

“Obsession,” “Regarding Education,” “Coming to Terms”

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Obsession

What does it mean to be obsessed? There is, to be sure, a sort of beauty in the eyes of a person obsessed about something. It is a rapt beauty, a desperate beauty, the beauty of those who pour their entire existence into one thing alone, but unlike that of people who devote themselves to work or sports or studying, this is a hopeless beauty—the beauty of a cornered animal, so to speak. There is something tragic in how an obsessed person can no longer find their way forward, and it is precisely because they do not realise this that they appear beautiful to an onlooker.

At the same time, there is also a sort of ugliness in the eyes of such people. As I see it, this comes from their being stuck in a deadlock. An obsessed person is, in a sense, someone who has become a slave to what they believe is true. Irrespective of their torment and their occasional readiness even to risk their lives for their obsession, there are times when such people actually appear foolish, and to a cruel onlooker, comical.

As far as can be managed, one would prefer not to become trapped in such an impasse, and in any case a situation as dire as this is unlikely to occur often in one’s life. Nevertheless, I believe that it is both important and essential for us as human beings that we obsess over things. The reason is that this is the only way in which human beings can come to grasp philosophies (*shisō*) which are truly alive.

A sentiment (*omou*) is an altogether more emotional and imprecise thing than a thought (*kangaeru*). As the word “sentimentalism” suggests, sentiments can at times be hopelessly vague, interpretable as little more than a self-indulgent declaration of belief. Yet it is for this exact reason that the act of having a sentiment is more primitive and involves more parts of a person than the act of thinking does.

If thoughts are primarily the product of reason, then sentiments are founded, first of all, on feeling. While trains of thought can sometimes deteriorate into abstract games of logic removed from reality, the danger when it comes to sentiments is in the more physically intoxicating self-complacency to which they lead.

However, as much as we can separate the acts of having a sentiment and thinking in this way, these mental processes are in fact two sides of the same coin. Without our realising it, we continually repeat the cycle of making our sentiments more precise by scrutinising them with thought, and making what we have thought about more systemic by believing in them as sentiments. Although our sentiments are not always correct and our thinking not always valid, it is without question this subtle shifting of gears that keeps our brains flexible.

In this light, it also follows that no obsession, no matter how intense, can possibly be a definitive end-point. There must be something to be discovered beyond. By reconsidering our obsession from a new perspective, we hold the possibility of breaking through the obsessive state. Since obsessions are prone to dissolve into hysteria, breaking through them is no easy task, and there may be times when that something beyond is no more than a snap decision and its accompanying action. Yet even so, thinking is part of the purview of human beings, and is by no means an excuse to avoid taking action.

If we assume that the amalgam of logic and emotion attained through the process of obsession cannot be altered by anything less than a complete effort of will, then maybe there is a need to re-examine the very ideas from which an obsession has sprung. Indeed, is every instance of cogitation not just the repetition of this act? Without the dynamism of this pendulum-like mental activity, the human spirit can never be free. Although what really matters is that we believe, rather than doubt, I think we should feel free to doubt as much as we want in the quest for a single belief.

I say this because ready-made philosophies have become rampant of late, and we are progressively losing the habit of taking one thing and obsessively mulling over it until we have thought it through.

It is interesting how one of the Japanese words for “philosophy,” *shisō*, is written with two characters that both mean “to think.” Sometimes it seems to me to be the very same thing as obsessing. In these peaceful times, no philosophy to be found in Japan may seem at all like a matter of life or death at the first glance. Yet there is no philosophy, in the true sense of the word, in which life does not hang in the balance—whatever the everydayness in which it may be situated.

For instance, to take *maihōmu-shugi*, the philosophy that one should own a house as the central space of one’s life: it goes without saying that making this a personal philosophy would call for the determination to defy authority and to take any measure to keep one’s wife

and children safe. There is no telling what dangerous notions even a philosophy of home ownership could morph into, once made the object of an obsession.

(1969)

Regarding Education

Part I

No word unnerves me more than the word “education.” The first thing that I feel toward the act of people educating other people is fear, and as I see it, education is connected somewhere deep down to violence. While the reason I hold such an irrational and biased opinion is likely due to the education I have received, that fact itself only makes me all the more afraid and agitated.

I believe that humans are unreliable creatures. In the end, we are no more than balls of clay that can be shaped in any which way according to the will of the potter. Humans will eat other humans if they are taught to do so, and kill other humans if ordered to do so. In short, man is not born as a man. Man is born as a beast that has inherited no more than its instincts.

If we suppose that education is what turns that beast into a human, then there is nothing more wonderful than education, and at the same time, nothing more terrifying.

While the ideal of what kind of person is to be produced by education differs between eras and societies, what remains constant is the fact that education is one form of domination. It is an older group of people egotistically cultivating another, younger group of people to be their successors. It could be said that, no matter how benevolent you make educators sound, it is no more than sentimentalism in the face of the enormous political workings of education as a system.

However, human existence is such that one cannot escape being moulded by the dominant civilisation and culture of the era. Provided that a human wishes to live as a member of a community, they cannot lead their life without consenting to and inheriting its mould.

At the same time, humans are fascinating in that, even when they have been educated along such dominant lines, their creativity allows them to imagine other, alternative ways of living. And maybe what nurtures this ability itself is also the power of education.

Perhaps because I grew up an only child, I used to hate school. I believe that this was the reason “education” was something that I only ever suffered through. Yet now that I am grown up, I am constantly learning from all sorts of people and from numerous books in a more proactive and a freer manner—and enjoying it.

Even now, I cannot suppress my fear at the capacity of education to whittle down the infinite possibilities dormant within humans. At the same time, human ingenuity is also making diversity possible in education. For education to be able to teach all people to value diverse ways of living rather than just one, and for society to enable such education: these will not change how hopeless things are, to be sure, but they are the topics around which my dreams tend to revolve.

(1970)

Part II

While I believe that remembering one's early childhood is the most important thing when thinking about early childhood education, my memories from that period are unfortunately not the clearest. I am sure this is the same for everyone. One thing I do remember is the fear that my mother might die. As an only child, and one who was very attached to his mother, I would start whimpering at the walls if my mother came back home even a moment late. I remember repeatedly trying to picture a life after my mother's death, and agonising, at my tender age, about how I would make it through the world alone.

I cannot pinpoint when exactly it was, but there came a time when I started to think that I would be able to make it through life even if my mother was dead. I suppose that could be called my first step toward adulthood. What was it that could have brought about this change? I am not very certain myself, but at the very least, I do not think that it was brought about by what we commonly think of as education. My strongest memory from kindergarten, a mission school, was a picture on the wall of heaven and hell. The picture showed the dead being judged by an angel with a scale for their actions in life, with them being allowed into heaven if it tilted toward good, and thrown into hell if it tilted toward evil, and for some reason I remember it vividly even to this day. This was clearly a sort of education. Granted, it was a rather unsavoury kind of education, but I find it difficult even to imagine how I might have turned out had I not been shown that picture.

There are many things that raise children into adults other than education in the strict sense of schooling by parents and teachers. Children receive an education from their siblings as well as from their friends. Picture books and TV are also sources of education, as is wider society. It would not be a mistake to say that the very environment that surrounds a child, the very society and era, form the child's education. It goes without saying that "education," in the strict sense of what is received in kindergarten and in school, is but one small part of education in this broader sense of the word. Even an ideal "education" can only be received in the context of the reality in which we live—a chaotic reality teeming with contradictions.

This chaotic reality is always in a state of flux. While we generally want to educate our children so that they can adapt better to the society in which we currently live, our children are simultaneously those who will transform this society and push it in new directions in our future. Education would be a simple matter if all we had to do was to raise our children into cookie-cutter copies of ourselves, but I do not believe that we genuinely

want our children to become just like us. As I see it, what we really want is to raise our children to be better than us.

I doubt many people think of our society as an ideal society. That being the case, we have the option of raising our children not to adapt to our current society, and to thereby produce those who will bring our society closer to what is ideal. Surely therein lies the biggest challenge of the act of education. The educator is always under the pressure to change. In this era, when we are being forced to reconsider, especially from an ecological standpoint, how human civilisation is to exist on our planet, the logic by which educators approach the future has become a grave issue involving the future life and death of posterity.

I do not know how much of an impact early childhood education can have on a person. Insofar as some highly revolutionary scientific method for education remains yet to be established, I will continue to believe that the education wrought by the society and the era—education in the broader sense of the word—is more powerful than “education” in its strict sense. However, to take this to be the case would mean that every one of us is unconsciously standing in the position of an educator with respect to children. I am terrified, first and foremost, by the awareness of this prospect.

I cannot name what it was that had given me the strength to overcome the fear of my mother’s death, but surely it would be arrogant to think that I had attained it single-handedly. While I have neither consciousness nor recollection of ever being taught it, I am confident that it was part of my education—not from any particular individual, but from humanity itself.

(1972)

Coming to Terms

There are those who say that humanity might as well die out. They argue that it would be better for mankind to die out than for it to wreak any more damage on the planet. However, if these people were asked whether they *wished* for the extinction of the human race, I am sure that even they would hesitate to agree. Behind the paradoxical form in which these people express their idiosyncratic love for humanity, I suspect there lies the intent to break down what humanity has commonly understood itself to be. Most of us are beginning to realise that there is a need to break away from the path of perpetual progress and endless improvement that humanity has followed so far. This change in direction must not be a simple U-turn. Indeed, it is the fact that it patently cannot be so that makes us so confused and afraid. Such is the age in which we live that expressions like “humanity should die out” actually bring us an inexplicable relief.

Yet someone who genuinely believed that humanity should die out would probably kill themselves first of all. If it is human to make such a radical claim and yet to live on and seek a way of life that is right for oneself, then it is also human to offer everything up for one’s beliefs and become a willing sacrifice for the sake of a better future for humanity. It is entirely possible that the suicide of a mere individual could, rather than spurring on the demise of the human race, actually offer wordless encouragement to those who live on, and it is there that we may discover the significance behind man’s existence as a social animal that transcends the individual, as well as the significance of reaching for the complex idea that is “mankind” through the self.

I am not an absolute believer in the notion that we should live on at any cost, that the value of life is found precisely when one clings desperately to it even at the risk of being thought a coward. At the same time, if I were to be asked when and for what cause I would gladly give up my life, I doubt the answer would emerge easily from within myself. While I do think that having something to die for makes it all the clearer what it means to be alive, one might say that it is at most the choice of the individual as to what to die for, and that the human race as a whole—surpassing the individual—will always be openly determined to live on. For both amoebas and humans, this blind determination is the heart of life. Because of this, even phenomena like the mass suicides that can occasionally be observed in nature are ultimately acts of instinct performed with the aim of preserving the species, and not even the

most embittered individual can deny the fundamental terms on which the human race operates—that it will always fight for its survival.

These few years have seen the recognition rapidly become widespread that the human race is destroying its own environment and causing irreversible chaos on the ecosystems of its planet. In the case of the specific problems that have appeared as the superficial manifestations of this issue, as are reported in newspapers and the like, the blame has often been put on private corporations for their disregard for human life in the pursuit of profit, or on politicians for their inaction. Yet while justice should of course be sought for each individual case within its real-life circumstances, the bigger problem is fundamental to civilisation itself—as is built on the western-European values that now dominate over half the world—and we have no choice but to recognise that, when seen on the wider scale, we are not only the victims of this problem but simultaneously those responsible for it.

To explain why, we could go as far back as when we humans gained the use of fire, or when we started to make sense of the world through language, albeit of a primitive kind. Although some people are quick to jump from there to trying to repudiate the entirety of human civilisation, any approach coming from this quarter is liable to return us to being *pre-erectus* mammals and to disregard every last thing that makes us human. Surely it is time we confronted the fact that, by now, the only thing capable of keeping technology in check is more advanced technology. Our consciousness—such as it may be—of being a part of the human race would be unthinkable without the development of a communications network, and our very ability to identify the danger to the environment was indubitably a product of science.

Since the ocean, for example, cannot belong to any one nation, it goes without saying that the problem of marine pollution cannot be resolved without the collaboration of all nations. Ecosystems are not bound within isolated areas but are connected with one another in a complex network stretching over the face of the planet. There was once a time when we dreamed about extraterrestrial attacks on Earth putting an end to warfare between nations and uniting all humans on the planet. Now, we need a global transformation in the consciousness of the human race, and we cannot afford to wait for such an extraordinary situation to bring it about. On top of that, “the human race” is by no means a homogenous entity.

While the latest medicines are causing deformities in one place, in another there are still populations that experience high mortality rates because they have no hope of access to

medical care. While food is rotting and being discarded in one place, in another there are people suffering from chronic starvation. Furthermore, “civilisation” holds the danger of visiting further disaster upon these people even in the very moment that it brings them its blessings.

We who live in the civilised part of the twentieth-century world are in a position where each of us must hold this sort of recognition deep in our souls and strive to make decisions in our daily lives, no matter how small, that all contribute to the future. The closer the human race comes to being a unified body, a community with a shared fate, the bigger and heavier the responsibility placed on the individual will become. Until just a few centuries ago, it was quite enough for a member of a family to conceive of their life within the scale of their village, but in the blink of an eye this scale expanded to the nation, and by now, whether we like it or not, we have no choice but to conceive of our lives on the scale of the human race. And this is such a difficult thing for an individual to do that I hesitate to put it even in such abstract terms.

I personally make an occupation of writing poetic things in the Japanese language. As a creator of the fictitious, I am free to take any action that goes against society or against humanity, including dying or going insane. I acknowledge this freedom on the terms that such acts would be duly punished in regular human society. At the same time, I am also the father of two children, and a citizen with rights to participate in Japanese politics. As is human nature, I want to leave a better world for those who will inherit my blood, and to achieve that, I want to avoid sacrificing others if I can help it. Although everything we do will involve dizzyingly long detours, it is more than obvious that nothing will move the colossal entity that is the human race if not individuals like each and every one of us.

For the oppressed, the road to freedom will lie in not holding back their desires, but as for those like me who have led happy lives so far, I believe that the only road to freedom will lie in suppressing our desires, at least from here on. This, of course, must not lead in any way to escapism. However, I do think it is one of the paradoxes of this era that behind an apparently escapist facade can in fact lie a vigorously busy spirit. My main method is to cast my lot with the Japanese language and pray, within its words, that the poet in me and the citizen that I am can live as one being. I suspect that the search for philosophies by which to bend the tools of science and politics in new directions will make people turn to religious concepts revived in some form. The task of poetry is thus to reveal to humanity once again

where the sacred things are, through a reform of language. I suppose I will have to make the sacrifice that this entails.

(1971)