

Children Have Duties

Summerhill revisited

A.S. Neill insisted that "what is called laziness is either lack of interest or lack of health." Neill's rejection of the use of the word "lazy" hinges upon his refusal to blame a child for inactivity in a learning situation. His refusal to blame such a child hinges upon his rejection of the notion that children ought to learn, and also upon his rejection of the notion that a child could be learning "better" than in fact he or she is learning. Stott maintains that neither of these rejections is justified, and hence neither is Neill's rejection of the term "lazy". Critics of the school system have done teachers a disservice in their refusal to recognize that children can be, and often are, lazy.

A.S. Neill insisted that the word "lazy" can never be correctly used of a child in a learning situation; rather one should say "uninterested", or "sick".

"Laziness doesn't exist." (Summerhill, p.357)

"What is called laziness is either lack of interest or lack of health".(p.59)

Most teachers and parents, and undoubtedly most if not all students, would totally disagree with Neill. Surely we all know what it is to be lazy in a learning situation, to make little or no effort at learning. How much credence then, if any, can we give to Neill's seemingly wild claim?

At the outset, let us be clear that the dispute centres on the correctness of the word "lazy" when applied to a young learner, not on the pedagogical appropriateness of the word. That is, if calling a child lazy causes him or her to give up and become resentful, then in a teaching-learning situation the term can be inappropriate. On the other hand, if calling a child lazy causes him or her to try harder and do better, then in a

teaching-learning situation the term can be appropriate. But we are here not concerned with the consequences of using the term "lazy", we are concerned only with whether or not "lazy" can be correctly used of a child in a learning situation.

If I say, "John, you are lazy when it comes to learning x", I strictly assume that John **ought** to be learning x. One does not appropriately call a person lazy for not studying poetry if one sees no call for him to be studying poetry, nor would one call a person lazy for sitting out in the sun all day, dozing, when one understands that the person is overworked and has been ordered to rest by his doctor. I also strictly assume that John is not learning x to the degree to which he could in fact be learning x. One does not appropriately call a person lazy for not reading poetry if he currently cannot, owing to eye injury, nor does one call a brain-damaged child lazy for not keeping up with his peers in maths. Most importantly, in terming John lazy I am not merely describing his behaviour, rather I am blaming him. I blame him precisely because he ought to be learning x and because he could be learning x. Blaming is the main point of using the term "lazy".

If Neill insists that "lazy" can never be correctly applied to a child in a learning situation, he could be asserting

either that there is nothing a child ought to learn,
or that in fact the child could not be learning better,
or both.

This latter, both, is precisely Neill's position.

Neill on the curse of humanity

Neill does not accept that a child ought to learn anything. For Neill, young people have a right to play, a right ultimately warranted by health. Trying to push Neill into a fairly clear philosophical slot, we can say that he is holding on to a form of naturalism. Kittens are naturally playful and curious, and to lock them up would be wrong because it is denying a natural movement towards happiness. Children are naturally playful and curious, and to force them into schools where they become bored, anxious, or pressured is wrong because it is denying a natural movement towards happiness.

"I ask what earthly good can come out of discussions about French or ancient history or what not when these subjects don't matter a jot compared to the larger question of life's natural fulfillment - of man's inner happiness." (p.24) The denial of happiness, moreover, is the fundamental root of ill-health, both individual and societal; pressured, repressed children become neurotic, and unhappy children become hostile, resentful, anti-social, or obsequious.

"The aim of life is happiness. The evil of life is all that

limits or destroys happiness. Happiness always means goodness; unhappiness at its extreme limits means Jew-baiting, minority torture, or war." (p.111)

"In all countries, capitalist, socialist, or communist, elaborate schools are built to educate the young. But all the wonderful labs and workshops do nothing to help John or Peter or Ivan surmount the emotional damage and the social evils bred by the pressure of the coercive quality of our civilization." (p.28)

The "ought to learn x" is thus at the root of educational evils since it licenses the teacher to pressure John to learn, to wield carrots and sticks, and licenses in John an acceptance of crippling guilt feelings when he fails to meet teacher expectations. It also rationalizes for all an acceptance of dull and anxiety-ridden experiences.

Not only is pressure to learn, the "ought", wrong; it is unnecessary, since happy, healthy children will learn all they need to learn. Readiness-motivation is the fundamental precondition of good learning. It cannot be compelled, since interest is spontaneous, and it need not be pursued, since it will arise naturally as a child interacts with the environment. If frustrated in pursuing his wishes, a child will naturally seek help. As he grows up, the responsibilities and opportunities of adult life will come into focus and he will respond to these natural pressures by learning what is needful. People learn most, most happily, when the desire is there, whether that desire be part and parcel of an instinct to play or whether it be part and parcel of a reasoned judgment that since I want x, I will have to learn y.

In sum, pressuring learning, for Neill, is wrong since it makes for unhappiness, and it is stupid since it is unnecessary.

"But true interest is the life force of the whole personality, and such interest is completely spontaneous... Though one can compel attention, one cannot compel interest." (p.162)

"My view is that a child is innately wise and realistic. If left to himself without adult suggestion of any kind, he will develop as far as he is capable of developing." (p.4)

"The whole idea of Summerhill is release; allowing the child to live out his natural interests. A school should make a child's life a game. I do not mean that the child should have a path of roses. Making it all easy for the child is fatal to the child's character. But life itself presents so many difficulties that the artificial difficulties which we present to children are unnecessary.

"I believe that to impose anything by authority is wrong. The child should not do anything until he comes to the opinion - his own opinion - that it should be done. The curse of humanity is the external compulsion, whether it comes from the Pope or the state or the teacher or the parent. It is fascism

in toto." (p.114)

"Laziness doesn't exist"

Furthermore, given the view that play and learning come naturally, Neill has to conclude, and does, that if a child in a learning situation is inactive (lazy) someone else is to blame since there is a very real sense in which the child "cannot" learn. Healthy young people are naturally curious, active, energetic. If a healthy child is bored or completely uninterested, his environment must be such that his natural energies and curiosities are being repressed. Given a repressive environment and certain natural laws about the effects of repression of natural tendencies, a child "cannot" more actively pursue the learning of x. This "cannot" indicates not so much "is literally unable", as "the cards are stacked against him". To compel a child to learn that in which he has not the slightest interest is to stack the cards against his learning in the same way that to feed a person rotten meat, all the while insisting it is for his own good health, stacks the cards against his continuing to eat more and more rotten meat. No doubt he does have the mechanical ability to chew and swallow it, but the effects are so shattering on a system that naturally moves toward health, so contrary to his own sense of well-being, that his rebellion and rejection is natural. So it is also with forced learning. To force learning on a child is to be responsible for that child's boredom and lack of interest, is to be blameworthy, is to be condemned. One should not chain up kittens and try to compel them to do tricks. Learning that comes naturally, by contrast, involves no feelings of repression, no painful upset.

Thus Neill holds that there is nothing a child ought to learn, and if he is not learning well there is a sense in which he cannot, and thus the blame for his inactivity lies elsewhere. Being unable, then, to blame the child, he must obviously reject the term "lazy" and must substitute a word that is non-accusatory and which is fairer to the facts - hence he uses either "sick" or "uninterested". Thus "Laziness doesn't exist."

Most radical critiques of education have centered around the rejection of the "ought to learn x" and the absolute folly of trying to coerce learning on the uninterested. Who are we to push our values onto others? How dare we create anxiety and boredom in the name of education, create distaste for learning in the name of learning? It is characteristic of these critiques that they never talk of the lazy child; rather do they dwell on authoritarian, insensitive schools. The following is typical.

"If he can just be kept out of school, he won't be taught that learning is dull, unpleasant work. He'll just assume it's what it is: the greatest pleasure in human life. There'll be no guilt and no fear... School is a terrible thing to do to kids. It's cruel, unnatural, unnecessary... It (school) warps your

expectations so that you'll see the outside world like the school and then you'll tend to make your world that way. You'll be trained to see learning as hard and painful. And you'll go out and perpetuate a world in which those conditions exist. You know, you have to teach any organism how to be unhappy. And the human being is the only organism that has learned unhappiness - except maybe some of his has spilled over onto his dog. I must insist that schools as they now exist are well designed to produce unhappiness and little else." (Sullivan)

"The world is filled with wrongs - war, disease, famine, racial degradation and all the slaveries man has invented for his own kind. But none is more deep or more poignant than the systematic destruction of the human spirit that, all too often, is the hidden function of every school." (Leonard)

For Neill and fellow travellers, given Neill's view of man and ethics, it would indeed be incorrect to use the term "lazy" of a child in a learning situation. But I wish to claim that they are wrong, and in being wrong they have done serious disservice to our schools.

Consideration of others

If John has a certain goal in mind then it is perfectly legitimate to say that he ought to do what is necessary to achieve it. If he wants to be a doctor and refuses to make any efforts to learn in school, and if it is reasonably certain that unless he does well in school he will never be accepted for medical training, it seems correct to call him lazy. We thus blame him for his inactivity because he could be learning but isn't, and because he ought to be learning given the goal he has chosen. This "ought" is not a clear case of a moral ought, and hence is interchangeable with the less urgent "should". We are not so much righteously condemning his inactivity as we are being exasperated by it; it is not so much the morality of the student which is in question as it is his rationality or common sense.

But this example does not defeat Neill's claim that laziness does not exist, inasmuch as in ordinary circumstances it is inconceivable. If John really wants to become a doctor, and if it is clear one is required to have certain transcripts, then John will do what is necessary. His failure to do what is necessary would simply indicate that the desire was little more than a whim or fancy. The accusations of laziness are typically associated with the unmotivated student, the one who seems to have no aims at all.

Since all individuals eventually have to take their place in the world, earn a living, or at least fill up the time one way or another, we might well say that all children, motivated or otherwise, need a modicum of skills and abilities, and therefore ought to (should) learn them. But Neill can quickly dismiss this

argument. For Neill, the important thing is that the child **will** learn when he feels the need or desire to, and to introduce the notion of ought, with its inevitable baggage of pressures, is to misconceive and distort the whole business of learning. Instead of obliterating the world of play and genuine interest under the banner "Preparation for Adulthood", we must let the child live out his play life, let him pursue what he actually does find interesting, and then we can be sure that this happy and self-confident youth will be able to tackle well any tasks that might fall his way in adulthood. That is, play and happiness is a better preparation for work than work is. This is a prediction, so only a future can declare it false. However, the evidence of Neill's own school favours the prediction. Furthermore, given the speed of change, it becomes harder to specify what modicum of skills and abilities will be required, and Neill's claim regarding self-confident youth makes intuitive good sense. All the above notwithstanding, I wish to claim that one can correctly term the inactive, unmotivated child in school lazy.

My argument is straightforward. Young people ought to work hard in schools because compulsory, universal education is a singular social achievement. Schools are, in the main, staffed and directed by humane people intent on equipping a child for a rich adult life, rich in abilities, appreciations, and, hopefully, job opportunities. Furthermore, the education system is funded by tax monies, which is to say that waitresses, bus drivers, and construction workers, amongst many others, pay for it. Furthermore, the vast majority of parents want children to benefit from school.

Surely at the heart of morality is the consideration of others. If for no other reason, out of consideration for the work and wishes of adults, children ought to take full advantage of schools designed to benefit them. Say what you will about interest, creativity, freedom to learn, and indoctrination, a root question is whether it is only adults who have duties to children or whether children also have duties to adults. If you reject the notion that children have duties to adults, then certainly the unmotivated inactive child cannot correctly be described as lazy, since he cannot be blamed unless one argues he has obligations to his own self-development. But if you accept the notion, then it would seem that one can correctly call the unmotivated inactive child lazy for the very good reason that he owes it to others not to waste what they have gone to some effort to provide.

Furthermore, given intelligent and half-decent teaching, students **can** learn. It only requires effort. And whether or not I make an effort is up to me. The assumption involved is that choice is not an illusion; I am not a puppet of genes-cum-stimuli having to wait to be correctly jerked so that I can move appropriately. Moreover maths, history, geography, or whatever, is nothing like rotten meat, and will only upset a sense of well-being if the person upset has learned to feel no

obligations.

Neill would quickly retort that whilst students have duties to adults, trying hard in school is not one of them. Freedom is not licence, and children must respect the rights of others, including adults; but learning, Neill insisted, is a private matter, and hence is nobody else's business or concern.

"In our education policy as a nation, we refuse to let live. We persuade through fear. But there is a great difference between compelling a child to cease throwing stones and compelling him to learn Latin. Throwing stones involves others; but learning Latin involves only the boy. The community has the right to restrain the antisocial boy because he is interfering with the rights of others; but the community has no right to compel a boy to learn Latin - for learning Latin is a matter for the individual. Forcing a child to learn is on a par with forcing a man to adopt a religion by act of Parliament. And it is equally foolish." (Summerhill, p.115)

"Children should be free to question the rules of etiquette, for eating peas with a knife is a personal thing. They should not be free to question what might be called social manners. If a child enters our drawing room with muddy boots, we shout at him, for the drawing room belongs to adults, and the adults have the right to decree what and who shall enter and what and who shall not." (p.193)

But how can one term learning a private matter when parents worry about whether their children are learning? When society at large puts up huge sums of money for the building and maintaining of a universal school system? When the majority of adults want a compulsory school system? When the future of our society is in the hands of the young? Learning is not a private matter, it is a public matter; whether my child learns is far more important than whether he comes into my living room with dirty boots. Children do have duties to adults, and to make the most of the opportunities afforded by schools is surely one of them.

Is society immoral?

Critics will be quick however, and correct, to state that one can concede that education is a public matter, that students are not puppets, and that students have duties to adults, and still reject the assertion that making the most of schools is one of these duties. They will argue that all of the foregoing is largely an obfuscation, a muddying of the basic issue, which is that our society is essentially immoral, schools are a major agency of socialization, therefore schools are immoral, therefore students have no duty to make the most of schools (which is, in effect, to support them) no matter how many people fund them or believe in them; mathematics may not be like rotten meat

but, nevertheless, the open curriculum and the teaching of it can be boring and destructive of enthusiasm and creativity; and the hidden curriculum, feeding a competitive society with suitably self-seeking insensitive-to-inequality youth, is as corrupting as it is insidious. In short, critics will insist that far from being a "singular social achievement", schooling is a powerful instrument of immorality. This, after all, was the major thrust of Neill, though he would probably prefer the word "sick" to "immoral".

To this I must reply that any society is in a sense immoral; schools are a major agency of socialization; all schools are tainted by social immorality; schools are indeed a singular social achievement, and students do have the obligation to make the most of them. Since the argument is now at the final resting place of ultimate moral justification, a notoriously slippery sink wherein philosophers have slid around (un)happily for centuries, I shall state the argument as briefly as possible.

a. All societies are inevitably immoral if by morality we mean justice, equality, caring, and such like. It will always be the case that some people have more power than others. Man's ability to care will always be limited by value clash and by his own emotional resources. Moreover, it will always be the case that moral conceptions will be impossible to pin down in clear, precise and agreed fashion; moral notions are essentially contestable.⁽¹⁾ Thus the charge of immorality can, and probably will, be continually made.

b. Childhood is inevitably socialization. Schooling is clearly socialization.

c. Hidden curricula are everywhere and inevitable. The medium can't help but be the message/massage.

Arguments based on the immorality of society and its agencies of socialization with their open and hidden curricula are trivial at least, but only in the sense that the same arguments could be used against any society. Thus the argument against society must turn on the degree of immorality - given a concept of morality sufficiently clear, precise and, if the struggle towards a more moral society is to be effective, agreed-upon. I believe this latter state of affairs, the contestability of moral concepts notwithstanding, to be the case.

Unless one opts for violent revolution to overthrow the old and usher in the new and morally better - the morality of such violence being hazy at best - then a society and its institutions should be essentially judged by how possible it is for moral persons, despite their often being at odds with each other (and, in my view, always with themselves,⁽²⁾ to engage in this struggle for a better society; and by how much the society has in general moved in a moral direction as compared with its own past and with the states of affairs in other societies. The main

indicators of the very possibility of moral struggle are free media (that is, no political censorship of press, T.V., radio, and such), laws granting freedom of speech, assembly, religion and unionization, and a school system where knowledge is admired and pursued, and where questions of fact and value are permitted and encouraged.

Overplayed

The evils of our society have been overplayed. The West and its schools are in a sense immoral, yet when judged by the criteria outlined above, they are indeed good. Western society with its freedoms and moral tradition is no mean achievement; even its critics make no attempt to leave. Western schooling is a singular social achievement; our schools are better than most and better than heretofore; every child has the right to personal development through formal education. The possibility of struggle towards a better social form is firmly in place.

The evils of forced learning have been overplayed. If interest is spontaneous than it can happen anywhere, including a school classroom. The belief that children will develop to their fullest potential without adult suggestion of any kind is not demonstrable and seems particularly foolish.

Happiness has been overplayed. Learning is not merely a private matter. A little boredom in a worthwhile cause does nobody any harm.

I must therefore conclude that students who are not making the most of our schools are indeed lazy. Poor schools may be a consequence of poor teaching, but they may also be a consequence of poor learning; schooling is hurt by lazy teachers who feel no obligation to their students, and is equally hurt by lazy students who feel no obligation to their society. Automatically blaming teachers or the school system does them a serious disservice.

NOTES

1. Is it caring to give a beggar ten dollars, or is it condescending? Is it fair that lawyers earn more than bus drivers? Are persons really equally worthy of respect? Etc.
Cf. "The concepts of the moral and political are both what has been called 'essentially contestable'. This means, among other things, both that the questions of where the proper boundaries are to be drawn between the moral and the non-moral, between the political and the non-political, raise issues that are themselves of moral or political significance, and that there may be real and indissoluble

- conflicts of moral or political values." A. Montefiore, "Philosophy and Moral (and Political) Education", *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol.13, 79.
2. I hold moral notions to be self-contradictory in a Marxian sense of "contradictory". The only thesis I know which more or less states this and fully explains it, is J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, wherein values such as goodness are reflections of an impossible union of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, a union which necessarily haunts being-for-itself. Cf. "Consider first ... the question of whether there can occur irreducible conflicts of moral values or obligations, conflicts of which there may be no morally acceptable resolution. What is at stake here is not the question of relations between different and incompatible moral outlooks held by different individuals or societies, but rather that of whether one and the same point of view can or must allow for the possibility of such clashes. This question goes pretty deep." A. Montefiore, *op.cit.*

REFERENCES

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