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An Existentialist Look at A. S. Neill

"I have no idea," Neill wrote in his autobiography, "what the word 'existentialism' means." And then he went on to provide evidence enough that, whether he knew or not what existentialists were saying, nothing could be more alien to his temperament. (He was bored, for example, by *Waiting for Godot*: "The Godot tramps are simply saying that the world is very sick, but I cannot recall hearing any suggestion for doing anything about it.") He did not, of course, believe in a divine order or plan; he thought everything happened by chance; but he could not "see any free will." Environment, he said, was all he could deal with; and he committed himself to creating environments, like the one at Summerhill, where children would develop the ability "to work joyfully and to live positively." He admitted, however, that poor children never came to Summerhill; and he wrote that all his successes were with children who had come from good homes, meaning homes where the parents were moderately wealthy, and where there was love. Even in such homes there were guilts and repressions; but he thought he could deal effectively with these through a kind of short-term Freudian therapy embodied in "private lessons," which guaranteed emotional release. The crucial problem was, as he saw it, "to free the child from lies and fears" and then to let him be. Children "naturally" were active, open, and sincere. Allowed to regulate themselves, spared manipulation from without, they could be counted upon to respond to love with love. "It is only *thwarted* power that works for evil," Neill wrote in *Summerhill*. "Human beings are good; they want to do good; they want to love and be loved. Hate and rebellion are only thwarted love and thwarted power."

There is a presumption about the "essence" of the human being here that an existentialist could never share. For Neill, as for Wordsworth, the child is not only born free; he comes "trailing clouds of glory" that only dissolve when he experiences adult controls. Allowed to develop at his own rate and in his own fashion, he will grow up to be happy; and happiness always means goodness. Every child "inevitably will turn out to be a good human being if he is not crippled and thwarted in his natural development by interference." This is to say, in effect, that every human being possesses an "essence" which is intrinsically valuable. It is also to say that the natural world is intrinsically benevolent; since unimpeded "natural development" cannot be anything else but good. The existentialist would object on two counts at least. He would describe the individual as simply "cast into the world" with the dread responsibility of *creating* an essence or an identity for himself through the conscious exercise of will. He would describe the mundane world as neutral, silent, neither bad nor good — an arena where a person must act upon his freedom in constantly changing situations, without hope of assurance or guarantee. He would talk about the "anguish" of choosing, about the "guilt" in *not* acting on possibility. Where love is concerned, he would discuss the terrible dangers in becoming "other" to the person claiming to love, the fear of becoming an object instead of a subject, the continuing tensions in any kind of social life. Where sincerity is concerned, he would identify the difficulties involved in attaining "authenticity," the traps (even in places like Summerhill) of being inauthentic, of falling into "bad faith."

The existentialist view is the more convincing one for me. Neill's sunlit realm is appealing enough; but I cannot believe that the spontaneity, activity, freedom, and love he describes are sufficient for growth *or* for education in the contemporary world. Freedom (albeit without "license") makes greater demands upon persons than he suggests. Apathy and boredom are greater threats. There is, in addition, the spectre of meaninglessness in a random universe; there is the constant intrusion of absurdity. "Books are the least important apparatus in a school," Neill wrote. "All that any child needs is the three R's; the rest would be tools and clay and sports and theatre and paint and freedom." How, with such paltry equipment, is the individual to combat meaninglessness, to develop the kinds of perspective upon reality that counteract

chaos? How is he to enter the realms of possibility implicit in the arts and humanities? How is he to cope with the inequities, the paradoxes, the deceptions of the world? How is he to develop the disquietude, the self-consciousness required for overcoming automatism and inertia? How is he to develop the courage to be — the resolution to choose?

Neill would say that the child who is subjected to authority cannot grow up with the strength needed to meet the challenges the existentialist defines. He would say that early self-regulation lays the only possible foundation for later self-identification. He would say that it is more important to be happy than to be sophisticated in the arts or in the sciences (and that, in any case, a child who is really interested in a subject matter will exert the effort to learn), that it is more important to be happy than to alter the shape of the world. But this, to me, presumes an either/or. It is not a question of authority or no authority, not a question of manipulation or self-government in accord with desire. There are admonitions to be given the young in the name of freedom; there are modes of pointing to real possibility — and of making it available to those who do not yet know enough to choose. There are efforts to be made to equip the young for critical reflection upon reality for the sake of transforming it. There are challenges to lives of principle, lives lived in response to the summons of norms.

Happiness or self-consciousness? Contentment or critical questioning? Clearly, I would find it hard to inhabit Neill's universe, — or even to tolerate Summerhill. But, for all that (and strange as it may seem), I mourn Neill's passing and think we all have sustained a loss. He may not have known what the word "existentialism" meant; but, from an existential point of view, he was a thoroughly authentic man who acted on his own freedom and chose himself as a pioneer. Moreover, in taking the side of children, he fought against efforts to make objects of them, to categorize and dehumanize them. All one needs to do is to heed the honest, cranky, candid voice that makes itself heard through the pages of Neill's books. In an odd way, he was a-historical and at once romantic. He was tough and he was innocent. He was a child himself and a sage. In the "unrectorial address" he would have given if he were ever to be made Lord Rector of Edinburgh University, he wrote: "Students, your job is to grow up, and all the courses in the faculties will not help you to do so. The fact

that you elect a rector proves that you need a rector, a symbol of old Oedipus, the all-knowing and all-powerful father. Shame on ye. You cannot stand on your own feet because you have had to have crutches all your days — teachers, policemen, politicians, sex repressors. 'Fear of freedom,' wrote Erich Fromm, and also Wilhelm Reich. You all seek freedom and you fear to have it because it means responsibility, aloneness, guts."

Anyone who knew that much had to make a difference in the world. Differing with him in multiple ways, I am glad he passed through here; and I miss him, now that he is gone.