

An Overview of J. Krishnamurti's Writing on Education

The role of education in any society has been to transmit its culture: rituals, knowledge and values, to future generations and, in the process, to perpetuate traditions. Both primitive societies and traditional ones evolve methods for educating their young in a variety of ways: piety to their gods, reverence for their great men, imitation of heroic role models, implanting rational principles and rules for good government – these are considered well trodden paths to the good life. The knowledge that educational institutions have sought to transmit is, in some sense, embedded in the larger social fabric.

Krishnamurti's educational philosophy reaches beyond the particularities of culture, and locates it in a universal moral space. 'The function of education,' he said in 1956, 'is not to help the young conform to this rotten society, but to be free of its influences so that they may create a new society, a different world.' (Chennai, February 1, 1956) In his public talks, Krishnamurti was a withering critic of social conditions and the ways of life that support those conditions. He often began his talks with comments on the state of the world, followed by a call for change. He traced violence, wars and sorrow back to pre-historic times, as depicted symbolically in art. Then he sketched a way of life that might be possible if individuals would change their lives in certain fundamental ways. A typical description of Krishnamurti's good society is one 'without violence, without the contradictions of various beliefs, dogmas, rituals, gods, without national and economic divisions.' (Ojai, April 21, 1979) 'A good society is not possible,' he concluded, 'without good human beings'. (Saanen, July 18, 1965)

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The term 'goodness' has a special meaning within Krishnamurti's discourse, as does the word 'human being'. One of the fundamental changes on the way to a good human being involves shedding special attachments that Krishnamurti considered divisive, and so facing life 'as a human being without a label.' Such a person would be free of anchorage, and thereby be well positioned to have 'right' values and 'right' relationships. 'You are the world,' he reminded his audiences, 'You are not a Russian or an American, you are not Hindu or a Muslim. You are apart from these labels. You are the rest of mankind.' (*Krishnamurti to Himself*, p. 60)

Sometimes Krishnamurti described the good human being in terms of character, and sometimes in terms of conduct. Much of the portrait is broadly moral, in the spirit of ancient questions: 'What is man?' and 'How should man live?' His moral thinking, however, did not consist of codes of conduct or moral rules; pointing rather to anger, envy, headlong ambition and the will to dominate as the proper subjects of moral enquiry, Krishnamurti advocated bringing an honest reflectiveness to thought-feelings that obstruct moral conduct. He urged human beings put away divisive ideas and feelings, 'Then you don't have to search for the good Then the good flourishes. Then goodness flowers. The beauty of that is endless.' (Brockwood Park, 28 August 1984)

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The vision of a new kind of education that emerges through Krishnamurti's writing sees traditional education as a servant of national, civic or economic interests, designed to produce efficient workers and patriotic citizens. He believed that education of this kind held the seeds of violence and chaos. By contrast, the kind of education he favoured was designed to help people 'to understand the ways of authority and not be caught in its net.' (*Commentaries on Living III*, p. 45)

Education and the Significance of Life (ESL), his first work on the subject, describes the new kind of education that would prepare a child to live in a society that is in 'economic and moral crisis'. Krishnamurti denies that a child can be removed from society and its influences; indeed, the child who comes to school 'is the result of both the past and the present and is therefore already conditioned [by social forces].' (ESL, p. 26) Krishnamurti's aim throughout is to show that the role of the teacher is not to mould the child in accordance with some social

ideal, but to free her from the imprisonment of existing influences: 'in understanding the child as he is without imposing upon him an ideal of what we think he should be.' (ESL, p.25)

Since Krishnamurti counted all ideals as subtly coercive, the teacher's first task is to abandon these, along with his own will to power, in favour of giving her 'full attention to each child, observing and helping him.' 'The moment we discard authority,' he added, 'we are in partnership, and only then is there cooperation and affection.' (ESL, p. 35) The teacher who thus enters into a partnership with the student, who begins to understand 'the inherited tendencies and environmental influences which condition the mind and heart and sustain fear,' can help nurture awareness, which is the first step to freedom. For Krishnamurti the terms 'freedom,' with its sense of 'liberation from inner and outer compulsions,' is a necessary condition of goodness: 'It is only in individual freedom that love and goodness can flower; and the right kind of education alone can offer this freedom. Neither conformity to the present society nor the promise of a future Utopia can ever give to the individual that insight without which he is constantly creating problems.' (ESL, p. 28) The 'partnership,' because it is non-authoritarian, is egalitarian.

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Goodness is not the object of the teacher's attention; it is not a distant goal to be reached through a variety of dos and don'ts, or systems and methods. The object of the teacher's attention is the child, in her total particularity. The child who is forced to conform, 'like a cog in a cruel machine', to the forces of society; the child who learns to imitate because she is afraid – it is this child who must receive the teacher's undivided, dispassionate and silent attention. In that partnership of attention both teacher and child learn the 'ways of fear' and may learn to go beyond it.

If Krishnamurti concentrated on the so-called negative emotions, such as fear, in portraying children, it is because he considered fear as an 'hindrance' to freedom, and consequently to goodness. Fear, for instance, is an emotion that is all pervasive. It penetrates both the conscious and the unconscious mind of teachers and students. It dulls their minds and hearts. It is at the root of conformity and competition, both of which schools nourish. Fear, Krishnamurti insisted, cannot be eliminated through discipline. It can, however, dissolve when the mind is still, when it is aware 'of its [fear's] darkening influence.' (ESL p. 59) The teacher's responsibility is to help a child 'to be fearless, which is to be free of all domination, whether by the teacher, the family or society, so that as an individual he can flower in love and goodness.' (ESL, p. 105) For Krishnamurti, then, reflective understanding was the gateway to freedom. In other words, to understand the ways of fear is to be freed of it. 'Self-knowledge is the beginning of freedom, and it is only when we know ourselves that we can bring about order and peace.'

Krishnamurti's evocation of the ancient idea of the ethical life based on self-knowledge has to be seen in the context of his whole thought. For the 'self' here does not stand for some spiritual essence of traditional Indian thought, but to the everyday self, in its relationship 'with people, with things, with ideas and with nature'. The teacher must 'educate' himself, find out his own attitudes through reflection, and understand, for instance, the ways of fear in his own life. If the teacher does not understand and 'is himself confused and narrow, nationalistic and theory-ridden, then naturally his pupil will be what he is, and education becomes a source of further confusion and strife.' (ESL, p. 97)

Education and the Significance of Life contains only passing reference to Krishnamurti's conception of human nature in general. But there are several allusions here to the self and its identifications showing where traditional education has gone wrong. The self, he holds, is constructed out of 'a conglomeration' of desires, through the psychological mechanism of identifications. Qualities, ideological beliefs, and possessions, are some of the objects that the self identifies with to position itself, and to gain security. Krishnamurti maintains that these identifications engender a sense of isolation from the not-self – from alien groups, distinct ideologies and other causes. Patriotism, assiduously cultivated by the state through racial or

cultural propaganda, and religious fervour whipped up by organised religion 'are all ways of the self, and therefore separative.' (ESL p, 69) Loneliness, reaction, competition and antagonism are intrinsic to the way human beings function in isolation, and these are in the personalities of both teachers and children alike (cf. ESL, Ch. 3).

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Krishnamurti thus draws out the deeper implication, that the fragmented self constructed out of identifications is divided. 'There are several entities in us,' he asserts, 'all revolving around the 'me' . . . ' (ESL, p. 54) He does not appeal to concepts of coherence, in order to introduce some sort of rationality into the fabric of the many selves he has uncovered. Nor does he distinguish between 'true' identity and 'false' identity, as choices along the path to goodness. Rather, he adopts the radical stance of neutralising the reactions or thought-feelings clustering around this basic phenomenon of identification.

Krishnamurti referred to this process of neutralising of thought content as 'unconditioning the mind', which, as we have already noted, he puts at the centre of the partnership between student and teacher. A particular sense of understanding underlies Krishnamurti's usage here – a non-judgmental understanding is a corrective to the mind's 'power of creating illusions' (ESL, p. 45). Overcoming illusions in this way brings the mind to the threshold of goodness.

The seemingly abstract imperatives of *Education and the Significance of Life are filled out in Life Ahead* (1963) and *This Matter of Culture* (1964), two compilations of Krishnamurti's direct interaction with children. Put together largely out of talks and question and answer sessions with students at Rajghat School, in Benaras, in 1952, *Life Ahead* (LA) is directed at awakening, what might today be called, 'moral and emotional intelligence'. The interactions here are Socratic, in the sense that Krishnamurti is not interested in transferring knowledge to his students. Rather, we see him engaged in an 'inquiry' to heighten awareness of emotions and the thought processes they generate, so that the student is freed to learn about 'life as a whole'. Pointing out to middle class students in the heartland of orthodoxy that fear is making them imitate their elders, and also making them hypocritical, he asks: 'Why do you treat women contemptuously? . . . Why do you go to the temple, why do you perform rituals, why do you follow a guru?' Krishnamurti lists out for male students the kinds of things they might fear: 'Suppose you wanted to marry a person not of your own caste or class; would you not be afraid of what people might say?' (LA, p. 28) And to the girls: 'If your future husband did not make the right amount of money, or if he did not have position or prestige, would you not feel ashamed?' (LA, p. 29) He tells them that if they lead lives based on fear they shut out initiative and creativity. And he illustrates the point, in his own unusual way: 'Have you ever . . . observed the poor people, the peasants, the villagers, and done something, done it spontaneously, naturally, out of your own heart, without waiting to be told what to do?' (LA, p. 29) The moral truths that Krishnamurti attempted to uncover neither came packaged as true belief, nor as knowledge, nor theories but were intrinsic to a spontaneously born sensitivity to life. 'Fear shuts out the understanding of life with all its extraordinary complications, with its struggles, its sorrows, its poverty, its riches and beauty - the beauty of the birds, and of the sunset on the water. When you are frightened, you are insensitive to all this.' (LA, p. 30)

'I think it is a curse to be ambitious,' he tells the students, 'Ambition is a form of self-interest, self-enclosure, and therefore it breeds mediocrity of mind.'(LA, p. 176) In a similar spirit of unworldliness, he often asks them to find out if the pursuit of security, money, and reputation did not make them superficial. Despite this rejection of worldly aims, the goal of Krishnamurti's education was not to bring his students to a mystical union with some transcendent, otherworldly reality. Rather, his aim was to heighten students' awareness of the reality of this world, of its fuller reality, which includes nature— 'the flourishing trees, the heavens, the stars'; social reality – 'the battle between groups, races and nations'; and reality of the psyche –'the envies, the ambitions, the passions, the fears, fulfilments and anxieties'. So that students, freed of these impediments, aware of the problems of the world, and grounded in a sense of reality, could grow up to create 'a new world.'(LA, p. 173)

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Published ten years after his previous works on the subject, *On Education* (OE) (1974) is a compilation of talks and dialogues with students and teachers at Rishi Valley School, in Andhra Pradesh, and in Rajghat, in Uttar Pradesh, during the sixties. Several familiar themes recur in these dialogues, but particularly revealing is Krishnamurti's response to a student who asks him, 'How can we know ourselves?' The first step, as he explains very simply, is to observe as one might in a mirror 'the way you talk, the way you behave, whether you are hard, cruel, rough, patient.' (OE, p. 76) The mirror reveals what one is, but problems take hold when one begins to disapprove of what the mirror shows. 'The mirror says, this is the fact; but you do not like the fact. So, you want to alter it. You start distorting it.' (OE, p. 76) Attention is silently watching what the mirror reveals, without the desire to change it. That silent observation comes into being when there is freedom from anger, envy and the pettiness that cloud the mirror. 'Look,' he says, 'not with your mind but with your eyes'. (OE, p. 23)

Over and over again, as the distinction between what is artificial or socially constructed and what is natural, became more explicitly articulated in his philosophy, Krishnamurti directed students to nature; the senses then become tools for cleansing the mind: 'Just look at the stars, the clear sky, the birds, the shape of the leaves. Watch the shadow. Watch the bird across the sky. By being with yourself, sitting quietly under a tree, you begin to understand the workings of your own mind and that is as important as going to class.' (OE, p. 47)

Self-knowledge as the ground of freedom emphasised in ESL was gradually replaced by the term 'learning,' as 'watching,' and 'listening'. Unlike self-knowledge, learning is not individuated; unlike knowledge it is neither static nor complete nor touched by the past as memory. Nor is it centred on the self as object. Learning is continuous, a lifelong process, one in which the outer and inner flow together. (OE, p. 14) Learning forges a new partnership between the teacher and the student, a partnership unmediated by barriers of personality, for learning bonds teacher and student in freedom.

An insistence on autonomy was perhaps among the deepest of Krishnamurti's moral concerns. He pointedly returned teachers back to their own psychological resources; statements of the form, 'I have nothing to give you;' 'You are on your own;' 'No one can help you;' 'It is your problem;' abound in his writing. With students the perspective was drawn more gently: ' . . . you cannot depend on others; you cannot expect somebody to give you freedom and order - whether it is your father, your mother, your husband, your teacher. You have to bring it about in yourself.' (OE, p. 27) And it is a given condition for participating in dialogue that, 'You have to learn never to accept anything which you yourself do not see clearly, never to repeat what another has said.' (OE, p. 14) He told even very young students not to be 'second hand human beings,' to live and act autonomously rather than be pushed around by violent, irrational forces.

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Freedom and responsibility together form the paired centres of Krishnamurti's thought, and highlight its practical nature. While references to human responsibility are scattered throughout the years of his writings and talks, a few periods stand out: talks in India at the

time of partition and, in Europe and America, during the seventies during the Viet Nam war. They indicate how Krishnamurti's talks reflected the context and often responded to major world events. The concern throughout much of his analysis is to demonstrate that, because individual human beings have not quenched the violence within themselves, they are responsible for violence in the world.

At a different level, Krishnamurti's treatment of the subject of responsibility highlights his lifelong critique of the way people conduct their everyday lives, and the way in which they pass on the sense of responsibility to the younger generation. It also brings to our attention certain values inherent in Krishnamurti's teachings, as well as other values he rejected, including those underlying what he called 'bourgeois' attitudes. The bourgeois life in Krishnamurti's sense seems to be based mainly on property in a highly generalised sense: it may be a piece of land, old furniture, an idea, or a belief, friends, family, profession and nation. Apart from these bourgeois values, Krishnamurti also rejected the approach that grounds responsibilities in religion, or human nature. He points out that responsibilities have often been regarded as carrying sanctions for non-compliance, at the very least invoking individual 'conscience' or feelings of guilt.

Krishnamurti's philosophy does not offer a choice between freedom and responsibility. What he does offer is a particular combination between the two: freedom together with a 'lighter' kind of responsibility – without authority, without guilt, and without the burden of tradition. In other words, he strips responsibility from its bourgeois spirit, and 'its burden of tradition'. 'If you say the little is the first step, then you are lost, you are caught in the little . . . little family, little house, little money, little clothes. You have made that first step and so you have little responsibility in society. You are all so terribly respectable.' (OE, p. 106) What drives responsibility in these teachings is not the sanction of society, religion or conscience, but the impulse of goodness.

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Beginnings of Learning (BL) (1975) is composed largely out of dialogues with students held in the early seventies at Brockwood Park, the school he established in England at the end the sixties. Here, the theme of responsibility is explored more closely with a group of older, international students. Playing at etymology, he derives 'responsibility' from 'response,' that is 'the ability to answer or be answerable'. He then challenges students to be answerable, without the imposition of authority. (BL, p. 15) 'Here at Brockwood,' he says, 'we are responsible for creating this soil in which there is freedom, which is non-dependency. In that freedom, in this energy we can flower in goodness.' (BL, p. 21)

During the last years of his life responsibility became an overwhelming concern for Krishnamurti. Intertwined with freedom, and learning, responsibility embraced a whole spectrum, ranging from the personal to the global. At the personal end, human beings are responsible for their own resentments, fears, greed and vanity; at the other end, they are responsible for the chaos in the world. Having established this, the global end of the spectrum includes larger concerns about society, war, peace, the state of the natural environment and generally the state of the world. And the personal end includes responsibility in one's intimate relationships, with husband, wife, neighbours, parents and children. (Cf. BL part 2, chapter 4.) This whole spectrum is referred to as 'total responsibility'. 'We are saying very definitely and most emphatically that only total responsibility for all mankind ... can basically transform the present state of society [which] is corrupt, degenerate and wholly immoral.' (LT, p. 32)

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At the end of his life Krishnamurti began writing to the teachers and students of the schools he had established on the three continents of India, Europe and the United States. In these letters he wants the schools to hold together, not by striving towards some Utopian principle, but by transcending human cultures that 'have emphasized separateness'. Instead of becoming exclusive in their uniqueness, the schools are exhorted to address the human condition, which is the same across the world, and learn the 'art of responsibility', which is

love: 'We need to bring about a good society in which all human beings can live happily in peace, without violence, with security. You as a student are responsible for this. A good society doesn't come into existence through some ideal, a hero or a leader, or some carefully planned system. (Jan 1, 1980. LT vol. 1, p. 94)

If the development of moral and spiritual sensibility is at the centre of Krishnamurti's educational enterprise, then the question: what place does knowledge have in his scheme of education, naturally arises. While conceding that there should be a highest level of academic excellence in his schools, he did not venture further into this area, which he left to teachers in his schools to map out. His chief concern was to help teachers realise that knowledge has limits: it is not the way to an ordered or sane life, or even to intelligence; knowledge must be imbued with values and embraced by wisdom if it is not to become destructive. In his earliest book on education he points out that 'The man who knows how to split the atom but has no love in his heart becomes a monster.' (ESL, p. 18)

Theory and practice merge in Krishnamurti's thought. Over a long life, he established several schools to test his and interested individuals' understanding of his teachings. At his most optimistic he regarded them as oases in a world, he felt, was headed towards chaos.

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In 1922, at the age of 27, Krishnamurti visited the University of California at Berkeley. Struck by the beauty of the place, the openness of its students, and the sense of equality he perceived in the community, he resolved to start an academic institution in India. His native country would have something unique to contribute to such a place of learning, he felt: 'We in India can create the proper religio-scholastic atmosphere'. (Herald of the Star, 1922.)

Krishnamurti began actively looking for land in 1925. His was an expansive vision but not a colonial one, for his search did not lead him to hill stations, where it was then fashionable to locate schools. He settled instead for the primeval landscape of Rayalseema, with its bare, sculpted hills. Here, in 1931, he established Rishi Valley School. In 1927 he had asked an intrepid young Cambridge-educated friend to look for land on the banks of the Ganga, in the ancient city of Benaras. Benegal Sanjiva Rao found land for a second school at the confluence of the Ganga and the Varuna, atop the ruins of fifth-century BC Kashi. Rishi Valley School, in the south, and Rajghat School, in the north of India, came into being at the beginning of the third decade of the twentieth century. For close to fifty years he worked tirelessly to create in these schools the spiritual atmosphere he believed to be part of the native genius of this land. The two schools have emerged into the twenty-first century as educational complexes, with large outreach programmes in the rural countryside.

Between the fifties and the seventies, six more schools were established, three in the urban centres of India, two in the West, in England and in California. 'The School' came into being in 1973, on a tree-filled campus in the vicinity of the Adayar River. 'The Valley School,' in Bangalore, was established in 1975, on land abutting a reserved forest. Bal Anand, a drop-in centre for the urban poor of Malabar Hill, in Bombay, started in 1954, and is located in two small garages under a high-rise apartment. The last of the Krishnamurti schools, Sahyadri School, was established in the west of India, after Krishnamurti's death, as part of the centenary celebrating his birth. The 'Nachiket Project', which combines community development with education, has grown around a retreat established at Uttar Kashi, along the banks of the Bhagirathi River.

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Emphasizing the pluralistic nature of his schools, Krishnamurti maintained that 'Each school must flower on its own, as one flower is unlike any another flower.' (Chennai, 1973, quoted in Vasant Vihar Newsletter, November 1998). The pluralism follows from the absence of any Utopian models in his thought. Life, as Krishnamurti insisted, is too varied, too vast, and too

vital to be captured within the compass of any blueprint. And learning about life is central to his educational philosophy.

Despite his total denunciation of society, Krishnamurti did not assert that his schools stood isolated from the social fabric. The schools did not represent an antithetical and perfect order. Krishnamurti's emphatic and repeated assertion that he was not a Utopian thinker is essentially connected with this larger philosophical outlook: just as students are conditioned by their parents and the society they belong to, so too are teachers conditioned by their personal experience and by their culture. His schools, then, represent the larger world in miniature - and he explicitly drew out the conclusion - with all its destructive potential. The only difference between these schools and the world at large, he hoped, might be that teachers committed to examining their lives would teach from a ground of inquiry. This examination is a negative process; it is an unraveling of the conditioned self, a stripping of prejudices, false ideas and bad relationships. Ultimately the tangled self, according to Krishnamurti, is replaced by moments of unconditioned silence. The foundations of Krishnamurti's education rest in the silent attention where the fixity of thought and inertness of indifference dissolve.

There is a broad framework, however, derived from the founder's writings, towards which all Krishnamurti's schools do aim. Qualities of compassion and cooperation rather than of comparison and competition; a global outlook rather than a parochial one; right relationship to nature, to ideas, to the past and to other human beings count prominently among these basic aims. Within this normative framework, each school is free to define its own vision, based on the quality of the landscape, the water, the character of its neighbours and the traditions of the country in which it is located.

Beyond this framework, Krishnamurti's challenge encompasses the school's relations with its surroundings; the teachers' relationship with students and it raises questions about the relevance of the curriculum of study to the actual world. Educational institutions are required to redefine ethical goals for their time and place. In the case of schools like Rishi Valley, for instance, this means charting an educational enterprise for a public school that is located in a degraded landscape, and surrounded by poverty and illiteracy; that is located in a country engaged in a struggle over its identity; at a time when the very existence of the human species and the planet on which species evolved is threatened.

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As early as 1924, Krishnamurti marked out a crossroads in human life: 'There comes a time when a human being must choose on which of the rivers he shall sail. They look alike, but they lead to different places.' (Herald of the Star, 1924) On many occasions throughout his long life he returned to this crossroads, varying the terms of different contexts. Speaking in California, he poignantly contrasted what was, with what might have been, if men and women had chosen to live differently. 'California has one of the most beautiful climates in the world . . . It should produce a marvelous society, totally different from that which is now . . . highly disciplined . . . not wholly materialistic . . . not self-centered. . . [with a] deep inward life.' (Ojai, 30 October 1966) Whether it is in America or India, Krishnamurti held out a challenge: 'This is a tremendous question, it is not a thing to be played around with. What do we mean by these three words: love, freedom and responsibility? . . . Are we responsible for the earth on which we live? To maintain the trees, waters, mountains, forests and the beauty of the land; or are we destroying everythingSir, you don't face these things.' (April 17, 1979)

Krishnamurti perceived the problems of the world as emerging from human consciousness and sought to liberate that consciousness. Even though he shared with traditional Indian thought the concept of liberation as the primary goal of human life, Krishnamurti borrowed neither his vocabulary nor his exposition from India's rich treasure house of sacred literature but, embracing modernity's iconoclastic spirit, worked out his own powerful discourse. It could justly be said that Krishnamurti introduced a new postulate into education. The moral disposition that educators seek to inculcate through education, he contended, is neither innate

nor God given, nor is it brought about through behavioural modifications; rather, it is nourished through the arts of listening and looking — at the outward world of nature and the inner worlds of desire and thought.

What is remarkable about Krishnamurti is the longevity of his moral passion. It accompanied him throughout his long life, from the age of twenty-seven when he traveled to California to the age of ninety when he died. The passion generated a philosophy and a practice, which together carry powerful implications for contemporary education.

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