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**Freedom and Authority
in Alexander S. Neill's
and Jean Jacques Rousseau's
Philosophy of Education**

Sven Müller

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This dissertation probably began when Dr. Rudi Thiessen tried to explain to me, back in about 1997, that assuming that humans are born good could actually be more pernicious than its opposite, because people with a positive assumption about human nature might want to punish more harshly in the end. If humans are assumed to be bad by nature, they pay for their crimes but, often, can redeem themselves. If, on the other hand, one assumes that humans are born good, people who do wrong could be deemed vicious because they could actually be good—if they only really wanted to.

I had almost forgotten this exchange until the last month of writing my dissertation on two of the authors who considered humans to be born good. Dr. Thiessen's words kept coming back, however, and today it is clear to me what he had meant. Recently, I often thought of him, some of the other professors who I met in Berlin, and how my academic pursuits actually began. The first truly amazing and eye-opening seminar I took was titled "Educational Concepts from Classical Antiquity to the Early Twentieth Century," which was taught by Professor Dr. Bernhard Schwenk. The seminar members was so intrigued by the topic, the way he taught us, and his personality that we requested the course to continue the next semester. The seminar wanted to cover more recent educational theories, a plan to which Professor Schwenk gladly agreed. He unfortunately died, however, during summer break in 1992. Regardless, I consider him one of the most important teachers of my life because he awakened my interest in the Philosophy and History of Education.

During the summer of 1992, I changed my major to Linguistics. Professor Dr. Helmut Richter taught one section of the introductory course the following fall. At the end of this class, we wrote a final exam the results of which students could discuss with him in person during winter break. When I was sitting in his office, however, we quickly began talking about the former East Germany, my vocational training as a mechanical engineer, and the general prospects of an academic career. His interest in me as a person and his encouragement made me stay in intense academic and fairly close personal contact with him all through my eight years in Berlin. I took several more seminars and colloquia with Professor Richter, and he became my advisor for my Master's thesis. I have never formally or officially acknowledged my debt to him, which is one of the reasons for going this far back in time in this acknowledgment. Before I thank the people who are closely related to my dissertation, I want to express my sincerest gratitude to both Professor Dr. Richter and Dr. Thiessen for what they have done for my intellectual, personal, and academic development. In addition, I want to use this opportunity also to thank Dr. Constantin Rauer of

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The biggest “thank you” at Indiana University’ School of Education goes, naturally, to my dissertation director Dr. Barry Bull. Without his astute advice, encouragement, and patience this dissertation might have never been completed. Furthermore, I want to express my gratitude to Drs. Luise McCarty, Edward McClellan, and Phil Carspecken for their academic support and encouragement as well as their efforts to make me feel at home in a strange land. Additional thanks I owe to Drs. Don Warren and Peg Sutton, who, in their function as course coordinators for “H340, Education and American Culture,” helped me to survive my first teaching assignments. Furthermore, I want to thank Sandy Strain for helping me through the bureaucratic maze that graduate students have to deal with.

This acknowledgment would not be complete if I did not also thank my former colleagues at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. The chair of the Educational Studies Department, Dr. Karen Biraimah, had faith that I would be a valuable colleague even though my dissertation was not nearly completed on the day my employment began. She nevertheless gave me a chance to gain further invaluable experience as a college teacher. Moreover, I remember two more of my colleagues particularly fondly: Drs. Cyndee Hutchinson and Randy Hewitt. Cyndee assisted me immensely in mastering the intricacies of teacher education in Florida; Randy helped to keep my spirits positive when I was close to being overwhelmed. Last but not least, I want to express many, many thanks to my mother and my late grandmother for their moral and financial support.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Perhaps second only to language, freedom is a defining quality of human beings. Whether the account of the origins of humankind is told from a biblical perspective, in which Adam and Eve took the liberty to assert themselves by eating from the tree of knowledge, or whether this story is narrated from a scientific, evolutionary angle—where structure and function increasingly separated during the development of the human species—to be able to change and adapt one's behavior as well as to initiate or refrain from actions on one's own volition is considered a crucial quality of human beings. This freedom to act on one's own will could, however, lead to socially constructive as well as harmful actions and, thus, has to be developed and guided, controlled and curtailed. Authority is invoked to prevent people from destructive actions toward others and themselves, and it seems natural to deny children the privilege of freedom that, in Western societies, is today guaranteed to every sane adult. Freedom and authority are thus two of the most fundamental and most controversial terms in the philosophy of education and political philosophy.

It is certainly difficult to imagine the relationship between children and adults as completely symmetric. Children are born helpless; they need to learn to walk, to speak, how to eat and behave in a civilized manner. Children need to be introduced to the culture of their society; they have to be prepared for the world they will inhabit. Education is the means to create fully capable and social adults, and authority thus appears to be an inherent part of every educator-educant relationship. In fact, there seems to be consensus that education inevitably and necessarily involves authority in some form or another. In this view, the educator is assumed to be the more skilled, rational, and experienced person who ought to, in one way or another, employ certain means to develop valuable habits and dispositions in children.

Educators have always tried to mold children according to their values with the justification that children have to be prepared for the future and that a sound, well-organized education is the only way to form children into moral agents and achieve stable and harmonious societies. On the other hand, the educator-educant relationship seems inevitably to entail moments of resistance, disagreement, and the potential for forceful reassertion on the side of the child as well as, on the other hand, the danger of emotional dependence, which are all detrimental to the declared purposes of education in Western societies. The question of how to educate or how to interact with children will always and necessarily involve the problems of authority and freedom, but judging from the problems and some failures of traditional education we should inquire if there are any alternatives.

Two of the authors who have questioned the seemingly obvious—the use of direct authority in the interaction with children—are Jean Jacques Rousseau

(1712-1778) and Alexander Sutherland Neill (1883-1973). Both wrestled with the question of freedom in education for a large part of their lives. Neill founded Summerhill, a school where authority is distributed evenly among the members of the community, including children. At Summerhill, Neill tried to demonstrate that education without the exertion of authority of adults is not only feasible but also beneficial and effective. Rousseau, united with Neill in his pursuit to lessen the outward pressures put on children mainly by Protestant doctrines and their secular placeholders, tried to delineate a free or natural education, as he called it, in which individuals could live true to themselves in an imperfect society and be protected from the detrimental influences of others. Both authors argued against the educational mainstream of their (and our) times, and the questions Rousseau and Neill addressed are perennial problems of human interaction and communal living.

This dissertation casts a critical eye on both authors, the one who founded the world's most controversial school and the other as one of the most prominent and controversial educational philosophers. Both Neill and Rousseau attempted to improve the education in their respective societies by criticizing the assumptions at the foundations of their culture, concluding that humans create most of their problems themselves. From growing up in similarly robust Calvinist cultures with a strong emphasis on work, restraint, self-denial, guilt, fear, and the authority of elders—and equally suffering from harsh punishment for digressions—Neill and Rousseau came to hold a mirror, in their idiosyncratic ways, to their and our civilization and presented alternatives to established social reality. They both understood their work as an effort to tip the scales in favor of tolerance, freedom, self-regulation, independence in thought and action, and sincerity. In light of their efforts we ought to ask again what both actually meant by “freedom in education,” whether their educational aims and methods are true to their own premises, whether education without authority is actually possible, and whether it is as desirable and as feasible as they both claimed.

Summerhill in Leiston, England, is perhaps still the most famous school in the world, and its philosophy inverts many assumptions about human nature and development as well as our views of what a school is or should be. At Summerhill, children do not have to attend the classes that are offered, nor are they encouraged to work or play competitive sports. Unlike traditional schools, Summerhill does not grade or track its students according to ability and the established notions of educational attainment. All decisions about the social life of the community are made in weekly General Meetings in which everyone's vote, including adults', has the same weight. In other words, adults at Summerhill are bound by the rules that children helped to establish. Nevertheless, life at Summerhill appears to be, on the whole, wholesome, constructive, and

conducive to individual development. Even though children do not have to go to classes, most of them do, and particularly older students, starting around the age of fourteen, study with the help of their teachers in often fairly traditional classroom settings, catching up on what they ‘missed’ during their prolonged play-period. A considerable portion of the Summerhill graduates passes the university entrance exams and, contrary to the opinion of its critics, hardly anyone leaves Summerhill without being able to read or write. Some of those who have, however, became literate later within a few months once they had realized the necessity of literacy, and we do not have any evidence that a substantial portion of Summerhill graduates has been unable to hold a job, as critics often fear.

On a more fundamental level, Neill was convinced that the aggression some children showed at Summerhill was not inborn but, in the large majority of the cases, was the result of conventional child-rearing practices. With Summerhill, Neill created a school in which children were allowed to do what they wanted—as long as they did not interfere with the same right of the other children—and where children, perhaps even more importantly, were able to abstain from what they did not want to do. Educators’ quest for perfecting students and the world was for Neill, as counterintuitive as it sounds, the cardinal sin in the educational philosophy of the West.¹ He contended that interfering with children’s pursuits and desires means curbing the child’s ego, which, for him, inexorably leads to resentment and the urge to reassert oneself in sometimes destructive ways at a later time.

Neill assumed, with Homer Lane—who was one of his predecessors and main influence—and Sigmund Freud, that this will to have one’s ego and vitality asserted is inextricably a part of the human condition. Freud’s psychology was, however, derived from individuals who had grown up in typical homes and schools. As conventional educators often do, Freud insisted that self-denial and taboos about sexuality have their necessity for civilization. Neill sharply departed from Freud in this regard when he asserted that aggression is the *product* of Western civilization and not an inherent trait of humankind. Whereas Freud regarded shame, guilt, and fear as being necessary safeguards for civilization to curb aggression and sexual impulses to prevent egotistical acts and crime, Neill became convinced that the conventional methods of rearing children actually *caused* this aggression and egotism in the first place. For Neill, culture and civilization were not necessarily antagonistic to human nature. He regarded young children, however, as “primitives” who need to live out their self-centered stage instead of having it repressed. This shift in thinking has, potentially, enormous consequences for education and the humanities, since—if Neill was right—traditional methods of child-rearing that are considered necessary for

¹ For Neill’s critique of the urge to perfect the child and the world see, for instance, Neill, A. S.: *The Problem Child* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1926), 25.

creating social adults and sustaining civilization ought to be abandoned to some extent because they create the problems they purport to solve.

This comparative study relies, in the case of Summerhill, not only on Neill's own writings but also on accounts of what he and others actually did at the school and what life at the school was like, because Neill's theories were developed, tested, and measured against reality. In addition, Neill's experiences, personal predispositions, and the historical situation all play a role in founding a school that is unlike any other. At the very beginning of Summerhill stood two adults who shared many convictions, who liked and complemented each other, and five children. They all knew each other very well, which certainly contributed to the successful beginning of the school and perhaps made it possible in the first place. Chapter 2 of this dissertation will trace Neill's youth, his experiences as a teacher when he began loosening authority in classrooms at conventional schools, and the theories and practices of those who influenced him. Some aspects of the general situation of what is called "alternative education" today are also important in order to place Neill and Summerhill within the educational landscape in Europe during the first three decades of the 20th century and in order to "give roots to what Neill has done."² Chapter 3 will then cover the beginnings of Summerhill proper, discuss further the development of Neill's theories, describe life at Summerhill in considerable detail and, in its last part, delineate and analyze what Neill's position regarding freedom and authority in education were. During this most important section of the chapter, I will extrapolate the patterns of interaction that can be observed in Neill's work with individual children as well as the whole group and discuss and analyze what made them distinctive and largely successful.

In contrast to Neill, who lived with children for the most part of his life and actually practiced his own theories, reflected upon and recalibrated them to some extent, Rousseau rarely engaged with and never reared any children. Only once was he employed as the tutor of two young boys for less than one year. However, his observations regarding children and the human psyche in general are often astute, sensitive, and sensible. Rousseau integrated these observations into a complex philosophical system, which is difficult to comprehend, however, because it seems to be contradictory in parts. In chapter 4, I will thus trace the development of Rousseau's thought in considerable detail from its beginnings and anchor it in his biography wherever appropriate and necessary.

Rousseau's upbringing was rather peculiar. After his mother had died shortly after his birth, he was raised by his father who read with him many works of literature meant for an adult audience, which created in Jean Jacques an exceptionally romantic view of the world and set standards that later were in reality

² Hemmings, Ray. *Children's Freedom: A.S. Neill and the Evolution of the Summerhill Idea*. (New York, Schocken, 1973), 1.

difficult to meet. When he was seven years old, his father was forced to leave Geneva and Jean Jacques was passed on to relatives who did not give him much formal education. He was free to play with his cousin, and the sheer presence of his kind relatives educated him well, Rousseau asserted. When he was eleven, however, Rousseau was apprenticed, which he abhorred because he was suddenly treated as an inferior and subject to the master's caprices.³

When he was not quite sixteen years old, Rousseau ran away from Geneva. He met a woman twelve years his senior who made him a convert to Catholicism and, subsequently, became his surrogate mother and lover. Rousseau led the life of a vagabond for a considerable part of his life and occupied many different positions at a time of intense struggles against deep-rooted authority and the quest for new certainties. He taught himself music theory, and his voracious reading made him later an equal to the most erudite of his time. His opera *The Village Soothsayer* was performed before the King, and, around the same time, he partook in an essay contest that the Academy of the Sciences at Dijon had offered. The question the Academy had posed was whether the arts and the sciences had contributed to the improvement of morality. Rousseau denied that humankind had made any progress but was nevertheless awarded the prize the Academy had offered. He became quickly famous in two distinct fields of the arts and enjoyed for a short time of enormous worldly success.

This *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, which Rousseau wrote in 1749, marks the beginning of his philosophy and his analysis of civilization, which he refined and expanded four years later in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*.⁴ Rousseau argued in both essays—contrary to the mainstream of the Enlightenment but in not too strong opposition to the teachings of the church—that humankind had not progressed; in fact, Rousseau asserted that the cultural development of humanity could just as well be conceived as retrogression. As the beginning of his social theory, Rousseau assumed that in prehistoric times humans lived as independent and free individuals who met only sporadically to mate and who were otherwise unconcerned about their fellow beings. As soon as humans started living in society, however, and as soon as they became capable of reflection, people began comparing themselves to others, which changed their motivation as well as their sources of contentment. Instead of satisfying one's basic needs—food, shelter, sexual gratification if the opportunity presented itself, and otherwise trying to live free of pain and any yoke that other beings could impose—people began working for others in the vain hope that their efforts would be reciprocated and, later, that political units could be established that would guarantee the equal and just treatment of everyone. Going beyond the

³ For biographical information on Rousseau see, for instance, *The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, trans. J.M. Cohen (New York: Penguin, 1953).

⁴ Both essays are published in J.H. Brumfit and J. Hall, ed. *Jean Jacques Rousseau: The Social Contract and the Discourses* (New York: Random House, 1993).

criticism Rousseau had leveled at civil society in his *First Discourse*, he argued in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* that the division of labor and the institution of property created conditions that, against all hopes and ambitions, made people slaves, not only because people now had to spend time working for others but also because individuals' wishes were manipulated and multiplied. In other words, the acculturation, refinement, and power of reason that the human race acquired through its development had disadvantages. The needs of the body were neglected in favor of the 'needs' of the mind; the arts, the sciences, and literature "fling," in Rousseau's words, "garlands of flowers over the chains" that weigh people down. Those chains "stifle in men's breasts that sense of original liberty, for which [men] seem to have been born, cause them to love their own slavery, and so make of them what is called a civilized people."⁵ Yet while animals and slaves would at least recognize their chains and rebel, modern humans seem to be happily enslaved, squandering their time and potential in petty pursuits, incessantly trying to impress and outshine others. Sparta and the Roman Republic, which Rousseau always held in high esteem since he had been acquainted with them during his childhood, regarded health, manliness, virtue, and vigor as supreme values.⁶ Prehistoric and ancient humans may have been rustic and crude in comparison to moderns, but at least they were natural and free, Rousseau maintained.⁷

In his subsequent works, particularly in *Emile, or on Education*,⁸ Rousseau proposed alternatives to educational and general cultural practices to restore virtue, sincerity, vigor, independence, and freedom. Even though Rousseau perceived culture in opposition to nature, he never argued that humans should go back to living as their ancestors in prehistoric times had. Instead, Rousseau insisted that there are more natural ways of interacting with children and living with others. *Emile, or on Education* is a description of how a natural man could be reared and preserved, how one's passions could be reconciled with reason, and how one could live in society without feeling alienated. Notwithstanding his concern about equality and justice, Rousseau's enemies were not the kings or the churches. Rather, it was a certain type of man who he was the first to identify: the *bourgeois*, who "distinguishes his own good from the common good. His good requires society, and hence he exploits others while depending on them"; in fact, he "define[s] himself in relation to them."⁹ Rousseau was certain that a revolution would sweep away "the ancien régime, the throne, the altar, and the nobility,"¹⁰ but he was concerned how new men could be formed who were able and willing to live freely in communities that were founded on egalitarian prin-

⁵ *First Discourse*, ed. Brumfitt/Hall, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸ *Emile, or on Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

⁹ Bloom, introduction to *Emile*, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

ciples and just laws. How such men could be educated was the question Rousseau tried to answer in his *Emile*.¹¹

Rousseau's critique of civilization and his views on freedom in education have many parallels to Neill's work, but there are also significant differences, as we shall see. Rousseau, for instance, wanted his imaginary pupil Emile to grow up away from society in the care of the tutor Jean Jacques, who is Emile's main influence until the boy is approximately seventeen years old. During his childhood, Emile continuously exerts his body and develops his senses as well as his native intelligence. Unlike the children at Summerhill however, Emile is deliberately kept from the corrupting influences of others because they would stir up and increase his desires. Rousseau regarded the influence of others as manipulation and a step toward slavery because the extended desires that the interaction with society inevitably bring tend to be infinite and can, thus, never be truly satisfied. Ostensibly, the tutor and his pupil are on equal footing as much as possible in *Emile*; one is not supposed to influence or be dependent on the other. Emile learns from experience and necessity, the two great teachers of nature, to orient himself in the physical world, and when he is ready he will expand on the knowledge that he has acquired without the help of teachers or books that Rousseau considered crutches, which only make humans indolent. When Emile is fourteen, he will begin joining society, learn a trade, expand his knowledge further, learn how to be virtuous from the best examples of history, and study morality, politics, and religion. When his sexual powers awaken, the tutor will distract Emile from his fantasies to ensure that, again, nothing is added to his desires. Sexual passion was, for Rousseau, the most dangerous force in human life; at the same time, he believed that this very passion provides, if harnessed and recast properly, the cohesion for society. As a young man, Emile will—after his love had been only a phantom for a long time—meet his future wife, Sophie, leave her and return to her, so that he is free to decide how and where he wants to live.

Like Neill, Rousseau saw the basic conflict in education in the tension between self-interest and the demands of society, a conflict, which to him results in a “disunity of the soul.”¹² Similar to Neill, Rousseau argued that children are constantly thwarted in conventional education so that they will be, as adults, torn between their inclinations and their duties. To prevent this disunity of the soul, Rousseau wanted educators to realize that childhood is a stage on its own and not simply the time to prepare for adulthood. Accordingly, Rousseau distinguished between the education of a man and a citizen,¹³ which he wanted to

¹¹ It was, actually, mainly men that Rousseau seriously considered. For the education of women and their role in free communities see sections 5.2 and 5.4 of this dissertation.

¹² Melzer, Arthur. *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 59).

¹³ See *Emile*, ed. Bloom, p. 42.

separate strictly in time. Hence, Jean Jacques reared Emile as far away as possible from the unpredictable and uncontrollable contact with people, who would corrupt Emile's natural development and who would interfere with the tutor's authority.¹⁴ Rousseau's model for a natural man was taken from his own conjectures in his *Discourse on Inequality*, his idea of a good society from idealized views of his native Geneva and ancient Sparta, and it is Rousseau's aim for the individual—Emile—to retrace in his education the steps that the species had taken in its evolution.¹⁵ After laying the groundwork for understanding Rousseau's project in chapter 4 of this dissertation, in chapter 5 his educational philosophy will be embedded in his social vision and analyzed in considerable detail. Naturally, this analysis will entail a discussion of Rousseau's plans for how to resolve the contradiction between the individual and society, his views on freedom and authority in education, his efforts to eliminate the use of direct authority, as well as his social vision in general.

One of Rousseau's last works, his essay on *The Government of Poland*,¹⁶ is little dealt with among scholars of education, but it can be argued that it is actually the capstone of his work. All of the important themes and concerns of Rousseau resurface in it, and the problems that he had previously been trying to solve on the levels of the individual and the community he now addressed on the plane of a whole nation. Initially, Rousseau addressed the question in *The Government of Poland* how the Polish nation can remain free from usurpation by its more powerful neighbors, Russia and Prussia. He argued that the Poles should build a federal society that is modeled after the ancient republics of Sparta and Rome and cultivate everything that is Polish 'in nature.' Serfs should be enfranchised and everyone should be educated to contribute to the prosperity of the nation. Children should be raised predominantly in public and be imbued with love for the fatherland, using the means of a compulsory school system and public festivities. Most importantly, however, Rousseau argued that citizens should be made to love each other, observe each others' conduct, and not develop individual aims or personalities. With this radically collectivist society—which seems to be not just a recipe for Poland but Rousseau's utopia of a free, harmonious, stable, and peaceful social order—Rousseau hoped to prevent the divide he saw in individuals' character between their inclinations and duties and to delineate a counter-model to the bourgeois France he unreservedly despised.

Not surprisingly, the verdict on Rousseau's writing is mixed. Ostensibly, he had set out to free the individual from unnecessary constraints but ended up arguing, in many ways, that they are not constrained enough or by the wrong means. Consequently, some critics view his way of developing free human

¹⁴ See *Emile*, ed. Bloom, p. 42.

¹⁵ See, for instance, *ibid.*, p. 189.

¹⁶ *Jean Jacques Rousseau: The Government of Poland*. Trans. Willmoore Kendall (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1972).

beings and societies as, in the end, so confining that it could be called an “anti-utopia.”¹⁷ Some have criticized the hedonism, individualism, and primitivism that Rousseau, supposedly, encouraged. Others again have praised Rousseau’s educational thought for its emphasis on the interests and the developmental stages of the child, and he is—rightfully, in many ways—regarded the father of modern, progressive, child-centered education. Neill, on the other hand, has often not been taken very seriously among professional educators and does not seem to be read much today. After a thorough exposition and analysis of both Neill’s and Rousseau’s theories on freedom and authority in education, I will place both authors’ positions in the context of their respective views on human nature and society, which will enable us to see the differences and commonalities between the two authors in all their details and facets.

This dissertation has several interconnected purposes. First, it aims at establishing a clear and thorough understanding of both writers’ conceptions on freedom and authority in education, which is necessary in Neill’s case because many students of his educational philosophy have misunderstood his approach. In Rousseau’s case, on the other hand, I want to clarify whether his philosophy of freedom in education can truly be considered the beginning of free or alternative education as it is commonly understood today. During this process, I want to solve the seeming contradictions in Rousseau’s philosophy and gain a clear understanding of what distinguishes Neill’s and Rousseau’s approaches from conventional education. Terms like ‘anti-authoritarian’ or ‘permissive’ do not appear to capture the essence of Summerhill, and I am equally convinced that authority is not simply abolished at the school but replaced with perhaps more appropriate and even more powerful means to creating socially responsible and intelligent adults. In other words, Neill and Summerhill might not be just a footnote in the history and philosophy of education but rather kindle the latent hope of humankind that the manifold frustrations and insults to children’s psyche that conventional education often involves and that continues to haunt many people could be significantly reduced.¹⁸ As a philosopher of education, I want to increase our understanding of authority and freedom in education and ask whether Neill’s and Rousseau’s philosophies provide viable alternatives to mainstream educational and other cultural practice.

Ironically, this dissertation had its beginning in a question that I have given undergraduate students for their term papers. For several semesters, I asked what Rousseau’s position on Summerhill would be. Almost inevitably, particularly perceptive students reached conflicting answers, which naturally led to frustra-

¹⁷ Rosenow, Eliyahu: “Rousseau’s ‘Emile’, an Anti-Utopia.” *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. XXVIII, No. 3 (October 1980), pp. 212-24.

¹⁸ See also Richter, Horst-Eberhard, “Haben die Elterngruppen Erfolge?” (in *betrifft: erziehung*, vol. 4, April 1, 1972), 21.

tions. Since I had long been intrigued by Neill's school and had to realize that I was not sure what my position on Rousseau's writings was, I have now attempted to answer the questions I had originally posed to my students. During my preliminary studies, I came across many attempts to praise, defend, or deride Summerhill and Rousseau, but I had to conclude that many of these attempts were one-sided, sometimes ill-conceived, and often unnecessarily lurid. However, since the question of freedom and authority is one of the most fundamental and controversial in the philosophy of education, I consider it necessary to engage again with the criticism that Rousseau and Neill leveled at the educational mainstream. I am convinced that every educator can still learn from Neill's and others' experiences at Summerhill and that some of the basic assumptions about human nature, including the conditions and the pattern of individual growth, need continuing reassessment. The range of possible constructive interaction between educator and child, or between human beings in general, does not seem to be exhausted. By thoroughly engaging with Neill's and Rousseau's work, I want finally to answer the questions I had, somewhat innocently but with the best intentions, given to sophomore students and to contribute to the perpetual search of all educators to refine and improve their approaches.

2. ALEXANDER SUTHERLAND NEILL—REBEL WITH A CAUSE

Childhood is playhood, and all schools that believe otherwise are suppressors of the child. And because our schools have been such suppressors we adults remain children at heart.¹⁹

2.1 BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Alexander Sutherland Neill was born in Forfar, Scotland in 1883 as the third oldest of eight siblings.²⁰ Neill, as he later preferred to be called by everyone, including the children at Summerhill, was a slow child whose early years appear to have been more of a burden than a pleasure. His father, being also his teacher, was sterner with him than he was with the other children in school, and Neill's appearance—jug ears, red hair, and large feet—earned him early a reputation as an oddball. Neill was the first child of the family not to advance to the Forfar Academy after primary schooling: "The sad truth is that it would have been useless and hopeless to send me there, for I could not learn," he said.²¹ Until his mid-twenties, Neill often felt inferior to his peers and unable to match the expectations of his parents.

Neill's mother, Mary Sutherland, had also been a school teacher until she married Neill's father and took care of the household. She was ambitious to achieve a higher status in the village and meticulous when it came to the appearance of the family: "We didn't keep up with the Joneses, we were the Joneses," Neill said later.²² The Neill children were not allowed to walk barefoot in the summer; instead, they had to wear "hot stockings and boots."²³ All the children of the Neill family were called in to do homework when most of the other children were still allowed to play. Later, Neill called his mother "a snob" who "made [the children] snobs."²⁴ Mary Sutherland's mother, Granny Sinclair, was also living in the Neill household, and she was very influential on young Neill. She seems to have been the only one who saw something special in Allie, as he

¹⁹ A.S. Neill, *The Problem Parent* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd, 1932), 92.

²⁰ Neill's mother actually gave birth to thirteen children, but four died in infancy, and one was still-born (see Jonathan Croall, *Neill of Summerhill: The Permanent Rebel* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1983], 10). Croall's biography of Neill provides the best source for Neill's life. Neill's autobiography *Neill! Neill! Orange Peel!* (New York: Hart Publishing, 1972) was put together by his U.S. publisher Harold Hart who "cut chunks and printed three quarters of my *Log*" (see Neill's letter to Ben Morris, September 24, 1972; in Jonathan Croall, ed., *All the Best, Neill: Letters from Summerhill* [New York: Franklin Watts, 1984], 173). Neill was not content with the book because of that (see *ibid*).

²¹ Neill, 1972, p. 35. Yet Neill admits that apart from Willie his other siblings did not deserve to go to the Academy either, because they were as far from being good students as Neill himself was.

²² Quoted in Croall, 1983, p. 10.

²³ Neill, 1972, p. 33.

²⁴ Croall, 1983, p. 10.

was called then. Neill, however, considered her a “psychic”;²⁵ she sometimes presaged when someone was going to die, and her predictions would come true from time to time.²⁶ She died when Neill was fourteen, and he still hesitated close to his ninetieth birthday to reach a final verdict on her.²⁷

A verdict on his father was easier: “My father did not care for me when I was a boy, and I acquired a definite fear of him, a fear that I never quite overcame in manhood.”²⁸ When Neill wrote his autobiography, he reached the conclusion though that this was not just the case with him but with all children. Neill’s father could not make a connection with any of his children or pupils. On the other hand, he was a ‘good’ teacher for the Scottish school system. He liked competition in the classroom, and the fact that his oldest son Willie was a good scholar pleased him very much.²⁹ Willie was considered the genius of the family. He managed—without doing any visible work—to go to university when he was only 16, where he won “further medals.”³⁰ No child of the family seemed to be able to match the oldest son’s brilliance, however, which put a damper on all the other sibling’s efforts.³¹ Among the family members, Neill was closest to his sister Clunie who was one year younger than he. She was the one who would vouch for him when their father treated Neill particularly shabbily. She protested when their father gave Allie the worst food available at the table as well as when Allie had to wear his older brothers’ clothes—all to no avail. Neill and his sister became too close though when they explored each other’s bodies frequently when they were 5 and 6 years old respectively, which resulted in severe beatings every time they were caught.³²

Neill’s school days were hard to endure. As the teacher’s son, he was watched more closely by his father than the other children were, and Allie’s ineptitude was an embarrassment to his father. In retribution, his father would take Neill

²⁵ Neill, 1972, p. 26.

²⁶ See Croall, 1983, p. 18.

²⁷ Neill, 1972, p. 27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31; Interestingly, Neill had dedicated his first book to “A village school where the bairns chattered and were happy” (see *A Dominie’s Log*, 1986 ed.). Hart, Neill’s publisher in the U.S., excluded the few sentences of dedication in Neill’s autobiography where most of *A Dominie’s Log* was reprinted.

²⁹ Neill, 1972, p. 34.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Willie read the Old Testament when he was 2 years old (see Croall, 1983, p. 12).

³¹ See Neill, 1972, p. 34. All the details given in this first chapter have been selected because they are pertinent in some way to Neill’s later educational ideas and lend some coherence to their development.

³² Those encounters and the resulting beatings not only sent the message to Neill and his sister that to explore one’s body is sinful but, Neill claimed, they also fixed his desires on Clunie. We do not have evidence that it happened the same way with his sister, although—judging from Neill’s own theories—this would have to be expected. Neill very often returned to these childhood encounters with Clunie in his writings (for instance Neill, 1972, pp. 79ff and 126).

by the cheek and pinch him hard “between thumb and forefinger.”³³ Fred McFarlane, a Kingsmuir man who remembered the Neills, described Allie to Jonathan Croall, Neill’s biographer, as “big and soft”³⁴ and confirmed that he must have had hard times as a child. His inward-turned, big feet, reddish hair, and his overall ungainly manner made the other children pick him last for team games. Neill summarized how he was often viewed as a boy: “I was clumsy, preoccupied with scraps of iron in my pockets, and my unprepossessing appearance did not help. My stuckout ears earned me the nickname Saucers, and my feet grew suddenly to the size they are now.”³⁵

Studying Latin was a particular problem for young Alexander. No matter how hard he tried, he could not remember lists of words or how to decline or conjugate them. Whereas this angered his father, he managed to upset his mother by not remembering the psalms either; he could not even memorize what to buy at the grocery store when his mother sent him there.³⁶ Further unpleasant experiences during his childhood were his fear of walking alone in the dark and of thunderstorms³⁷ as well as the perennial fights between rival schools and villages.³⁸ These fears were probably shared by many, if not all the children; yet, one cannot know for sure, because “fears were nothing to be talked about among the boys,” Neill said. “I never knew whether the other children had similar fears. We did not mention such things, because we knew that to be a coward was the greatest of all social sins.”³⁹

Village life in rural Scotland before the turn of the 20th century was slow. There was no entertainment as we know it today, no radio, no television, no cinema, no cars; there was no way to escape the daily encounters with family, friends, and—perceived—foes. School picnics and the “occasional juggler”⁴⁰ provided some amusement; yet, during the rest of the year not much happened apart from the sporadic wedding or funeral.⁴¹ Market days provided some diversion for the ones who had a little money. Neill found some solace in daydreaming. When he was thirteen, he dreamed he was an inventor. He had several ideas about how to improve bicycles, for instance, and when a “semi-relative of the family, versed in mechanics, hinted that the cycle of the future would be driven

³³ Neill, 1972, p. 38.

³⁴ Croall, 1983, p. 12.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See Neill, 1972, p. 39.

³⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁸ Many of those experiences Neill used for his novel *Carrotty Broon* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1921). The protagonist is modeled after Neill himself.

³⁹ Neill, 1972, p. 44.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 45

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 46.

by compressed air, he tried to become an inventor.⁴² Nothing substantial came of it, however, but Neill kept his interest in mechanics and metalwork all of his life and passed it on later to many of the children at Summerhill.

At school, 'licks' were common, and his father used the 'tawse'⁴³ rather often. If there was no occasion to hit a child, Mr. Neill sometimes would create one: "He'd sat a group of us to do some sums, and you had to put up your hand when you'd finished. The last one would get the strap—and you'd have a strapping for any you got wrong."⁴⁴ One reason for this harshness seems to have been the Scottish system of "payment by results."⁴⁵ The more students attended school, the more often they attended, the better their grades were, the better the impression the students made was when an inspector visited the schools—and the better the whisky and the food were at the teacher's house on that particular day, a cynic might add—the more money, including the teacher's pay, the school would receive.⁴⁶

Another reason for the teacher's severity was the prevailing Calvinism, which threatened punishment, in school, at home, and in hell: "For more than 300 years the dark shadow of John Calvin had lain across of the lives of the Scots people, turning them into a God-fearing rather than a God-loving nation. Calvin's God was remote and all-powerful, while man was corrupt and powerless," Neill summarized.⁴⁷ Salvation could come to only a few; yet everyone was required to live austere. Schools were a means "to keep children from sinning,"⁴⁸ and those who transgressed were reprimanded. Neill probably became such an ardent fighter for what he called "pro-life" later because so much during his childhood had death written all over it.⁴⁹ The atmosphere at school and at home appears to have been suffused with fear and obedience, with only occasional relief. Sunday was the day of worship, when only the most necessary work could be done and when the Neills sat down after dinner to read psalms, to sing

⁴² For example, Neill thought that, while riding a bicycle downhill, air could be compressed in cylinders that, once released again by a switch of a lever, could make riding uphill easier.

⁴³ A 'tawse' was a leather-strap with two 'fingers'—thinner leather strips—at one end.

⁴⁴ So said one ex-pupil of Neill's father (see Croall, 1983, p. 17). Neill's father's actions become more understandable when we take into consideration that he had up to 139 pupils (with one assistant and one pupil-teacher) in a building that was designed for 25 pupils (see Hemmings, 1973, p. 1). Neill's father was, however, remembered rather fondly by some of his ex-pupils (see *ibid.*, p. 2).

⁴⁵ See Croall, 1983, pp. 15f.

⁴⁶ Kingsmuir school's grant decreased from £95 in 1888 to £79 in 1891 (see *ibid.*, p. 16).

⁴⁷ Croall, 1983, p. 17; for a further exposition of life in Scotland in the 1880s see, for instance, Hans Hermann Karg: *Erziehungsnormen und ihre Begründung in der Pädagogik von Alexander Sutherland Neill* (Frankfurt/Main: Haag & Herchen Verlag, 1983), chapter 1.

⁴⁸ Croall, 1983, p. 16.

⁴⁹ Neill's grandmother never ceased to describe the torments of hell, and one neighbor told Neill's mother, in his presence when he was 9, that "Allie had 'death' written all over his face" (*ibid.*, p. 18).

religious songs, and to thank God “for sparing and taking care of us.”⁵⁰ Many decades later, Neill remembered that he, his brother Nellie, and Clunie often had a hard time holding back laughter on these occasions. Yet, Neill further recalled,

[W]ithout being told, we knew precisely the milestones on the broad road that leadeth to destruction. They were sex, stealing, lying, swearing, and profaning God’s day. (The last-named included everything that was enjoyable.) . . . Disobedience did not come into our line of vision; we were too well trained to attempt it.⁵¹

When Neill was fourteen, he had to leave school to earn a living. His brother Nellie had not been doing very well at Forfar Academy, so the two went into the workforce together as office clerks.⁵² Neill was appointed at a gas meter factory in Edinburgh. He was to lodge with Nellie in Leith, on the outskirts of the city. Neill was torn: on the one hand, he would not have to study Latin anymore, but he also was “freed from play and bird-nesting and catching minnows.”⁵³ Neill’s workplace, however, turned out to be an “evil-smelling hole.”⁵⁴ He dreaded every minute there and became homesick very quickly. After Nellie was fired, it took, however, several months before Allie was allowed to return home; yet when he finally went back, he was ashamed for “not having been able to stick it out.”⁵⁵ For his father and the farmers of his native village this was one more proof that Allie was not good for anything.

Next, the two brothers studied for a civil service exam even though their father considered it too hard for both of them. As soon as the local chemist needed an apprentice, however, Neill was sent there.⁵⁶ A few days later their father decided to replace Allie with Nellie and sent Alexander to be an apprentice at a draper instead. There Neill cleaned, made deliveries, and did other apprentice’s chores. For the first time—because he delivered to middle-class households—he developed a snobbery that would not leave him for the next 20 years: Compared to the ordinary girls he saw in the streets, the middle class girls at their homes became an ideal, and he decided that the former were not good enough; he “aimed higher.”⁵⁷ Yet working for twelve hours and walking two miles back and forth each day took its toll. His toes became so painful that he had to stop his apprentice work. “The boy is just hopeless,” his father con-

⁵⁰ Neill, 1972, p. 74.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² See *ibid.*, pp. 83ff.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵⁶ See *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

cluded. "He might be a teacher," Neill's mother ventured in turn. Without any irony his father replied, "It's about all he's fit for."⁵⁸

Neill's mother added one more reason for the change: her husband had more students than other teachers, and Allie's help was appreciated. Thus Neill started to teach young pupils how to read and write, using the traditional methods of his father. He discovered that the best way to understand and memorize something is to teach it and that it is better to "draw out than to stuff in."⁵⁹ After two years of apprenticing, Neill barely passed a high school entrance examination, which made his father ashamed of him again. Neill received a warning from the examiner "that his work all round is weak."⁶⁰ Two years later Neill finished near the bottom of the class once more and received only a Third Class degree, which did not entitle him to go to university immediately. He felt like a "dunce"⁶¹ again but, looking back, he felt that he had been in a difficult position as an apprentice teacher, since he had "to be on the side of authority" at a rather young age. He had to be a man when he was still a boy himself. When Neill, the 'pupil teacher,' as the position was officially called, passed two more exams at the age of nineteen, he became an "authorized teacher," but of "untrained" status. Nonetheless, he applied for positions around Scotland and started working at Bonnyrigg near Edinburgh. Compared to his father's methods, this school was exceedingly strict. The children were not allowed even to whisper; if they did, they had to be beaten. Neill relented, because he too was afraid of the headmistress. He could cope with this situation for only two months and left for another school in Kingskettle, Scotland.

In Kingskettle, Neill worked with Mister Calder, the headmaster, who was separated from Neill's classroom only by a glass panel and watched Neill's every move. For three years, Neill had to be "the sternest of the taskmasters" and did his work "with fear in his heart."⁶² Calder could never be approached humanly; Neill was stared down coldly whenever he tried. Yet, "in a weird sort of way," the two seemed to like each other.⁶³ Calder would work out math problems slowly on the board for his pupils, and, then, he required them to repeat his demonstration in their books. If they failed, Calder punished them, but only a few failed this method. Her Majesty's inspector was rather pleased with the

⁵⁸ Neill, 1972, p. 87.

⁵⁹ This seems to have been his father's method too. Neill was at the end of his life still fond of the pupil-teacher system. Neill never dismissed teacher education completely but also held that there are many things a teacher could learn only in the classroom (see, for instance, his letter to the editor of the *Sunday Telegraph* from January 21, 1971; in Jonathan Croall, ed, *All the Best, Neill: Letters from Summerhill* [New York: Franklin Watts, 1984], 41).

⁶⁰ Neill, 1972, p. 90.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 97. All quotes without footnotes can be found on the same page as the following quote.

⁶³ See *ibid.*

school's accomplishments.⁶⁴ Calder's school was in many ways stricter than his father's school had been. In Neill's father's school, children were allowed to chat, laugh, and even carve their names in the desks. At Calder's school, pupils moved like soldiers, and this whole experience was sheer horror for Neill. When Calder was absent, Neill, who taught design and drawing, lightened the atmosphere, with some success.⁶⁵

During these three years at Kingskettle, Neill lodged with a family whose son Willie was a sailor who was boastful about what he had seen and experienced. Willie persuaded Neill to join a paramilitary group that on weekends went on excursions to a shooting range. Neill immediately made an impression as a marksman, hitting the bull's-eye four times in succession. Even though he dreaded the marching and the military atmosphere, he had for the first time been best at something and, consequently, started studying trigonometry and ballistics. During his stay in Kingskettle he actually began studying to be a minister. Reverend Gordon, a Canadian, became his teacher for Ancient Greek. Every morning, Neill went to the Reverend's place to study. He became proficient enough to read Homer and Herodotus. During this time, Neill also made his first acquaintance with politics and the theater. The father of the household where he was lodging as well as Reverend Gordon were staunch Tories and Neill tried to impress them by being zealous for Tory politics.⁶⁶ Having reached a salary of 75 pounds a year, he applied for another post, and, to his surprise, two men walked into Calder's school one day and offered him a position in Newport, a suburb of Dundee. Neill's new school had working class as well as middle-class children, and the new headmaster was much different from Calder. He was open-minded and easy-going, and Neill describes the two years in Newport as the happiest in his life so far.⁶⁷

Neill began going to the opera, and his life-long interest in drama dates back to this period. Croall tracked down some of his former pupils from Newport, and their memories of their former teacher were fond and favorable. Neill had invited the pupils on nature walks after school, on which he encouraged them to take notes on the weather and to make sketches of the flowers and the landscape. His ex-pupils describe him as very original and enthusiastic in the classroom and as encouraging the students to be the same. On their outdoor adventures, Neill taught his students how to use brush and pencil, and he seemed to have relished his newly found role as a somewhat unconventional teacher.⁶⁸ In 1908, he eventually passed the university entrance exams and began studying

⁶⁴ See Neill, 1972, p. 98.

⁶⁵ See Croall, 1983, p. 33.

⁶⁶ Neill 1972, p. 104. Neill once threw a tomato at young Winston Churchill, because "Ella Robertson dared me to" (*ibid.*, p. 111).

⁶⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 105.

⁶⁸ See Croall, 1983, p. 37.

agriculture because of the prospects in the British colonies.⁶⁹ He chose the University of Edinburgh, because the city was more cosmopolitan than St. Andrews. In hindsight, however, Neill considered the plan to study farming an illustration of “how much of a drifter”⁷⁰ he was.

In Edinburgh, he lodged with his brother again. Although Neill had a grant from the Carnegie foundation for his tuition, the two experienced severe financial hardships; sometimes, they had to share one meal per day between them.⁷¹ During his first year in Edinburgh, Neill had to take science, which remained “double Dutch” to him.⁷² Lab work turned out to be a farce; after struggling to get the required results, he followed the advice of a fellow student and faked them.⁷³ After one year, he had grown convinced that science was not for him and switched to a degree in Honors English. During this second year, the classes turned out to be dull lectures, mainly on what someone—particularly the professors at the University of Edinburgh—had said about the classics in English literature. The students were expected only to regurgitate and not to criticize. Professors read aloud their and others’ work,⁷⁴ and no teacher ever asked his students to produce any original work. After Neill had committed the blunder of comparing Shakespeare unfavorably to Ibsen, however, at least one professor knew him by name.

One episode illustrates how Neill conquered his timidity, why he became a staunch defender of the weak, and why he grew so adverse to arbitrary, imposed authority. He had been thrown out of the classroom one day because he, supposedly, had caused a commotion. Neill went to see Professor Lodge in his private room after the lecture and told him that he was not only considerably older than most of the students but also too poor to waste his money and time on creating a disturbance in a lecture hall. Lodge raised his eyebrows at first but then held out his hand and apologized.⁷⁵ This seems to be Neill’s first step towards an eventual emancipation from Victorian moral codes, which he eventually scorned for their aloofness and severity. Around this time, Neill became an ardent admirer of the works of H.G. Wells and, more importantly, George Bernard Shaw. Shaw’s appeal lay in his relentless efforts to diminish everything that was dear to Victorian Britain: church, religion, schools, morality, law, marriage, and family.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ See Neill, 1972, p. 113.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, p. 115.

⁷² Ibid, p. 116.

⁷³ See *ibid.*

⁷⁴ As the editor of the student newspaper, Neill criticized his teachers at Edinburgh in the second issue in March 1912 (see Axel Kühn, *Alexander S. Neill*. [Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1995], 22), which was certainly an emancipatory step. These experiences at Edinburgh University seem in many ways responsible for his anti-intellectual stance, which he cultivated at Summerhill (see particularly section 3.5).

⁷⁵ See Croall, 1983, p. 47.

⁷⁶ See Croall, 1983, p. 48.

Summarizing his experiences in Edinburgh, however, Neill described his university years again as mainly unhappy.⁷⁷ The city was dead, parochial, and pompous. The university life did not have any community spirit; one could take one's degree without ever speaking to anyone. Union life was narrow and dull, and Neill disagreed with the patronizing attitude toward the many 'colored' students from the colonies. When he was awarded his Second Class degree, he did not know what to do with it. All he knew was that he did not want to teach.⁷⁸

Neill decided to go to London to try himself out. His first job there was editing an encyclopedia; the next position was as the art editor for the *Piccadilly Magazine*. He was not exactly qualified for this position, but his application letter was the only one that amused the editor.⁷⁹ Overall, Neill felt very lonely in London, and his recollections have mostly an unusual somber tone.⁸⁰ Once, he stepped on a soap box in Hyde Park's famous Speaker's Corner, where he now espoused Socialist doctrines rather than the Tory ideology he had adhered to earlier to impress his mentors. Once he was forced down from his box, however, because he had used the Postal Service as a good model for a socialist institution. The outbreak of World War One prevented the *Piccadilly Magazine* from being published. Out of a job, Neill went back to Scotland and applied for a teaching position at Gretna Green on the English border.

2.2 THE DOMINIE—THE BIRTH OF THE SUMMERHILL IDEA

It seems ludicrous that a man that is known as an educational heretic should have taken to this profession merely because journalism and his military courage had failed him.⁸¹

Neill hardly ever missed a chance to describe the events of his life as in no way preparing him for being a teacher or opening a school. Even though he clearly had indicated that this—if anything—was what he enjoyed, in his recollections he portrays his becoming an educator and, later, an educational heretic, as a matter of chance. The fact is however, that, at Gretna, one finds the birth of Neill's educational thought and practice. Already in 1915, before he had read Freud and before he met Homer Lane, many of his convictions about interac-

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 127. This claim sounds somewhat spurious. After all, his two years at Newport had been the "happiest of his life" and his pupils remembered him fondly 65 years later.

⁷⁹ Neill, 1972, p. 134.

⁸⁰ Once he accosted a woman who was reading on a park bench, admitting his loneliness. This maladroit effort only distressed her, and she left after five minutes of awkward conversation (see *ibid*, 131f).

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 139.

tion with children were forming. His years at Gretna Neill described in his first book, *A Dominie's Log*,⁸² which, as he himself declared, is not a work of fiction but retelling “more or less truly”⁸³ of what happened there. It was also the time, if his recollections are accurate, when he started thinking systematically about education.

His predecessor at Gretna Green had been a stern disciplinarian. The children at the school were quiet when Neill arrived, and he was expected to keep discipline. The older boys were watching him closely, and at the first act of disobedience he gave a severe lashing to one of them.⁸⁴ However, his demeanor did not last long; progressively, he did not care anymore whether his students talked or not during lessons. Indeed, when they stopped talking, he would turn around and see whether an inspector had entered the room.⁸⁵ It dawned on Neill that it was *fear* of the students that caused teachers to insist on respect and the observance of the teachers' dignity. Neill became convinced that “Discipline ... means a pose on the part of the teacher. It makes him very remote; it lends him dignity. Dignity is a thing I abhor.”⁸⁶

Neill not only loosened discipline once he was a schoolmaster. He ruminated about the purpose of life and schools in particular as well as about the nature of children. He asked himself, in Socratic fashion, whether his pupils, and their parents, had ever “sat down saying: ‘I must examine myself so that I may find out what manner of man I am.’”⁸⁷ He grew confident that he would do his part as a teacher: “I was hopeful because I have found a solution. I shall henceforth make my bairns realise,”⁸⁸ and what they should realize was nothing less than the meaning of life.⁸⁹ What were the motives, though, for being kind to children, he asked himself? Was it that he, the teacher, wants to be liked? Was it only that he liked the feeling of the children thinking kindly of him? Although he was sure that these motives were also involved, his foremost intention was to make the children happy. In contrast to the Calvinist culture of Scotland, he declared that “No man, no woman, has the right to make the skies cloudy for a bairn; it is a sin against the Holy Ghost.”⁹⁰

⁸² This book is out of print but, unlike most of his work, was republished in 1985 (reprinted and slightly abridged also in Neill, 1972. All quotes are from the latter edition).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* Later, Neill devised the “silly ass” test to check how comfortable teacher and student were with each other. Every teacher who was shocked by being called a “silly ass” should not be in the classroom, he insisted (see A.S. Neill, *The Problem Teacher* [London: Herbert Jenkins, 1939], 11).

⁸⁷ Neill, 1972, p. 370.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 369f.

⁸⁹ “I think I want to make them realise what life means” (*ibid.*, p. 370).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

Besides making children happy and enlightening them, Neill wanted to foster the children's intrinsic motivation, imagination, creativity, and sense of humor. It broke his heart when he saw witty, creative, and curious children being silenced and suppressed in traditional schools, as if preparation for the work force and stifling children's energy were the purposes of a school. Often, he was disheartened though: "My pessimism has remained with me all day. I feel that I am merely pouring water into a sieve. I almost feel that to meddle with education is to begin at the wrong end." Robert, one of his students, had turned fourteen and was about to start working the following Monday. Neill had tried to give Robert "an ideal."⁹¹ What Neill feared, however, was that with the bleak prospects of the average child in this time and place, Robert "will take up the attitude of the neighbors: he will go to church, he will vote Radical or Tory, ... [and] he will marry and live in a hovel." Education, in Neill's opinion, was merely "trying to adapt itself to commerce and economics and convention."⁹² He grew quickly opposed to the individualistic mindset of his native Britain and developed his Socialist ideas further. Unwittingly echoing Rousseau, Neill declared that the "idle rich waste millions every year" at the expense of the slaving majority.⁹³ Education seems to be cut off at fourteen because, otherwise, the pupil might develop ideas of a different, better life and ask: "Why should I, a man made in the image of God, be forced to slave for gains that you will steal?"⁹⁴

Early during his stay at Gretna, Neill toyed with idea of writing abridged versions of Plato's *Republic*, More's *Utopia*, and Bacon's *New Atlantis*, among other classic works of Western civilization. He wanted his students to read Shelley, Tolstoy, Blake, and Nietzsche.⁹⁵ As a teacher, he was determined to "tear all the rags of hypocrisy from the facts of life; I shall lead my bairns to doubt everything."⁹⁶ He wanted to study history with his pupils, partially to expose the poor reasoning of history textbooks and to show his students, in modern terms, how to think critically. He introduced his class to Ibsen's plays, which proved to be too difficult for the pupils, however.⁹⁷ Yet what Neill did in school did not go completely unnoticed in the village. Some parents approached him about his political views and told him that they had no place in the classroom. After he had reassured one parent that Radicalism—which was what he was being accused of—was not what he wanted, the father asked him what his political leanings were. Neill's reply, however, "I am a Utopian," only confused

⁹¹ Neill, 1972, p. 388.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 389.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 376.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 389.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 377.

the concerned father, and the two men ended up talking about the weather and tulips—and that was it.⁹⁸

Neill's first book is a document of constant self-reflection. What had started out as an effort to become clearer about his views on education turned into a journey of self-discovery.⁹⁹ Neill realized that if he wanted to be consistent and to follow his convictions at every moment, he would lose his position at a state school immediately, and, thus, he compromised: "Were I to carry my convictions to their natural conclusion I should be an outcast—and an outcast is of no value to the community."¹⁰⁰ He, therefore, abstained from introducing excessively radical topics like sexuality to the class, yet he discussed women's right to vote and other political questions like "what is a republican." And at night he wrestled with Nietzsche's anti-democratic philosophy, which, otherwise, seems to have appealed to him.¹⁰¹

To make the lives of the children more enjoyable, Neill abolished traditional exams and replaced the established emphasis on spelling and grammar with essay assignments like "Write a Utopia of your own" or humorous ones like "Imagine an elderly woman who ordered a duck receiving an airplane instead. Write about the pilot's reaction when being delivered a duck."¹⁰² Topics such as these often proved to be too difficult but Neill realized that interest and humor are indispensable in education. He put the leather strap away for good and, when criticized, replied that he was not "the policeman of this village; I'm the school master."¹⁰³ This may have annoyed the parents who wanted him to do what they did not want to do to their children, but Neill had realized that he, as the children's teacher, had to be on "the side of the bairns."¹⁰⁴

And they appreciated what he did. Walter Roan, who stayed on for one term under Neill recalls his "easy-going manner—he used no punishment, yet maintained perfect control."¹⁰⁵ When Neill put the 'tawse' away, he threw out the symbol of authority and the mutual fear that had reigned in the classroom.

⁹⁸ See Neill, 1972, p. 390f.

⁹⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 393.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 410ff. Nietzsche and Neill both missed in their contemporaries a radiating, joyful boldness—"saying yea to life," as Neill later put it (A.S. Neill, *The Problem Family* [New York: Hermitage Press, 1949], 147). Neill seems to have been considerably influenced by Nietzsche, and he had his own anti-democratic tendencies (see section 3.5).

¹⁰² Neill, 1972, p. 459.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 415. Hugh D. MacKenzie, who met Neill in the 1950s and wrote the introduction to the new edition of *A Dominie's Log* in 1985, credited Neill with being *the* pioneer in abolishing corporal punishment at Scottish schools, which eventually happened only after two parents went to the European Court of Justice in 1982.

¹⁰⁴ Neill, 1972, p. 415. He claimed later that this is how Lane put it. However, he had not met Lane yet.

¹⁰⁵ Croall, 1983, p. 60. Neill was still remembered Gretna with admiration and "affection" in the early 1970s, when Ray Hemmings went there to conduct research for his book (see Hemmings, 1973, p. 17).

He tore down the barriers that had existed between students and teachers. He played a bugle to summon his students and did not mind when they left the classroom for a few minutes without asking. Later, he actually allowed the students to study what they wanted and gave them one 'free day' per week when they could choose their activities entirely.¹⁰⁶ The older students were allowed to spend their whole day in the shop or to take their books outside. In the winter, Neill built snowmen with the children. He was remembered by his former students as kind and gentle, and when the children had their weekly tea party in the cookery room on Fridays, Neill and his two female assistants were invited.¹⁰⁷ As in Newport, there were nature walks, sometimes interspersed with kite flying, and, to foster the children's interest in nature, he built a fish pond and a pigeon house.¹⁰⁸ This 'being on the side of the child' by letting them chatter and eat candy in the classroom does not appear to have had any detrimental effects on learning. One inspection concluded that, "The pupils in the Senior division are intelligent and bright under oral examinations and make an exceedingly good appearance in the class subjects."¹⁰⁹ Yet, the inspector complained that "discipline could be firmer" and disapproved of "a tendency to talk on the part of the pupils whenever opportunity occurs."¹¹⁰ Neill, however, concluded that discipline had been invented by people who could not stand noise; "stern disciplinarians are men who hate to be irritated," he said.¹¹¹

Neill's first *Dominie* book is interspersed with ruminations on Utopia. He asked himself what he would do if he could actually open a school. What would his ideal school and ideal society be like? These questions were posed by one of the characters in the book after the school master had made himself a reputation as an expert on education,¹¹² and Neill's answer was: "I don't want children to be trained to make peasoup and picture frames, I want them to be trained to think."¹¹³ His method would be to abolish History and Geography as they were conventionally taught and replace them by an open-ended inquiry that started with the interests of the child. History and Geography would "come in incidentally," and Neill claimed that he could teach for a whole week using a newspaper report about a fire in New York.¹¹⁴ As far as other subjects were concerned, he

¹⁰⁶ See Croall, 1983, p. 60.

¹⁰⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁰⁸ See *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Neill, 1972, p. 423.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Neill had the impression that the village thought he was "quite a nice chap but, of course, half-daft," (*ibid.*, p. 140). Neill had started giving public talks on education in which, again, his later educational philosophy is foreshadowed. However, the villagers' response seems to have been to laugh him off, to find him perhaps entertaining, but to ignore what he had to say.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

¹¹⁴ See *ibid.*