replaced by a new child, he comforts himself. Faced with Sonia's shock and despair Bruno tries to get their child back, an act that leads to new crimes and more complications. Steve, an underage criminal that helps Bruno to steal money for the payback of debts, is caught by the police and put in jail, while Bruno himself escapes. As time goes, Bruno realises that Steve will not inform on him and eventually he pleads guilty. Bruno acts on the possibility he is given, and Steve is released. Morality appears in a situation where we, the watchers of the movie, do not expect it and from someone we do not deem moral(ity) in the first place.

An event, in Romano's (2009) sense of the word, is a personal and immediate call. It differs from what he calls "innerwordly facts". Innerwordly facts, he says, "happen *to nobody*, or rather to nobody *in particular*" (p. 27), like the rhythm of the day, raindrops falling, a dog barking in the backyard. Such experiences are not necessarily directed to anyone in particular. They happen to several among us. On the contrary, an event singularizes and opens the world anew (and thus possibilities) for the person experiencing it, e.g. to plead guilty. In Bruno case, he chooses to take responsibility for the situation they have gotten into. He could have let it be. To Løgstrup (2007) the ontology of being human is related to what he calls "the sovereign expressions of life" (s. 52). Sovereign expressions of life are phenomena that ground our very existence, like trust, compassion, openness of speech, love, and hope. These phenomena are not visible to us, and "we are unaware of them" (p. 125) in our everyday life. "We are far too preoccupied with the things we are doing and have to accomplish and see through to the end [to see them]" (p. 125). "It takes crises, collision, and conflict for us to become aware of the expressions of life", Løgstrup says (p. 126). Hence, in their absence, we might, like Bruno in the movie, become aware of them, as a feeling of unease or disquiet.

## Disquiet and Related Phenomena

### Disquiet versus Fear

Disquiet is described as a “disprove of peace, rest, or tranquillity”<sup>6</sup>. Synonyms are uneasiness, worry for someone or something, unease, distress, anxiety, fear, and turmoil<sup>7</sup>. We might be disquieted by noise, disagreement or when we dread something. Likewise, disorder and material chaos might put us in unease. Stronger events like serious accidents or catastrophes might leave us paralyzed or in shock. We are unable to take in, relate to or act upon the situation. Also threatening situations might make us unable to act or think. A student nurse, Ingrid, in practical training at a centre for people with drug-addiction, recalls a moment when she feared for her own safety.

*I am in the middle of a conversation with my supervisor when he enters the room. He is large in size, and it is obvious to me that he is affected by drugs. The steps are unsteady, and his eyes are blurry. It is almost like he sees right through me. “Can I borrow the scissors?”, he asks. “No way”, I think. “Just a second”, my supervisor answers, and runs for a pair of scissors. I want to scream, but no words come out of my mouth. I want to run, but my feet feel glued to the floor. My supervisor is back in a minute. “Here you are”, she says and smile at the man as she hands over the scissors. “Thanks”, he responds, and leaves the room.*

Ingrid is worried by the fact that her supervisor actually hands over a pair of scissors to a person that she perceives as being in an unstable condition. Her supervisor, on the other hand, who probably knows the man better than the student, seems to have no worry about lending him the scissors. In contrast to Lisa’s experience above, Ingrid seems to fear for herself and her own life, more than she is worried about the life or life condition of the intruding person (or her supervisor). Although the person enters the situation from the outside, Ingrid’s awareness comes from herself and is oriented to herself. While moral disquiet is an existential phenomenon felt as a responsibility for the other, Ingrid’s sense of responsibility in the moment is for herself. On the other hand, responsibility as a response, an answer to or promise in return<sup>8</sup>, might be seen as a personal call coming from the outside (of oneself), a call *directed to me* (or you) personally (Torsteinson & Saevi, 2022). Moral disquiet thus turns to the other, while fear is oriented to oneself.

### Responsibility or Control

As parents and teachers, we are responsible for children and youths. We worry for them, hope that life will treat them well and try to help when life takes demanding turns. But we also are responsible for adults and in some situations, we give more or less good advice, or we demand something from them. Sometimes we even fix that which has gone wrong, for both adults and the young. But how far does our responsibility for others actually

<sup>6</sup> [disquiet | Search Online Etymology Dictionary \(etymonline.com\)](https://www.etymonline.com/dictionary/disquiet)

<sup>7</sup> [DISQUIET Synonyms: 70 Synonyms & Antonyms for DISQUIET | Thesaurus.com](https://www.thesaurus.com/synonyms/synonym.php?word=disquiet)

<sup>8</sup> [responsible | Search Online Etymology Dictionary \(etymonline.com\)](https://www.etymonline.com/dictionary/responsible)

reach? When are we taking over the responsibility that belongs to another? And what distinguishes responsibility as a personal call from responsibility as paternalism or control? The line might be blurred in practical life situations. Etymologically, the noun ‘paternalism’ means “the feeling of a father for his children” (from *paternal* + *ism*). The Cambridge Dictionary interprets paternalism as “the practice of controlling esp. employees or citizens in a way that is similar to that of a father controlling his children, by giving them what is beneficial but not allowing them responsibility or freedom of choice”<sup>9</sup>. In other words, freedom is a significant part of the difference between responsibility and control. What does this mean experientially?

Wilma, a social work student, describes a situation when care for someone’s comfort is disputed:

*We are in the middle of the daily afternoon routine at the nursing home and stand by the bed of an elderly lady. She is lying in bed, and I ask my supervisor if I shall go and get the wash basin. The diaper is full. My supervisor answers that it is not necessary, as she will get a new diaper tomorrow morning. I can’t help but resist. “But what if this person had been your grandmother?”, I ask, “What would you have done then? Would you have left your own grandmother overnight with a full diaper?”*

The student’s questions are perhaps (in)appropriate and do surely impair the power relation between the student and the professional. We may sympathize with Wilma and what she stands up for, but we could also hesitate to the way she corrects her colleague. It is an ethical problem, according to Levinas (1972/2006), to place responsibility on someone else’s shoulders. Responsibility as a personal call is given to me (or you) alone. It singularizes and is not something I can hand over to someone else. Responsibility must be taken up freely by the other (Levinas, 1972/2006). The colleague likely does not see the situation like Wilma does. Professional human practice always includes numerous perspectives to a situation and several ways in which we can perceive and encounter breakdowns of routines, disagreement, and resistance (Torsteinson & Saevi, 2022). But in the situation above, Wilma seems to be sure of what to do and what is right and wrong. She seems to have no doubts and corrects in a rather paternalistic way her colleague who does not see the situation as she does.

### **Moral Disquiet versus Moral Distress**

In nursing literature and psychologically oriented research studies, the term moral distress is commonly used (Deschenes et al., 2020; Jameton, 2017; Maeland et al., 2021; Morley et al., 2019; Sasso et al., 2016). The term was first introduced by Andrew Jameton (1984) in the book “Nursing Ethics: The Ethical Issue”, where he defines moral distress as “the experience of knowing the right thing to do while being in a situation in which it is nearly impossible to do it” (Jameton, 2017, p. 617). As we see, Jameton’s original definition of moral distress refers to situations in which the professional *knows* the right thing to do but is prevented from doing so. Moral distress is also defined as “the psychological, emotional, and physiological suffering that may be experienced when we act in ways that

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<sup>9</sup> [PATERNALISM | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary](#)

are inconsistent with deeply held ethical values, principles or moral commitments” (Sasso et al., 2016, p. 524). To act inconsistently or *against* one’s beliefs, values or integrity over time is undoubtable demanding and might open for moral distress.

However, recent research literature expresses the need to expand the understanding of moral distress to also include both other occupational groups (not only nurses) and feelings of uncertainty and doubt (Fourie, 2017; Deschenes et al., 2020). Hence, there seems to exist different understandings of moral distress: one that seems to have similarities to control or paternalism (“knowing” what is right) and one that also opens for uncertainty and doubt. Etymologically, the word distress<sup>10</sup> dates back to late 13th century, meaning “circumstance that causes anxiety or hardship”. It derives from the Latin *districtus*, past participle of *distringere* (“draw apart, hinder”). The meaning of distress is relevant in professional human practices, where demands are numerous, manifold and often incompatible. As professional, one might be responsible for many patients or children and the time is limited. Whose needs should be given priority? Who should wait? The demands might draw us in different directions or apart, and we wonder whose call we should answer. In addition, overarching institutional rules, regulations and demands related to registration, mapping and documentation takes its toll, and might conflict with the responsibility we encounter in concrete situations. Where does our loyalty lie in professional work when we are drawn between different, perhaps equally important, tasks?

We might be stressed when we run out of time, or do not manage the tasks expected from us, or if workloads exceed a limited time schedule. We can also feel stressed if someone repeatedly nags at us, if our surroundings are too messy or loud or if we lack an overview of the situation. To be distressed can be a constant state, or it can occur frequently or seldom. It can be connected to a specific place, a situation, or a person. Research literature tends to present moral distress as something one should mitigate, cope with, or solve in one way or another (Maeland et al., 2021). Stress or distress are considered a personal “problem”, as lack of knowledge and a response to ethical dilemmas (Jansen et al., 2022; Sasso et al., 2016). Moral distress is also connected to what one perceives as wrongdoings in practice (Austin et al., 2005), a “reality shock” (Maeland et al., 2021) or as an organisational and system-oriented problem experienced at a personal level that influences the practitioner’s professional practice or personal life (Jansen et al., 2022). The consequences of moral distress appear to be blame of others or oneself, anger, frustration, depression or even compassion fatigue or burnout (Austin et al., 2013; Deschenes et al., 2020; Helmers, Palmer and Greenberg, 2020).

Moral distress, as it emerges in research literature, seems to place the phenomenon, or the “problem”, within an overarching system or as an individual “problem” to be solved. The term stress, indicating “hardship, adversity, force, pressure”<sup>11</sup>, easily gives connotations of something negative or hard, and indeed stressful situations are undoubtedly unpleasant. Within a psychological and diagnostic perspective, hardship, as moral distress, disquiet, or unease, often should be overcome, mastered, and controlled by for instance regulations, stricter regulations, or self-help techniques. As a common problem,

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<sup>10</sup> [distress | Search Online Etymology Dictionary \(etymonline.com\)](https://www.etymonline.com/dictionary/distress)

<sup>11</sup> [stress | Search Online Etymology Dictionary \(etymonline.com\)](https://www.etymonline.com/dictionary/stress)

stress often is considered from a sociological, critical, or system-oriented perspective and left to authorities and politicians to “take care” of. Phenomenology, on the other hand, is not after “causes and effects” or categorization of peoples’ opinions or behaviour. Nor is it after solutions to individual, institutional, or societal problems in forms of recommendations, advice, or regulations to control human practices. Instead, phenomenology *shows*. It is oriented towards life, and our immediate and pre-reflective encounter with the world. A phenomenologist thus accepts the world *as it is* without trying to control or fix it.

### Disquiet versus Critique

To be deprived of quiet, peace or rest is not necessarily negative. Pettersvold and Oestrem (2018) have studied what they call professional disquiet and show that “it usually starts with an uneasiness, an experience that something is amiss, or a feeling that the demands you face represent something other than what they pretend to be”<sup>12</sup> (2018, p. 20, my translation). The unease can be seen as a source to responsibility, judgement, and action, they assert (Pettersvold and Oestrem, 2018). A similar kind of professional unease appears in Johansen’s (2017) chronicle on unease in the nursing profession. She questions the medical treatment of elderly and sick in situations where palliative nursing and care would be more appropriate and tells about the first time she witnessed treatment of a patient against the patient's will. Johansen (2017) emphasises that nurses often encounter unease and contradictions in their practices as professionals. Following Pettersvold and Oestrem (2018), professional unease can be productive, as long as we listen to it, like “if we listen to the nurse who wants to relieve, when the doctor wants to treat [diseases]”<sup>13</sup> (Pettersvold and Oestrem, 2018 s. 22, my translation).

Likewise, Halaas (2017) is concerned with what we might call the researcher’s disquiet. Her approach is different, as she sees the unease from a phenomenological viewpoint. She claims that disquietude can be a guiding force that might strengthen the researcher’s ability to make judgements by paying attention to the phenomenon. The significance of paying attention to the unease is seen in relation to the complexity and tension connected to the practice of research and research methodology, especially within the field of professions and professional human practices. She sees disquiet in relation to discrepancy; an experience or a feeling that something is not right (Halaas, 2017). It is described as a bodily, pre-reflexive experience:

It can be uncomfortable and intrusive. The unease takes the form of a bad conscience. It becomes like a fever that I must pay attention to. It turns into an appeal to take responsibility, to use the position I have as a researcher to speak out about and work against abusive practices to promote a more dignified and empowering practice.<sup>14</sup> (Halaas, 2017, p. 227, my translation)

<sup>12</sup> Original text in Norwegian: “Det starter gjerne med uro, en opplevelse av at det er noe som skurrer, eller en fornemmelse av at kravene man står ovenfor, representerer noe annet enn det de gir seg ut for» (Pettersvold and Oestrem, 2018, p. 20).

<sup>13</sup> Original text in Norwegian: “[...] dersom vi lytter til sykepleieren som vil lindre, når legene vil behandle» (Pettersvold and Oestrem, 2018, p. 22).

<sup>14</sup> Original text in Norwegian: «Det kan føles ubehagelig og påtrengende. Uroen får ansikt av en dårlig samvittighet. Den blir som en feber som jeg må ta hensyn til. Den blir til en appell om å ta

Halaas (2017) describes the unease as an aspect of professional preparedness, which is both emotional and intellectual in nature; as a kind of “bodily sensation that is awakened by something uncertain or undefinable, by something that is not right or is unclear”<sup>15</sup> (p. 237, my translation). According to Halaas (2017), the feeling might be more or less conscious, awakened by value-based understandings and emerges at the same time as a personal responsibility that one cannot renounce. In this sense, the disquiet that Halaas describes has similarities with moral disquiet as an existential phenomenon. It also gives connotations to the Greek word *parrhesia*. Ordinarily, *parrhesia* is translated to “free speech” (Foucault, 2001). Etymologically, *parrhesiazesthai* (the one who speaks *parrhesia*), means “to say everything”, from *pan* (everything) and *rhema* (that which is said) (p. 12). Foucault (2001) sees *parrhesia* as a form of criticism.

*Parrhesia* is a form of criticism, either towards another or towards oneself, but always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor. The *parrhesiastes* is always less powerful than the one with whom he speaks. The *parrhesia* comes from “below”, as it were, and is directed towards “above”. (Foucault, 2001, p. 17-18)

### System-oriented Critique

Disquiet as a form of resistance, disagreement, criticism, or critique as introduced in the abovementioned studies, is recognizable within the field of education and professional human practice. We recognize it in professional practices as e.g. a counter voice to neoliberal mindsets and the emergence of New Public Management (NPM) within health care and educational institutions. The critics are concerned with the bureaucratization of professional practice, such as the consequences of economic savings, the strong tendency of efficiency, measurement, and calculation of people’s lives (see Zamojski, 2014; Madrussan, 2016; Biesta, 2017; Säfström, 2020; Hennem, Pettersvold and Oestrem, 2022). They also critique the fundamental distrust of professionalism and professional knowledge. As an example of the critique Zamojski (2014) writes: “*instead* of thinking, *instead* of being attentive, *instead* of creating their own educational practice, they [the teachers] were forced to work according to an externally imposed, standardized matrix of behaviour that could be indexed, measured, and reported” (p. 26).

Likewise, Rothuizen and Togsvard (2019) point to that the emphasis on effectiveness, bureaucratization, and streamlined systems to control education and professional human practices easily draw our attention to rules and regulations and therefore make us inattentive to pedagogy and human qualities that cannot be calculated and measured. We become inattentive to aspects that ground our very existence, as the sovereign expressions of life and aspects of practice that cannot be applied (Løgstrup, 2007). The very idea that everything should be useful and used for a purpose is problematic,

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ansvar, om å bruke den posisjonen jeg har som forsker, til å si ifra om og arbeide for endring av krenkende praksiser og for å fremme en mer verdig og myndiggjørende praksis» (Halaas, 2017, p. 227).

<sup>15</sup> Original text in Norwegian: «Den fremtrer ofte som en kroppslig fornemmelse som vekkes av noe uvisst, noe som ikke stemmer eller er uklart» (Halaas, 2017, p. 237).

according to Løgstrup. “The expression of life is not something to be applied”, he says, “[...] it can only be realized, as I realize myself in it” (p. 53). Thus, disagreement or critique manifested in us as an inner distress, disquiet, or unease can reveal aspects of professional practice that is hidden, easily overlooked, or ignored in our everyday practices. But unlike sudden interruptions, critique is often reflective and thought through. We have thought things through and disagree with a certain decision, institutional regulations or a practice.

Sudden interruptions have the quality to break through inattentiveness and what we easily take for granted, as an awakening of the *I* (Biesta, 2020). It might, however, lead to reflections in the aftermath (and perhaps also critique). But in the present moment, in the now, the experience of interruption is immediate and pre-reflective. It might be directed towards oneself or others, as a moral disquiet. When Lisa, in the example above, is disturbed on the behalf of the child, she does not only see the child. She also becomes attentive to herself and her own values and beliefs. In the moment of moral disquiet, she is thus confronted, not only by the child, but also by herself; who am I in this? Am I supposed to say or do something? If so, what? Moral disquiet thus seems to have a double character; in seeing the other, I also see myself. The person who experiences moral disquiet and the phenomenon itself are inextricable. This transition, Romano says, “from one sense of the world to the other is not something carried out by a “subject”, even involuntarily. Nor does this transition “succeed” an event or “proceed” from it. “*In its eventness, an event “is” itself this transition*” (2009, p. 69), as Lisa *is* the disquiet she senses on the behalf of the child. She *is* the transition from an egological state of being to an outside world orientation.

## The Notion of Tact and Moral Disquiet

Tact is another phenomenon related to moral disquiet that should be explored in this text. Etymologically, tact<sup>16</sup> derives from the Latin *tactus*, meaning “a touch, handling, sense of touch”. The Norwegian Language Council’s Dictionary describes tact as a touch, a feeling, or a sense for what is suitable in human interaction<sup>17</sup>. In addition, it is also referred to as a rhythmic sound or a rhythmic movement. Tact can be coupled with what Aristotle called *phronesis*. Phronesis is often associated with practical knowledge, practical ethics (morality) and practical wisdom (Green, 2009), and refers to the more undefinable, unpredictable, and variable aspects of our lifeworld. van Manen (2016) defines tact as the ability by the professional to “know[ing] what to do when you don’t know what to do”. An example from professional practice recalled by the nursing student, Nanna, might give us an experiential entrance to the phenomenon of tact:

*“Why is my wife still in bed? Why has not anyone taken care of her yet?”. His words reach me on my way through the corridor to another patient in the nursing home. The husband is obviously upset. On his way to the reception, he spots me. I am trapped. What do I do now? Should I go and get a more qualified nurse from the staff? Should I stay? His steps are firm as he moves towards me. As he approaches me, I wonder if I am the right person to meet him. Am I competent*

<sup>16</sup> [tact | Search Online Etymology Dictionary \(etymonline.com\)](https://www.etymonline.com)

<sup>17</sup> [takt - ordbokene.no \(ordbokene.no\)](https://ordbokene.no)

*enough? Do I have the knowledge needed to encounter him in a good manner? If he is after medical assistance, I could always get a nurse. But it seems to be something else. I recall the report this morning that said that he had been informed yesterday that his wife was too sick to move back home. "I heard about yesterday", I say, "I am sorry. This must be hard for you". He stops and looks at me, and I am glad that I decided to stay.*

Nanna could easily have left the situation. She could have handed the responsibility over to someone else. But she decides to stay and meet the situation as it evolves. She acts without recommendations and guidelines, and without knowing how her reaching out will be met by the other. Eventually, Nanna is glad that she stayed, as the situation turned out well, but there is no guarantee that our reaching out will have a good outcome. Even if we put all our effort and tactfulness in a situation or a relation, it can always turn out as a mishap or a failure (Bollnow, 2022). Thus, lack of tact or failure is always a possibility in professional human practices. To Herbart<sup>18</sup> (2022), tact emerges as closely related to both theory and practice. It is described as an attunement, a pedagogical disposition, or “a mode of action that gives vent to feelings and expresses how one has been affected from the outside. It shows one's emotional state rather than the results of one's thinking”, he says (2022, p. 32). With this, Herbart, as van Manen (2016), seems to acknowledge more undefinable, unplannable, and intuitive aspects of tact. This also implies that life is always more complex, ambiguous, and multi-layered than we can ever imagine or determine in general theories. Thus, we must be receptive to the uniqueness of every moment and the fact that we can never fully know the other or the situations we run into.

However, in order to form one's tact, as a practitioner, Herbart (2022) asserts, one must engage with precisely science. To him science coincides with theory (Wissenschaft), and through “reflections, reasoning and inquiry”; “the educator must prepare his head as well as his heart to correctly receive, perceive, feel, and judge the phenomena awaiting him and the situation in which he will be placed” (Herbart, 2022, p. 33). Therefore, tact, to Herbart (2022), “occupies the place that theory leaves vacant, and so becomes the immediate director of our practice” (p. 32). In this sense, Herbart seems to place tact somewhere in-between theoretical knowledge (the universal) and practical action (the singular), as a (re)integration of theoretical and practical knowledge (Friesen, 2022). But what does it mean to (re)integrate theory and practice? One can also ask if theory and practice ever have been separated, as theorizing is also a form of practice, and every theory builds on someone's practice examined and summarized in categories and systems. Theories, on the other hand, form and influence one's practice, and make practice more conscious. In this sense, theory and practice can be seen as two sides of one coin. Herbart says,

Only in action do we learn the art; only in this way do we acquire tact, aptitude, quickness and dexterity. But even in action, one learns this art only if one has earlier thoughtfully learned the science, made it one's own, attuned oneself

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<sup>18</sup> Historically, the notion of tact and tactfulness in the educational discourse was first introduced by Johann Friedrich Herbart in an introductory lecture on pedagogy to his students in 1802 (Friesen, 2022).

through it, and one is able to make sense of future experiences through it.  
(Herbart, 2022, p. 33)

Tact, to Herbart, thus “requires knowledge and forms of judgement that open up possibilities of tactful interaction [...]. An educator who has not been formally educated cannot be tactful” (Zirfas, 2022, p. 188). With this, he places tact within the field of professional practice. This also distinguishes tact from moral disquiet, which can happen to anyone everywhere, and does not necessarily rely on theories or formal education. Moral disquiet is not a feature or a skill that can be trained to reach a goal or a better or good outcome. It simply occurs – unexpectedly, as out of nowhere - and when it does, as with Lisa, we are taken aback *without* knowing what to do. How then are the two phenomena, tact and moral disquiet, related to each other? Are there any connections at all?

### **The connection between Pedagogical Tact and Moral Disquiet**

Tact is described as “knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do” (van Manen, 2016, p. 3). When experiencing moral disquiet, we are left alone with no foreseeable good outcomes of the situation (Torsteinson & Saevi, 2022). Perhaps all we can do in the moment is to be present in the situation; to *be there*, because there are no, or we see no, good response to the situation. Interestingly, the adjective present<sup>19</sup> means “being in the same place as someone or something” or “existing at the time”. The etymological roots derive from Latin *praesentem* (present, at sight, in hand) from present participle of *praesense*, meaning “be before (someone or something), be at hand”, from *prae-* (before) and *-esse* (to be). The noun present, deriving from Latin *praesens* (“being there”), also refer to a different meaning “what is offered or given as a gift”. We might say that being present (*being there*) in the time now passing, receptive to the world and that which is given, is a “gift” (Marion, 2012). The world as a gift, something given to us in the present helps us “see” the world differently, whether what we see is delightful or dreary. In this sense, moral disquiet is a phenomenon that has the capacity to break through chronological time (Torsteinson and Saevi, 2023), for instance by being a pause in our sense of time or by coming back to us as a reminder of something past.

The phenomenon of moral disquiet may let us see something we otherwise would not have seen, something that could easily slip our mind, be overlooked, or ignored in our everyday life and practices. Moral disquiet is a break in time where something other is given to me (or you) to take care of - either I succeed or not. The phenomenon of tact and moral disquiet are unique and singular phenomena having value and meaning in themselves. They both presuppose sensitivity and are required to possibly ease situations for others, but in different situations and with different intentions. Tact is a professional quality sensed and honed by professionals in situations where power is unequally distributed. It is “above all a principle of *meditation*”, Zirfas says (2022, p. 181). He describes tact as “an intersubjective medium of mutual protection” (p. 186). Tact therefore includes both sensitivity and restraint (Muth, 2022), a form of self-control (Zirfas, 2022). Moral disquiet, on the other hand, leaves one empty-handed and powerless. One feels a loss of control or even as a “hostage to the other” (Levinas, 1987).

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<sup>19</sup> [present | Search Online Etymology Dictionary \(etymonline.com\)](https://www.etymonline.com)

To seek a phenomenon's invariant qualities, to distinguish a phenomenon from phenomena that have similarities, but still are different, is to try to identify qualities that belong to the phenomenon in such a way that without these qualities the phenomenon would be something else. To put it bluntly, one of the invariant qualities of moral disquiet seems to be the instant outward interruption, where one momentarily experiences to see the situation *as it is*. I feel needed because there is an ethical demand speaking directly to me, there, in front of my eyes. A sense of responsibility for the other in the situation is present. It breaks through my egological awareness, and I look for something I might do or say to ease the other's suffering or pain. The significant quality of moral disquiet is not that the person knows what to do, but rather that the person is left out of plans, helpless. Moral disquiet is pre-reflective and comes *before* – before the cognition, before the rationale and before we have had the time to think things through. The task is too big or complicated, I cannot sort it out, or I am overwhelmed by the demand and do not know what to say or do. Or, I may act and regret my actions. Moral disquiet is what Bauman calls “the first reality of the self” (1993, p. 13). Feeling responsible, as the one who is chosen, also is an encounter with oneself. Initially, I can decide if I overlook the other's needs and walk away, or I may stay as the situation unfolds. That is my “freedom” as a human being.

### **Moral Disquiet as an Educational Quality**

In this text, I distinguish moral disquiet from similar, but different, phenomena; fear, paternalism, moral distress, critique, and tact. I also distinguish phenomenological studies from other qualitative research traditions (as psychological-oriented studies, system critique and studies that focus on diagnoses or aims at solving individual “problems” or “problems” in a group, institution, culture, or a society). These distinctions are important to avoid misunderstandings and confusion between moral disquiet and phenomena that are close but not the same. Clarification is also important for implying a reliable phenomenological research basis and an argument for moral disquiet as an educationally relevant quality. To be touched by the other, as in the example with Lisa, is undoubtedly of significance in professional human practices and professional human education. The rupture in time that characterizes moral disquiet, the fact that moral disquiet appears, draws our attention to the moment and reality *as it is*. However, in moments of unease, we do not only encounter the other, whether the other might be an injured bird, a child being corrected or a patient going through a painful examination. We also encounter ourselves; our own beliefs, lust and desires – the limits of our agency, our possible shortcomings, mishaps, and failures. And we encounter our freedom. Moral disquiet thus is an educational moment in itself.

Rather than seeing the phenomenon of moral disquiet as caused by objectionable conditions, something that we should criticise, fix, cope with, or master, moral disquiet is an existential endeavour. Existential here means “life, and the way we live our lives [...]” (Saevi, 2020, p. 1). Lived experiences happen in our intimate relationship to the world - our intertwinedness with events and occurrences - and are our access to the world we live in (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). “Seeking the essence of the world”, Merleau-Ponty says, “is not to seek what it is as an idea, after having reduced it to a theme of discourses; rather, it is to seek what it in fact is for us, prior to every thematization” (p. xxix). In this

sense, reality as lived precedes thematization, just like practice precedes theory (Herbart, 2022). Paradoxically, we tend to overlook the *lived* qualities of life that are actually closest to us (Heidegger, 1962/2008) and turn to thinking and reflection about the world. Doing phenomenology, as an existential endeavour (Saevi, 2020), intends to bring us back to the origin. It directs our attention to the source of the phenomenon, to our lifeworld where life itself takes place. Moral disquiet as an existential phenomenon seems to awaken the *I* in situations where humanity is at stake, as in the example with Lisa, and therefore is a significant educational quality. It creates events that “reveal[s] man to himself and initiate[s] him to his own humanity” (Romano, 2016, p. 5).

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