Reflections

Leslie Terebessy
Reflections
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Contents

Foreword 11

Preface 12

Why Write? 12
Morality 12
Education 13
Ethics 13
Disorientation 13

Communication 13

Words 13
Cliches 14
Free Speech 14
Independence of the Media 15

Community 15

Individualism 15
What Keeps Us Together? 16
Friendship 16
Fragmentation 17
Civilisation 17
Globalisation 17
Leslie Terebessy

Critical Thinking 17

Prisons of the Mind 17
Prejudice 19
Appearance and Reality 19
Perpetuation of Misunderstanding 19
Independent Thinking 20
False Dichotomies 21
Questioning 21
Perception 22
Analytical Thinking 22
Borderless Thinking 23
Abstract Thinking 24
Water Under the Bridge 25

Economics 25

Economy 25
Advertising 25
Unemployment 26
What are Corporations? 27
Corporate Accountability 28
Audits 30
Rich and Poor 31
Being Dismissed 31
Paradox of Monopoly 32

Education 32

What Schools are Expected to Do 32
Reflections

Excellence 32
Student Manners 34
Equality 34
Freedom 35
Experience 36
Shame 37
Manners 37
Purpose of Education 38

Entertainment 38
Movies as Education 38

Families 39
Equality of the Sexes 39
Happy Housewives 40
Marriage 40
Marriage Breakdown 40
Gangsterism 40

Language 41
Loose Words 41
Meaning of Words 41
Privatisation of Language 42
Value Judgments 42
Disappearing Words 43
Misappropriation of Words 43

Law 44
Leslie Terebessy

Justice 44
Morale 44
Plea-bargaining 45
Behaviour 46
Trust 46
Liberty and Equality 46
Public Interest 47
Modernity 47
Achieving Unity 47
Freedom and Education 48
Democracy 48
Changing the World 49
Empires 49
Causes of Conflict 49
Idealism 50

Life 50
Stress and Distress 50
Questions that Matter 50
Progress 50
Environment 51
Wisdom 51
Freedom and Restrictions 51
Togetherness and Fragmentation 51
Creditors and Debtors 52
Friendship and Loneliness 52
Reflections

Demoralisation 52
What to Do? 53

Morality 53
What are morals? 53
Aversion to Morality 54
Moral Relativism 54
Morality and Brainwashing 56
Being Judgmental 56
Are Principles Dangerous? 56
Morals and Morale 57
Body and Soul 57
Regeneration 58
Ritual 58
Danger of Victimhood 58
Wrongdoing and Judgment 58
Ignorance 58
Cheating and Reputation 59
Conflict of Interest 59
Peacekeeping 59
Dignity 59
Cynicism 60
Discipline 60
Family 60
Honesty 60
Gambling 61
People's Inheritance 61

People 61

Life is a Drama 61
Borrowing 62
Rush 62
Makeup 63
Getting Ahead 63
City and Country 64
Apartments 64
People and Things 64
Formalities 64
Promises 65
Praise and Reproach 65

Philosophy 65

Search for Truth 65
Prophets and Philosophers 65

Psychology 66

Emotional Desensitisation 66
Age of Rage 66
Repression and Depression 66
Positive Attitude 66

Religion 67

Interpretation and Truth 67

Science 67
Reflections

*What is Science?* 67
*Reasoning* 67
*Research and Time* 68
*Indifference of Science* 68
*Generalisations* 68
*Statistics* 68
*Social Science* 69

**Technology** 69
*Computers* 69
*Telephones* 70
*Television* 70

**Tradition** 70
*Keeping Up with the Times* 70
*Modernity and Humanity* 70
*What Is Tradition?* 71
*Traditional Values* 73
Leslie Terebessy
Foreword

These "reflections" comprise thoughts the writer explored with his students during a period spanning eighteen years, in Canada and in Malaysia. They were first published under the title *Second Thoughts* in 1999, in Canada.

In a few ways these ‘reflections’ constitute a plea for the preservation of what is broadly known as ‘tradition.’ For it seems that in the face of ‘modernity,’ a few traditional institutions such as the family appear to be under stress.

Moral disorientation is a manifestation of modernity. People seem unsure about the difference between right and wrong. Thus, they become confused.

This is in part a result of moral relativism, which teaches that moral standards are ‘relative’ to time and place.

In other words, there are no universal standards, applicable at all times and in all places. All views about right and wrong are therefore ‘subjective’ and ultimately ‘arbitrary.’ But this is far from the truth.

Moral standards are neither subjective nor arbitrary. Taking the life of an innocent person is wrong under any circumstances.

This book attempts to reach out to everybody, not just members of a particular creed or worse still, a particular sect.

The writer is from Bratislava, Slovakia. His ancestors are from Transylvania, Romania. He migrated to Canada in 1968, after the Soviet invasion. He graduated from the University of Toronto.
Leslie Terebessy


After another year in Canada, he continued at Sunway in 1999. In 2002 he joined the Islamic Science University of Malaysia. In 2008 he joined IAIS Malaysia, where he remained until 2017.

Preface

Why Write?

We are faced with either of two alternatives: remaining silent or speaking out. Yet the risks of remaining silent appear to be greater than the risks of speaking out.

The quality of much of the available information is questionable. Where does a person find true enlightenment? Where does he or she learn about the difference between right and wrong?

This book is meant for readers who seek answers to these questions. For these questions are not always raised, let alone answered.

Morality

One reason for the limited discussion of ethics in public schools is the view that the responsibility for teaching ethics or faith is private. Thus we expect parents to teach their
offspring the difference between right and wrong.

But what if the parents themselves do not know, or do not care about, the difference between right and wrong, good and evil?

**Education**

Ethics should not be separated from education. Trying to separate them is akin to teaching a person how to drive a car without teaching him or her how to follow traffic signs. Such a person is likely to get into an accident sooner rather than later.

**Ethics**

We require education in ethics. Without knowledge of ethics, we are not in a position to say no to what is wrong and yes to what is right. This puts us at a degree of risk.

**Disorientation**

What is the response to moral disorientation? We need to start asking questions that we seem to have stopped asking. Instead of building faster machines and exploring space in the universe, we need to pay more attention to the problems of demoralisation, crime and poverty.

**Communication**

**Words**

There is a way to use a large number of words to say very little; there is also a way to use a few words to say a great
deal. An example of the first is convoluted writing. An example of the latter may be found in the works of classical writers.

A few words appear to have gone missing. A word missing from the vocabulary of a person may mean that a particular experience – represented by that word – may be missing from his or her life.

**Cliches**

There is a danger in treating wise sayings as *cliches*. Just because we may have heard an idea over and over again does not make it false.

Words of wisdom, precisely because they are timeless, are at risk of being dismissed as cliches. Parents and teachers must alert people to this danger. Wise sayings, far from being cliches, are affirmations of truth. A few examples follow.

*Loose Lips Sink Ships*. We should speak cautiously. We need to consider the effects our words might have on others before we speak.

*We Reap What We Sow*. Our life turns out according to the foundations we have laid earlier.

*A Stitch in Time is Worth Nine*. Doing something important at the right time can avoid many troubles later.

*Pen and Sword*. The pen is mightier than the sword. The force of argument is stronger than the force of arms.

**Free Speech**

How much or how little difference free speech makes depends on where it is practiced. In societies that tolerate freedom of speech, speaking freely appears to carry relatively
little weight. By contrast, in societies where freedom of speech is restricted, words spoken freely appear to carry more weight. Why?

In freer states, a range of different views is being expressed all the time. In restrictive states, anyone that expresses a perspective different from the official narrative arouses interest.

Yet free speech is restrained even in “freer” societies. For every government has its “party line” and its members are expected to adhere to it.

Moreover, free speech has to be regulated to prevent or minimize hate speech. For indulging in hate speech is no longer an exercise of free speech; rather, it is an abuse of the right to free speech.

**Independence of the Media**

How independent is the mass media? How well do private instruments of mass communication serve the public interest?

Which newspaper will print stories that may prove damaging to its shareholders? Which media network will report stories that may prove damaging to its clients, on whom the network depends for its advertising revenue?

**Community**

**Individualism**

Individualism holds that everyone is responsible for
himself or herself, that we all have to “go it alone.” It has been said that the pursuit of self-interest motivates economic activity. It is said that society requires individuals who are able to think for themselves.

However, excessive self-centredness results in high rates of separation and neglect of children. It fosters indifference to the fate of others. People say, “I am not my brother’s keeper. Others say, “I got to look out for number one.”

Moreover, excessive individualism also exacerbates inequality, as highly individualistic persons generally hate to share their wealth with the less fortunate.

**What Keeps Us Together?**

Many of the ties that keep present-day groups together appear weak: they tend break easily. Does freedom mean freedom from commitments?

**Friendship**

Instead of noting that people are forming a friendship, the psychologist will say that people are “bonding.” This reduces friendship to a “glue.”

Is friendship possible where individualism is rampant? Socialising for purposes apart from socio-economic advancement is a risk few are willing to take.

We speak guardedly to avoid making damaging revelations to our ‘friends.’ We communicate as if anything we say might be used against us.

Conversations tend to take place within a safe range of topics. This tends to isolate us within our protective shells and makes it harder to relate to others.
Reflections

**Fragmentation**

This process appears in many areas. The products we buy fall apart, knowledge is becoming fragmented, states break up, the family is under pressure, even persons are falling apart.

**Civilisation**

Civilisation is the ability to coexist with different people peacefully. Harmony between persons, communities and states is an important mark of civilisation.

Harmony requires good behaviour because it is manners that restrain us when we feel aggressive. There are ways to resolve conflicts peacefully.

**Globalisation**

Progress allegedly results in the replacement of communities by the global village. We could think of this as the globalisation of civilisation. In different words, evolution is bringing people together. But globalisation in a few ways also separates people from each other.

**Critical Thinking**

**Prisons of the Mind**

We are assaulted daily by messages from every direction. These messages are frequently false or misleading. It appears hard to know what or whom to trust.

Nevertheless, we must make the effort. Those who
unthinkingly accept such messages run the risk of being prisoners of people’s views.

Critical thinking is a deeper kind of thinking. It requires getting past the appearance of things to the heart of the matter. It also requires guarding against error.

A critical thinker does not accept statements at face value; he or she withholds judgment until proof and evidence enables him or her to come to a conclusion about the veracity of a given statement or view.

By comparison, the uncritical person is easy to deceive. He or she is gullible and has minimal, if any understanding of the reasons for holding a given view or adhering to a particular way of doing things.

Critical thinking requires evaluative judgment and taking into account the effects of a given course of action. It is important to keep in mind how our actions, or a failure to act, may impact on us as well as on others. Critical thinking also helps one to identify and ascertain the strengths and weaknesses in various perspectives, scholarly or otherwise.

Critical thinking can be learned with practice. The teaching of critical thinking should be supported in schools and universities and, where necessary, expanded. Debates and competitions should be encouraged. Conversely, rote learning devoid of inquisitive and discursive input should be discouraged.

It is important to move from a teacher-centred model to a student-centred one. Students need to be given opportunities to take on leadership roles, and in this way develop confidence, as well as communication and other skills. This can be achieved by requiring students to conduct research,
Reflections

...group work, and make presentations. The latter need to be followed by Q & A sessions.

**Prejudice**

Prejudice is a view formed in advance, without thinking. Prejudiced people are unwilling to change their preconceived views. They rarely tolerate views that differ from theirs.

**Appearance and Reality**

Things are not always what they seem. How many times have we heard this expression, and yet how consistent are we in differentiating the two? We hardly look beneath the surface of things.

**Perpetuation of Misunderstanding**

Misunderstandings become entrenched and perpetuate themselves by presenting themselves as knowledge. Due to lack of questioning, they are absorbed into mainstream thinking with relative ease. Those who are heedless become victims of misconceptions. Every notion requires to be scrutinised.

It gets worse when misconceptions are given authoritative status. This makes it harder to question them.

An example may be found in the so-called ‘schools’ of thought. What presents itself as a school, on closer inspection more often than not turns out to be a body of problematic notions, being passed from generation to generation.

The sad part is that many young people enrol in such ‘schools,’ only to discover to their dismay that what they
thought was knowledge was little different from unfounded opinion.

A distinguishing feature of problematic schools is being ‘out of touch with reality.’ Another distinguishing feature of such schools is a distinct dictates for questioning and a penchant for dogmatism. Things become particularly dangerous when schools begin to place its founders upon a pedestal. At this stage the ‘school’ begins to resemble a *cult*.

The school perpetuates itself by tolerating little or no dissent. In this way it ensures its own survival. However, in the long term, truth begins to address the misconceptions of the school. Eventually the school collapses and is replaced by another school.

**Independent Thinking**

People who think independently at times say things that may appear as ‘off the wall.’

Independent thinking requires us to sail into uncharted arguments. Is it surprising that daring sailors brush against and even brush against a reef from time to time?

Independent thinking requires courage: we must be willing to take risks, especially the risk that we might be wrong.

We may get it wrong from time to time. But a bigger danger is that we may remain unaware that we may have inadvertently accepted a defective point of view.

Thinking requires examining all points of view in a given debate. It does not mean impartiality in the sense of refusing to take sides.

There is a time for everything. There is a time to be
impartial, and there is a time to be partial.

Thinking should be impartial in the way that a judge is expected to be impartial. He is impartial while he hears the evidence from all parties concerned.

He withholds judgment until he hears and considers all evidence. To do otherwise would be to pre-judge the issue, to be guilty of prejudice.

Yet the judge ends by being partial when he declares the verdict. At that time he takes a stand in the case, the side of the law against crime.

**False Dichotomies**

We need to guard against the trap of falling into false dichotomies.

**Questioning**

Asking questions is important. Questions, together with the answers they elicit, increase our understanding of an issue.

Without questioning we are likely to remain in the dark. Teachers should therefore never forbid but rather encourage questioning. Similarly, question time in parliament is also important.

Questioning is necessary for progress and improvement. Without questioning, no individual or institution is going to become aware of its weaknesses. Without questioning, even if we become aware of injustices, little will get done to correct them.

If there is no recognition of problems, there can be no possibility of taking action to address them. Discouraging
questioning reinforces complacency, whether in education or in politics.

**Perception**

Two people look at the same thing and yet they see different things. Is it perhaps because we tend to see only what we want to see?

**Analytical Thinking**

Thinking requires using the mind to gain knowledge and carry out various tasks. Use of the intellect is needed in analysing, understanding and solving problems. It is difficult to imagine a life without thinking.

It is by means of the application of the intellect that we discover and utilise scientific as well as other knowledge.

Thinking should be broadly consistent with what is known as “common sense.” Reflection helps to restrain us from acting on impulse, from following our or other people’s desires without thinking of consequences. A well thought-out course of action is more likely to bring success than a hastily arrived at decision.

Everyone does some thinking, some more than others. People who fail to think or do not think much, put themselves – and likely others – at risk. People who think, by contrast, and think well, have better prospects in life.

Wherever possible, thinking should be proactive. We should anticipate problems even before they arise. That way, we can prepare to face them once they arrive, and we will not be caught off-guard.

Education, among other things, is a process of learning
how to think. It is a life-long process. A person – or civilisation – that stops thinking also stops growing. Thinking allows a person to reflect on the past, contemplate the present, and plan for the future.

Many have suffered because they failed to think. In some cases they allowed themselves to be deceived. History provides countless examples of people and even entire nations that came to a tragic end because they did not reflect or reflect deeply enough.

**Borderless Thinking**

This requires exploring ideas in different contexts. For example, we could take the idea of ‘balance,’ and explore it in different settings. The idea of ‘balance’ is present in just about all disciplines, such as politics, economics, philosophy, and finance.

In politics, we talk about the balance of power between different nations, as well as about checks and balances on the exercise of political power within a particular nation.

We think of politicians as participating balancing acts. In economics, we encounter the concept of balance in the form of the economic *equilibrium* or a balanced budget.

In psychology and psychiatry, people’s mental balance or lack of it is a health issue. In physics, we think of balance in the form of physical stability.

In biology, we focus on the balance of the ecosystem. In mathematics we have the notion of balance in the form of the equation. In accounting we talk about balance sheets and bank balances.

In the humanities we have the concept of a balanced point.
of view. In law, justice is conceived of as a balance. In meditation, we aim at achieving spiritual balance.

When we think in context, we traverse subject areas by exploring a term in different environments. Borderless thinking enables us to escape the limits of specialisation, and perhaps make discoveries that would have escaped us otherwise.

**Abstract Thinking**

Abstract thinking is a pared kind of thinking. It strips away from an object of perception its less essential properties. Abstract thinking is different from descriptive thinking.

When we describe a thing, we think of it by picturing it in our imagination. In descriptive thinking, we remain on the surface of the object, as we see only what is visible to the naked eye.

In abstract thinking, however, we attempt to penetrate the surface and see what lies under the surface.

One difficulty in abstract thinking arises from the difficulty in deciding which properties or features of a given phenomenon are more or less essential than others. For to think about something abstractly means to think of it apart from its attributes, except for those we deem to be important.

When we consider a given variable, we try to understand it in relation to another variable or variables, on the assumption that they are related as an effect is related to its cause or causes.

In different academic pursuits, the factor under consideration is thought of as the *dependent* variable, while the cause or determining variable is thought of as the
Independent variable.

Independent variables, in relation to other variables in turn become dependent variables. And so the linking of variables leads to a long chain of causes and effects.

Accordingly, we have the Big Bang theory of the first cause, the story of creation, or a theory of evolution from most primitive forms of life.

**Water Under the Bridge**

How many people justify not taking a critical look at the past using these words? Didn’t someone say that those who are not willing to learn from the mistakes of the past are bound to repeat them?

**Economics**

**Economy**

Economists and businessmen promote global economic growth as if growth were not subject the scarcity of resources. We know that the world is limited both in size (there is only so much land available) and in the amount of non-renewable resources it has.

**Advertising**

The advertising industry thrives on blurring the difference between needs and wants. Advertising companies try to convince us that we need what we only want, and perhaps even don’t want.
What is the relationship between the economic and the psychological state of people in consumer societies?

Economic growth depends on spending that in part results from advertising. Advertising works by making us feel inadequate and even depressed, because we do not possess certain goods or services to satisfy various real or imaginary “needs.” When we arrive at this point, we are ready for treatment – shopping.

In the process, businesses as well as the advertising industry, make bigger profits. We spend buy anti-depressant medication, the products and services that make us feel better. Then we feel better, at least for a while.

Afterwards, the whole process is repeated. In a few cases, we become addicted to shopping, we become shopaholics. How does one break out of the cycle of advertising, feelings of deprivation, and temporary relief?

Unemployment

In agriculture alone it takes far less labour at present to produce a given quantity of food than was the case in the past.

This has increased the levels of unemployment in the industrialised countries. The people that have employment work hard. At the same time, there is a large pool of the unemployed and underemployed persons.

Would it not make sense to reduce the weekly hours of work so that additional people could work? Implementing minimum mandatory holidays per year might be another way to practice work sharing.

When more people get to share the available work,
unemployment will decline. Appropriate legislation limiting the number of working hours per week and mandating a minimum number of holidays, is required.

People could spend the extra time obtained as a result of a shorter workweek in personally and socially useful ways. For example, they could spend more quality time with their children.

**What are Corporations?**

Corporations are organisations whose purpose is to make profit for their shareholders. Big business exerts much influence upon people’s lives. It advertises extensively in order to convince us that it has best interests of people at heart.

The corporation is comparable to a medieval fiefdom. Despite all the talk about the de-layering, businesses retain the hierarchical structure of tribes.

The chairman is the warlord. The chief executive officer is the chairman’s second in command. The board are the elders.

The warlord plots strategy and the executives and workers implement it. The aim is to enlarge market share, the assets of the warlord and those of the shareholders.

There are similarities as well as differences between the way companies and nations function.

Among the similarities is the organization of each. The political equivalent of the chairman is the Prime Minister or President.

The political equivalent of the Board of Directors is the Cabinet. The company directors in turn find their counterparts in Cabinet ministers, while the different
divisions of the company correspond to the different ministries of the government. The Annual General Meeting (AGM) is analogous to the general election.

Among the differences between a nation-state and a corporation is that in representative system each person of voting age has one vote, that is a share of political power.

However, in a corporation the principle ‘one person equals one share’ does not apply. In a corporation a person may possess the majority or all of the shares, and in that way exercise undiluted authority in the business.

**Corporate Accountability**

The degree of private accountability decreases as the public character of a business increases. Personal responsibility is reduced by dispersing possession of businesses among a large group of shareholders.

Among many proprietors, personal responsibility is lesser than in proprietorships and partnerships. As if this was not enough, a person suggested re-inventing the business itself as a “person.”

It is this “person” that would be responsible for any misdemeanours and even crimes perpetrated by the company. The liability of the shareholders is restricted to their shareholdings.

Personal proprietorships and partnerships are fully liable for their actions. The owners of corporations do not risk personal assets to pay for any potential liabilities of the company in excess of the amount that they have invested in the corporation. What is the rationale for limiting liability to the amount invested by shareholders?
Reflections

As the vast majority of the shareholders do not play an active role in the day to day management of the corporation, it would be difficult to justify expecting them to take full responsibility for the actions of the corporation.

The day-to-day management of the corporation is entrusted to the executives of the company. Like that of shareholders, the liability of the executives is limited to the amount of shares they own.

Should managers be liable in excess of the amount they invested in the company, on the grounds that they manage the company? Or should their liability be limited, like that of shareholders, to the amount they invested?

Since decisions are made by those who manage the company, and liability arises from decisions, it would be difficult to hold that management of a company does not constitute grounds for liability.

The underlying issue is what is grounds for liability. This problem does not arise in the case of proprietorships and partnerships.

In the eyes of the law the corporation has the status of a ‘person.’ Only persons can be considered to be liable for actions or consequences that result from decisions made by persons.

The corporation as a person appears to have an existence that is independent of the persons who control the corporation.

If the corporation is a ‘person,’ then the corporation should take full responsibility for all its actions.

The assumption that a corporation is a person constitutes
Leslie Terebessy

an incentive for the executives of a corporation to act in less than responsible ways. It may be a way of allowing managers to escape full responsibility for their decisions and actions.

This may contribute to acts on the part of the corporations as would not have been undertaken if people were responsible.

Business history is replete with examples where managers of companies escaped responsibility for the acts of the businesses they controlled.

**Audits**

An auditing firm is a business like any other business in the sense that it is expected to maximise profits for its shareholders.

An auditing firm is different from other kinds of businesses in the sense that it performs to a significant degree what could be called a public interest function.

As a firm that examines the accounts of publicly owned companies, the auditing firm is expected to act in the public interest by providing an accurate and impartial assessment of a firm’s financial position and performance. It is a requirement that such information be made available to the public on a periodic basis.

The management of the company that hires an auditing firm wants a favourable report, in order to look good in front of the shareholders.

What will an auditing firm do if it has to be critical of the performance of the management of the company being audited? Will firms that want favourable audits hire auditing firms that might produce anything less than a splendid
Reflections

report?

The management might respond to a negative report by terminating the services of the auditing firm before the end of its appointed term. It might also respond by hiring another, less rigorous auditor the next time around.

So the auditing firms with the higher standards may also be the firms less likely to get or keep the job. The auditing services industry constitutes an example of an industry in which market forces alone cannot guarantee quality service.

**Rich and Poor**

Much has been said about the (growing) gap between the rich and the poor. The interesting question is not so much why a gap developed in the first place, but why it gets bigger. Those who are already well established generally use their wealth to establish themselves even more firmly.

**Being Dismissed**

When a company dismisses an employee, it is saying to him or her that “you do not really fit into our company.” This is expressed in the popular saying that so and so was not a “team player."

It may well be the case that an employee does not fit into a particular company. But we should not jump to the view that it was therefore the employee that was bad for the business rather than the company that was bad for the employee.

The former employee should be open to the possibility that his or her “dismissal” may have been a case of “this company does not fit me,” or “this company does not suit me.”


Leslie Terebessy

**Paradox of Monopoly**

Monopolies find themselves in a paradox. They are both more and less efficient than firms that have to compete.

They are more efficient in that they can produce things at a lower unit cost, due to their ability to utilise economies of scale.

However, monopolies are less efficient in that, since they face no competition, they charge higher prices for their products than they would have to under competitive conditions.

**Education**

*What Schools are Expected to Do*

Educational establishments are places where people are expected to gain knowledge that will enable them to live well. How well are universities discharging these responsibilities?

The answer depends to an extent upon whom we ask, for different people have different notions about what schools are and what they are expected to do.

*Excellence*

Do schools, especially public schools, place enough emphasis on academic excellence? Only recently have people started to talk about excellence again. It appears that excellence almost became one of the vanishing words.

The lack of emphasis on excellence is evident in the absence in many schools of the so-called ‘classical’ texts,
books that have withstood the test of time. Excellence is avoided for several reasons, none of which is convincing. One, it is alleged that it is impossible to define excellence.

And even if we succeed in defining excellence, such a definition is necessarily subjective. Everyone has his or her own idea of what excellence is.

Yet the fact is that very definite notions of excellence are used in sports and business activities. If a standard of excellence may be identified and applied in these activities, why could such standards not be articulated in education?

The fact that teachers grade students’ work proves that some standards are used to determine what constitutes higher academic achievement.

The second argument against excellence in education is that, even if excellence were definable, it would be elitist to teach it. Elitism, as everyone knows, cannot be encouraged in schools.

This argument does not hold water either. There is already much elitism being practiced in all walks of life, only under different names, such as performance or competence.

An athlete that performs at a very high level is regarded as an excellent athlete. If improving the performance of the students is elitist, and if we cannot identify high standards of achievement, how can we possibly expect to improve the performance of the students, or anyone else, for that matter?

Another reason why excellence is avoided is psychological. We avoid designating students' work as excellent for fear that we might hurt the feelings of less accomplished pupils.

Yet by assigning either letter grades or percentage grades
to a student’s work, we are already indicating that a given student’s work is better than other students’ work.

If students can be made to live with the feelings arising from getting a lower grade than others, why should they be deemed not to have what it takes to accept the fact that some students’ work may deserve the description of excellent?

In any case, receiving a grade that indicates less than excellent achievement should help motivate students to try harder.

**Student Manners**

A distinguishing feature in schools is a lack of good manners on the part of the students. Not infrequently, students show little respect for teachers.

In a few schools, teachers spend half of the valuable learning time controlling the students’ behaviour, the practice known as “classroom management.”

In other schools, bullying and even violence are on the rise. In a few schools, students commit crimes.

We seldom ask whether the degree of freedom afforded to the pupils is proportionate to what they are able to handle at a particular age.

**Equality**

Students should not be treated as equals of the teachers. Students and teachers are very different people.

A friendship between a student and the teacher is different from the friendship between one student and another. The teacher is more like a mentor to the student than a friend.
Reflections

Generally speaking, the teacher is older, more educated, and more experienced than the student. For these reasons the teacher is expected to fulfil responsibilities that may not be delegated to the students.

Students should address the teachers formally. Teachers should remain at arms length from the students. The pupils should rise to the level of the teacher rather than the teacher going down to the standard of the student.

There is an underlying assumption that teachers do not really know anything anyway, so they should not give themselves airs. This view shows how cynical we have become about knowledge.

**Freedom**

Many permissive tendencies in education were a response to what was perceived as its excessively authoritarian character. The teacher was the sage on the stage rather than the guide on the side.

The learning process consisted of a one way communication process, from the teacher down to the student.

Questioning was not encouraged. Students were spoon-fed and were expected to memorise and regurgitate the material when tested or examined.

There is excessive emphasis on external rather than internal control.

Instead of setting more rules designed to control external behaviour, we need to teach students how to control themselves.

They have to take responsibility for their actions and
know why it is important to do so. Incorporating ethics courses into the curriculum is one way to accomplish this. Students have to be taught good habits.

Those who call for more freedom tend to see the main problem in education as authoritarianism and regimentation. The assumption here is that the students will, in one way or another, realize their potential.

Interference by teachers in this process is more likely to harm rather than benefit the students. Without guidance, however, they are unlikely to realize their full potential.

**Experience**

Testing ethical principles using oneself as the subject of the experiment, may get us ‘burned,’ like the proverbial professor experimenting with dangerous substances.

Roentgen used his wife to experiment with radiation. She subsequently died from it. In order that people may avoid those risks, we teach through instruction.

Yet instruction at times appears to be ineffective. Why is it that people rarely pay heed to advice? They do not believe that the effects of different actions are as bad as the teachers warn. Not until they find out – the hard way – through experience.

When the instructor tells us that a particular action is wrong, our imagination may provide us with an example of the significance of respecting and not respecting advice.

For example, suppose a person says, “do not abuse substances because they will destroy your mind and life.” Is it necessary to experiment with drugs to accept this advice?

A vivid imagination, complemented by pictures or
documentaries about the harmful effects of substance abuse, will render any additional ‘experience’ of the life of addiction unnecessary.

**Shame**

Many teachers are against the use of shame for the purpose of learning because it damages the self-esteem of the shamed person.

The result is that the motive for improvement becomes less effective. In psychology, people talk about positive and negative reinforcements.

Shame is a powerful motivator, precisely because no one wants to feel ashamed. Without shame, there is no reason for the person to change. Of course shame has to be used carefully, so as not to demoralise the person.

**Manners**

Teaching good manners requires the teaching of ethics and behaviour. An argument frequently made is that schools have no business teaching ethics to students, because teaching ethics is a kind of *brainwashing*. Brainwashing is undemocratic because it takes away a person’s autonomy.

This view is flawed. Not only are people with morals not a threat to society; democratic society requires people with ethical standards. A democratic way of life requires people with standards precisely because so much freedom is available to them.

Democracies require people with principles in order to help protect the society from demagogues and extremists.

Opposing intolerant views is always risky, especially if
those views are propounded by the established authorities or by those who wish to become the authorities.

**Purpose of Education**

There is a difference between education and training. The latter equips people with knowledge to earn a living; education equips them with skills to live well.

Pupils should learn how to put themselves in other people’s shoes, how to see things from other people’s points of view. That way they will become more tolerant of other people and their diverse ways of life.

**Entertainment**

Education may be acquired by way of entertainment. Good entertainment should have educational value. The most common types of entertainment are movies and literature.

**Movies as Education**

Several classics appear to have educational value. Among these several stand out.

*The Confession* or *L’Aveau* in French. This is a Costa Gavras movie with Yves Montand and Simone Signoret. The movie is about political trials in the former East Bloc. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* is a worthy film from America.

Among westerns, there are the Sergio Leone classics, such as the Good, Bad and the Ugly, and Once Upon a Time in the West.

*The Treasure on the Sierra Madre*, based on the book by B.
Reflections

Traven, is also worth seeing. Not to be forgotten is the Last of the Mohicans, based on the story by James Fenimore Cooper. Perhaps Shane could also be included.

Among young people's movies we may include the Star Wars movies, about the struggles between good and evil. Also, ET may be included.

Among the musicals we may include the West Side Story, with Natalie Wood.

Among the epic movies, perhaps we may include Les Misérables, based on the novel by Victor Hugo, and the dramatisations of Tolstoy’s major works, War and Peace and Anna Karenina. The BBC versions, with Anthony Hopkins in the lead role, in particular stand out.

Among foreign epics, Genghis Khan stands out, as well as films by Akira Kurosawa, the Japanese filmmaker, including Ikiru.

Among crime movies we may include L.A. Confidential. Among comedies, we may include the BBC dramatisations of Yes Minister and Yes Prime Minister. Many popular comedies are rather vulgar and therefore not worth mentioning here.

Many other worthy lives have no doubt been left out. Perhaps they may be included in a later edition.

Families

Equality of the Sexes

No reasonable person will disagree that the dignity of females is equal to that of men, or that females should get
equal pay for equal work. But does this mean that men and women are the same in other respects? For example, does it mean that men are equally able to care for newborns as women?

**Happy Housewives**

There are many housewives who enjoy caring for their families. Why should these women be made to feel that there is missing in being “just a housewife”?

**Marriage**

Marriage signifies the desire of two persons, male and female, to enter into a relationship of friendship to raise a family. The family is exclusive.

**Marriage Breakdown**

When a marriage breaks down, children are wounded for a time.

**Gangsterism**

Why do young people turn to gangs and gangsterism? As strange as it may seem, young people join gangs because gangs provide people with what they are failing to get elsewhere: a feeling of being part of a group and friendship.

The rise of gangsterism is evidence of the failure of the family to enable people to develop a feeling of belonging.
Language

*Loose Words*

How many of us can say that we have never spoken without reflection about the consequences of what we said? Sometimes we speak first and think afterwards. We say things that may prove damaging, either to us or to other people.

*Meaning of Words*

Words are significant. Their significance can be likened to weight. Some words carry more weight than others.

A word such as ‘justice’ is weightier than a word such as ‘structure.’ At times, we use ‘light weight’ words as if they had great significance. At other times we use ‘weighty’ words as if they had limited significance.

Part of the process of education is learning the difference between light weight and weighty words, and how to use such words.

It has been said that the meaning of words changes with time. It has even been asserted that words have no meaning at all. We attach meaning words the way we attach labels to parcels. The parcel itself, the word, is empty.

Meaning exists, it is said, only in the mind of the person. And since different people attach different meanings to words, there may never be a truly shared language.

Even if this were true, however, this does not mean that there cannot be a shared *understanding.*
Words represent experience. Many experiences are common to people. It is on the basis of universal experiences that a common vision grows.

If words were meaningless, there would be little demand for lawyers and need for judges to allocate hours exploring the meaning of a clause or a word.

**Privatisation of Language**

The insistence that words at best have merely subjective meaning contributes, in effect, to something that we might call the privatisation of language.

**Value Judgments**

There is an attempt to make speech politically correct. This language claims to be free of biases and prejudices, especially value judgments.

There are few opposites in such a language, such as good and evil, right and wrong, graceful and disgraceful.

Such contrasts, according to this argument, divide people and people should live in harmony. But by refraining from expressing approval and disapproval, we abdicate the responsibility to differentiate good and evil, to praise or to blame.

This process takes place through a substitution of words by weaker, more neutral expressions that frequently feel like euphemisms.

When we lay off people and jeopardise their security, we call it ‘downsizing’ or ‘right sizing.’ We say ‘equity’ instead of justice, ‘relationships’ replace marriage, a husband or wife becomes a mere ‘partner,’ loyalty becomes a ‘commitment,’
adultery becomes a mere ‘affair,’ and gambling becomes ‘gaming.’

**Disappearing Words**

A few words are disappearing from language altogether. It seems as if these words were banned, especially from public discourse.

To justify the expulsion of these words from daily language, we are told that the disappearance of these words is a result of “progress.”

Nothing may stop progress, and therefore there is little need to worry about words taking on fresh meanings or the disappearance of a few words.

What are the disappearing words, and why are we so reluctant to use them? They are traditional words, words that are linked to morality.

They are words such as virtue, duty, loyalty, jealousy, selfishness, adultery, betrayal, modesty, chastity, nobility, grace, soul, spirit, wisdom and others.

We refrain from using traditional terms by asserting that they express antiquated perceptions or experiences. But do they?

**Misappropriation of Words**

Many words that are not banished are used selectively or in restricted ways. The process of making financial transactions has appropriated traditional language.

Thus we say that we “redeem” bonds and promissory notes, when we refer to meeting financial obligations. Instead of honouring our parents, we talk about honouring or
dishonouring checks.

We need to rehabilitate the words that are being banished from language, because we need them. We need them so we can once again recover the experiences they signify.

**Law**

**Justice**

What is justice? It requires giving each his or her due. Justice is a state of the soul and the soul of the state.

Relations between people should not be viewed as a struggle for power. Relationships between people are characterised by justice or injustice, good and evil. Those who fall in the trap of understanding relationships as a struggle for power risk forgetting justice.

Accordingly, when contemplating a course of action, we should not ask not so much whether it enhances or reduces a person’s power, but whether the action is just or unjust.

It is wrong to say that might is right. To say that might is right is equivalent to holding that justice is on the side of the stronger. This means that justice is whatever a person with power says it is.

**Morale**

Why do people turn and return to crime? One reason is poverty. Demoralisation is a related factor. It follows that if we could reduce poverty and raise people’s spirits, there would be less crime.
Reflections

Successful crime prevention therefore requires helping people attain and remain in high spirits. We have to help troubled persons attain and retain high morale.

Plea-bargaining

How market forces have affected us may be seen in the widespread practice of plea-bargaining. Plea-bargaining consists of striking a bargain between the accused and the prosecution.

The accused agrees to plead guilty, and in exchange for the guilty plea, the prosecution agrees to press a lesser charge.

On the surface, plea-bargaining seems like a good idea. It speeds up the judicial process and helps to clear backlogs of cases.

Plea bargains help where it might be difficult to get a conviction due to lack of evidence. With a plea bargain, the prosecution is likelier to get a conviction.

The judges and juries are spared having to make uncertain and possibly wrong decisions. For the accused, the advantage is that the possibility of being convicted of the original and more serious charge is eliminated.

The problem with plea-bargaining is that justice is violated. In a plea bargain, the accused pleads guilty to an offence he did not commit, and no one is actually charged with the offence that allegedly took place. What message does this practice send to potential criminals?

It sends the message that they can bargain their way to taking less than full responsibility for their actions. This awareness may make criminals bolder and thus encourage
more crime. The criminals know that, in the event of getting caught, they may be able to bargain their way to a lesser sentence.

The law-abiding citizens may become cynical, and their respect for the law may diminish. Members of the families of the victims may lose faith in the system and be tempted to take justice into their own hands.

**Behaviour**

Why are laws insufficient to guarantee good conduct? Laws make people do or prevent from doing things by threatening consequences.

If people believe that they can avoid the consequences by violating the law when no one is looking, what is there to stop them from doing it?

For example, the fear of God restrains people from doing the wrong thing even when they think no one is looking.

**Trust**

The law in the industrial countries makes it an offence to use the word ‘trust’ in a misleading way when a person’s money is at stake. Why does the law not also make it a criminal offence to use the word trust in a misleading way when a person’s marriage is at stake? Is the betrayal of trust in a marital agreement a lesser offence than the betrayal of trust in a financial agreement?

**Liberty and Equality**

There appears to be a trade-off between freedom and equality. Thus, the countries that emphasise equality tend to
do so by restricting freedom, while those countries that emphasise freedom tend to have less equality. Although, no doubt, there are states that hardly appear to have either.

**Public Interest**

What exactly is the public interest? It is what is good for everybody, not just what is good for a particular section of society.

What guarantee is there in a system based on the pursuit of private interest that the public interest will not be sacrificed?

The degradation of the environment is just one example of how the interest of the public (a contamination-free environment) can sometimes give way to the interests of private businesses.

**Modernity**

Modern thinkers started by asking how men live rather than by asking how men should live. The first question has a moral dimension, while the second does not. By starting with the first rather than the second question, they effectively separated ethics from politics.

**Achieving Unity**

The political problem in democratic societies can be defined by saying that it consists in the need to reconcile the various demands of different groups that make up the society. It is a process where various interest groups jostle for political influence.

Groups form around a shared vision. There are labor
unions, professional unions or associations. Last but not least, there are different political parties, all of which have ideas on how best to solve the problems of the country.

However, not all people belong to an identifiable group or, if they do, not all have the knowledge or ability to organise themselves and get a hearing.

Even if some groups are successful in organising themselves, they may be too small as a group to compete successfully with larger groups.

Part of the political problem in democratic societies is to reconcile public interest and private interest. People have the right to attend to their private interests.

Public servants are expected to do what is in the public interest, and to refrain from using their positions to advance their personal interests. Upholding the public interest is among the responsibilities of the government.

**Freedom and Education**

Freedom is the ability to reach one’s goals with minimum interference. In a democracy, people are free to express views. They are free to form into groups such as political parties, labor unions, and professional organisations. People are free to worship according to their traditions.

**Democracy**

In a democracy which political faction or party will rule is decided by the majority of the citizens. Government requires the consent of the governed. Members are elected at regular intervals through elections. Every citizen of voting age has a share of political power, one vote.
Reflections

The government is representative in the sense that an elected group of persons, the members of a legislative assembly, represent and act on behalf of the citizens.

Democracy provides a range of freedoms and basic rights. In democracies, people have the freedom to speak, associate, worship, and engage in enterprise.

There is also equality before the law, right to a fair and speedy trial, freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention, and the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty.

**Changing the World**

The world is in bad shape. If we could only change it and make it a better place to live. The good news is that it can be done.

The best way to change the world is to change oneself, because we are part of the world. Our control over ourselves is far greater than our control over other people.

**Empires**

Modern empires have risen and fallen faster than ancient empires, probably because of the use of advanced military technology.

**Causes of Conflict**

Political historians have identified many causes of war and fighting in general. The desire for possessions such as resources, the preservation of freedom, the desire for glory or recognition have all been considered as causes.
Idealism

Is idealism dangerous? Idealists are people who value ideals more than material possessions.

Life

Stress and Distress

By and large, in industrialised societies we take it for granted that as we are enjoying a high standard of living, we are also enjoying a high quality of life.

Yet despite the high standard of living, many people feel far from fulfilled. There is exhaustion and frustration.

Questions that Matter

One reason for this is that we have been asking too many questions of one kind, and too few of another kind.

Our knowledge of the laws of nature has progressed phenomenally. Yet there is uncertainty and disorientation in the realm of life, both private and public.

Progress

People take it for granted that, as time passes, life gets better and better. Many are convinced that we have progressed far beyond our predecessors.

Technology has progressed far beyond what was known even in the relatively recent past. Yet is our faith in the healing powers of technology justified?
Reflections

**Environment**

Economic progress has contributed significantly to the higher standard of living; it also resulted in a degradation of the environment.

The degradation of the environment has reduced the quality of life. Air pollution has become one of the leading causes of respiratory and cardiovascular diseases in many urban areas.

The tainting of food has heightened risks from food. Noise pollution has increased the stress levels of those exposed to it.

**Wisdom**

Modern technology has provided us with methods of mass production. Do we have the wisdom to use the power of technology in ways that enhance humanity rather than in ways that destroy it?

**Freedom and Restrictions**

Many of our daily activities are regulated down to the minutest detail. This includes moving from place to place, performing various tasks, or going for a swim in a public park.

The rationale for having many rules is that without regulations there would be threats to public safety, and a reduced standard of living.

**Togetherness and Fragmentation**

Marriages are unstable. Divorce is widespread. Various forms of abuse abound. Rising inequality is making matters
worse. Communities are threatened in many ways.

This is taking place in part because in the rush to advance technology, we neglected acquiring knowledge of living well. We need to focus on acquiring wisdom as much as, if not more, modern scientific knowledge.

**Creditors and Debtors**

Many people and entire nations are deeply in debt. The burden of debt does not permit them to escape from the debt trap.

**Friendship and Loneliness**

Friendships are precarious. People are having a hard time making and keeping friends. Even those who learned how to make friends are having a hard time keeping them.

The idea of loyalty appears to be under stress. We should be loyal to our friends and not abandon them for the smallest misdemeanours. We need to learn how to forgive faults.

**Demoralisation**

Not a few people experience what is known as burnout. What is “burnout” and why does it happen to people?

Burnout is a depletion of energy and vitality: physical, emotional, and spiritual. Your batteries run down and it feels like it. It’s very difficult to exist in this condition.

People burn out for many reasons. If the amount of energy discharged during periods of work is greater than the amount of energy recovered during periods of rest, it is just a matter of time before a person burns out.

The greater is the gap between energy spent and energy
Reflections

gained each day, the faster a person will burn out. The great danger of burnout is that it happens imperceptibly, and that it can be very hard to recover from.

Another reason people experience burnout is relationships. There are not many experiences that exhaust and demoralise people more than a relationship that breaks down.

**What to Do?**

We have to think about what where we are heading. Put everything on the table and examine it: habits, presuppositions, goals and priorities. We must ask questions, especially ‘why’ questions.

**Morality**

**What are morals?**

A good life requires good morals. The challenge is to differentiate morals that are good from those that are bad.

Why have people become less concerned with morality and even to the point of being unwilling even to discuss morality?

Morals are rules of behaviour – personal and public. Without principles, our actions become chaotic and unstable.

Practically all major religions and faiths enjoin and prohibit the similar actions. Common sense also indicates rules of behaviour.

An example is to treat others the way we would like to be
treated by them. If everyone were to treat other people as he would like to be treated by them, everyone would be treated well.

Another example is the relationship between means and ends. A few people think that the ends justify the means. It is all right to take any action, if you get the desired result.

At a political level, this is reflected in the view that it is all right to participate in revolutions, as long as the perfect state emerges at the end of the process.

Apart from the fact that no perfect society has yet emerged, this view is false for additional reasons as well.

If the end were to justify the means, anyone could do anything and say that he or she was doing it with a good intent in mind.

Accordingly, we may not interfere, criticise, or hold the person responsible for those actions. While intentions are not irrelevant, they cannot provide justification for crimes.

Good habits contribute to the preservation, dignity, and well being of persons. Bad habits have the reverse effects.

**Aversion to Morality**

Ethical principles govern behaviour. However, a few people wish to do as they please, in the mistaken belief that this is the best way to live. Any kind of judgment in their view is just another attempt by someone to impose his or her ‘subjective’ opinion on others.

**Moral Relativism**

A few people have become less preoccupied with morality because they believe that it is not possible to tell the
difference between right and wrong.

Faced with what appears to be multiple ethical standards, rather than evaluating those standards, they assert that all principles are relative. That is an easy way out.

For example, if a person falsely testifies against another person, the false witness committed an injustice, and there is nothing subjective about that.

By propagating the view that “there are no right answers,” we eliminate the basis for maintaining any difference between right and wrong. Young people become thus become morally handicapped from the beginning.

It is ironic that this takes place in education. If there are no right answers, there can be no right ways of behaviour either.

If there are no right ways of conduct, can there be any wrong ways? The insistence that ‘there are no right answers’ presupposes a far-reaching moral relativism, with potentially catastrophic effects.

Moral relativism implies that there are no moral restraints on behaviour. Since there is no line between right and wrong, there is no danger of ever crossing such a line. Anything goes. Is this the message we want to relay to people?

It is better to say that while there may be questions to which it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a right answer, there are many questions that have right answers.

For example, to the question “is honesty a desirable quality?” the right answer is “yes.” To the question “should we respect our parents?” the right answer is also “yes.”

As a result of ethical relativism, we distinguish what we
think of as statements of fact from what we think of as value judgements.

Facts are objective, so the argument goes, and values are not. Thus we are exhorted to ‘stick to the facts, as this will protect us from making arbitrary judgements.

The difference between facts and values, however, is arbitrary. Not all statements of facts are objective, while not all statements of moral principles are subjective.

Since we think of all values as relative, we expect everyone to make up his or her mind as to the difference between right and wrong. We have come to think of morality as private.

The fact that we have guidelines for professionals proves that we have not given up on the idea that it is necessary to differentiate right from wrong.

**Morality and Brainwashing**

A few think of morality as a rigid set of rules designed to restrict freedom rather than to live a better, fuller life. And as people tend to think of freedom as the highest good, they tend to disregard talk about morality as merely an attempt by one party to impose its views on another.

**Being Judgmental**

We are exhorted to be *non-judgemental*. Are we then prepared to say that *anything goes*? The insistence on being non-judgmental has the effect of allowing people to do anything they want, and not to feel guilty about any of it.

**Are Principles Dangerous?**

Strange as it may seem, there are persons who feel that
people with principles are a threat, especially in liberal societies.

The attachment to moral or religious principles, they feel, is an indication of an “authoritarian personality.”

Accordingly, they spend time and effort in attempting to eradicate any remains of principles in people who hold on to them. Entire education systems in liberal societies appear to be designed to achieve this end.

This is also achieved through the mass media, publications, and universities. The intent is to produce the ultimate non-judgmental person.

Those who distrust persons with convictions miss several facts. Having convictions does not make a person authoritarian.

Moreover, it is the people without principles, without the knowledge of right and wrong that are the real threat.

They are the conformists that will defend themselves by saying that they followed orders.

**Morals and Morale**

There is a close relationship between morals and morale. A few of the feelings we experience are the result of actions we take.

It follows that a change of habits may result in a change of morale. The idea is to adopt habits that keep our morale high, and refrain from actions that lower it.

**Body and Soul**

Despite the religious revival in recent years, faith awareness appears to be limited. This is unfortunate in that it
causes people to neglect themselves.

**Regeneration**

Generation is the growth and the blossoming of life. In order to attain and retain high morale, we need to pursue activities that regenerate us.

**Ritual**

Teachers emphasise the need to put one's heart into one's actions. More than lip service is required. It is not enough to possess sound principles if they are not acted upon. Actions speak louder than words.

**Danger of Victimhood**

The danger in designating people as “victims” is that this designation may be used as an excuse to justify actions that transgress ethical principles.

In different words, the danger is that the “victim” may descend to the standards of the aggressor and become no different.

**Wrongdoing and Judgment**

Actions affect judgment. A wrong action impairs the judgment of the person. Accordingly, it is important to remain on guard against committing even what appear to be small wrongs.

**Ignorance**

People who do wrong are not always aware of it. If they were, presumably they would not do it. A few of them realise later that they did wrong, and at this point they experience
Reflections

regrets.

It is perhaps to this group of persons that the saying “there is no sin but ignorance” applies. But a few people persist in wrongdoing knowingly. As far as the truly ignorant are concerned, preventing wrongdoing requires education.

**Cheating and Reputation**

People who cheat will get a bad reputation. Once they are caught cheating, bad reputation will stick to them like their own shadow.

**Conflict of Interest**

People in public positions are expected to represent the interest of the public. If such people undertake any actions that benefit them personally while acting in the position of public officials, they have allowed their personal interest to conflict with or take priority over the public interest. Such actions constitute a betrayal of public trust and should be treated accordingly.

**Peacekeeping**

It is very important to keep peace; between nations, people, and within oneself. Every day many disturbances threaten the peace. How to keep peace?

**Dignity**

Dignity is a quiet resolve to remain true to one’s way of life. Yet there are many ways of life, and a quiet resolve to remain true to a life of crime cannot possibly be dignified. Thus, dignity requires a quiet resolve to a *worthy* way of life.
Leslie Terebessy

**Cynicism**

A person may care little about people because he thinks that they do not care about him. The way to escape from cynicism is to start caring about others.

**Discipline**

Discipline is the habit of living and doing things according to a set of good rules. To acquire a high degree of discipline requires practice.

No accomplishment, great or small, whether it be in the field of science, sports, politics, religion, business, or raising a family, has ever been achieved without discipline.

**Family**

The family is an exclusive unit of private existence. The family is indispensable for the education and well-being of children. The privacy of the family unit has to be respected and protected. Raising a family is part of life and process of procreation.

However, the sanctity go the family is at times violated. Violations of the privacy of the home take many forms. Even states interfere in the family in a few cases. How far and on what grounds does the state have a right to interfere in people's private affairs?

**Honesty**

Honesty is telling the truth. Dishonesty damages the credibility of the person who is shown to have acted dishonestly.
Gambling

Gambling is taking an unnecessary risk in the hope of making a quick gain. Gamblers think that reward is possible without work and perseverance.

But there are no shortcuts to prosperity. Why do people gamble, and why do so many states tolerate and even participate in gambling?

When a person gambles, he risks the fruits of years of hard work and sacrifice on chance. The future and welfare of countless families and children have been severely damaged by this abhorrent practice. How many individuals and families have been destroyed by gambling?

People's Inheritance

When people teach their children religion, diligence, self-control, honesty, compassion, and good habits in general, they have already bequeathed much to their children. For success in life is in large measure the result of excellent habits.

People

Life is a Drama

Life is a drama. Everyone has a part to play. We can play the part of a good character or a bad one. We choose the part we want to play.

It is the process of learning which part to play. It is a process of learning the difference between right and wrong,
the difference between truth and falsehood.

How our life turns out depends on which part we play. Contrary to the saying that good guys finish last, good guys finish first.

**Borrowing**

In the act of borrowing, the borrower enters into a position of obligation to the lender. The borrower must service and repay the loan.

At one time, borrowing and lending were frowned upon, no doubt in part for this reason. What had to happen in people’s thinking to make lending and borrowing a more respectable practice than before? To a significant extent, the traditional disgrace attached to being in debt had to be diminished.

**Rush**

We have to speed up since we are a part of the economy. We need to work faster to pay back what we borrowed. We have to keep up with machines.

We rush almost everything. The economy is characterised by the frenzy of a race. This frenzy is apparent especially in businesses which buy and sell securities.

Bosses rush their workers. Managers pressure their teams to meet targets. We rush when we eat, and not just when we eat fast food.

We even rush the fruits and vegetables, not giving them enough time to become ripe. We harvest them prematurely, expecting that by the time they arrive in the supermarket they will be ripe. But will such vegetables and fruits taste
Reflections

good? And will they be nutritious?

**Makeup**

The face tells a great deal about the person. Even a poker face tells that the person wearing it does not want us to know anything about him or her.

Many attempts are made to “see through” people. There is even an ancient Chinese art of face reading.

In the past people in acting used makeup. Stars in entertainment depend a great deal on their appearance to survive in business.

At present, even politicians and artists wear make up. Have we all taken to acting? What exactly is the part we are trying to play?

The people who rely on the use of make up miss the fact that it is possible to be attractive even without make up.

First, a person who is not particularly beautiful may yet be attractive. Also, a person with beautiful features may yet be unattractive.

Conversely, everyone has seen or experienced what has been described as ‘cold beauty.’

Not everyone is or can be beautiful; everyone can, however, be attractive. Prominent among the factors that make people attractive is spirituality.

**Getting Ahead**

When people in any community begin to act as if they believe that the best way to get ahead in life is not through diligence and hard work, but through cheating and ‘beating the system,’ that community is in serious jeopardy.
People will do just that – they will try to cheat their way to success. Those who remain honest may begin to believe that, indeed, ‘nice guys finish last.’

**City and Country**

Why would anyone want to live in an urban centre with all the noise pollution, air pollution, the high cost, high density, and high stress living? The need to hold on to one’s job constitutes a compelling reason for putting up with life in the city.

**Apartments**

Apartment and condominium living are signs of the fragmentation of communities. People who live in apartments or condominiums barely know their neighbours.

**People and Things**

Industrial countries have become advanced to the point where things are treated as people and people as things. In the eyes of the law, the modern corporation is a person.

The people working in the corporation, on the other hand, have been reduced to factors of production or human capital. This shows how we have collectively turned things upside down.

**Formalities**

It is striking how differently we treat formalities in matters of personal relationships in comparison to financial transactions.

Yet we do not see too many commercial transactions taking place without the formalities of written
Promises

Why do we treat marital contracts less seriously than financial agreements? If a person breaks a financial promise by failing to pay back a promissory note, he is guilty of a ‘breach of contract,’ and has committed an offence. Yet if a person breaks the promise ‘til death do us part,’ he or she commits no legal offence.

It is very important to keep promises. It’s easier to do if we don’t make too many. If we do not keep our promises, we will lose credibility.

Praise and Reproach

It is better to be reproached by a genius than praised by a fool.

Philosophy

Search for Truth

The secret of the philosophers, someone said, is that they value the quest for truth higher than the truth.

Prophets and Philosophers

What is the difference between philosophers and prophets?
Emotional Desensitisation

This is a condition where a person has become desensitised to the point where he finds few experiences ‘moving.’

When he witnesses a person’s misfortune, he remains unmoved; his ability to feel has diminished. His heart has become hard. And what is the significance of this desensitisation?

Age of Rage

Why do a few people find it so hard to restrain themselves?

Repression and Depression

There was a time when people believed they suffered from sexual repression. They felt that they would be a lot happier if they could escape from the restrictions placed on their freedom by religion, parents, and their inhibitions.

After escaping from these restrictions, however, it appears that people now suffer from another, perhaps related condition – depression.

Positive Attitude

To live well it is important to have a positive attitude.
Reflections

Religion

**Interpretation and Truth**

Among different interpretations a few are nearer to truth than others. The challenge is to determine which of the available views is the closest to the truth. Then, for all practical purposes, we should adopt the best interpretation.

Science

**What is Science?**

Science is the systematic effort to understand reality; it seeks to explain the way things work, to understand the relationships between different parts of reality. The aim of research is the search for knowledge.

**Reasoning**

Reasoning is the process of arriving at valid statements. Reasoning may proceed deductively. Conclusions are drawn from preceding statements. The latter are known as premises.

The basic rule is the principle of contradiction. In order to ascertain whether a conclusion is true, we have to examine the soundness of the premises. Next, we need to examine whether the transition from the premises to the conclusion is justified.
Research and Time

There is a tendency, among scholars and lay people, to assume that more recent research means more authoritative research.

This is a prejudice which assumes that something is more true and relevant because it arrives later in time.

Indifference of Science

Present-day scientific knowledge is morally neutral. Indeed, social scientists take pride in abstaining from what they think of as ‘value judgments.’

They believe that doing so enhances the integrity, impartiality, and reliability of their work. The reason we require ethics in applying knowledge is that its products may be used for both good and evil purposes.

Generalisations

Generalisations are statements about an entire class of things or experiences. Scientific laws are examples of scientific generalisations; proverbs are examples of generalisations about habits and morals. We place far too much emphasis on the first type of knowledge and not enough on the second type.

Statistics

Statistics claim to give an objective account of subjective experience. Statistical findings are purportedly based on a sample sufficiently large (and therefore representative) as to minimise the possibility of coming to the wrong conclusion.

Many perspectives are allegedly supported by “studies.”
But just how do statistics prove one thing or another? Mostly, surveys of people’s views are gathered.

Statistics are statements derived from data that is quantifiable. Often surveys are based on assumptions that cannot be validated using the methods of statistics.

**Social Science**

Relativism teaches that all moral choices are in the end arbitrary. A value free or relativistic social science takes away the ground from making choices.

At the political level, a value-free science does not allow us to differentiate better regimes from worse ones. A value free social science does not allow us to condemn tyranny or to praise democracy.

A distinguishing feature of democracies is that they allow for the peaceful coexistence of diverse ways of life.

**Technology**

**Computers**

One of the strengths of computers is their ability to record, process, and retrieve vast amounts of information in a short time. Computers also enable people around the world to communicate with each other quickly. Computers make our lives more challenging, interesting, and in some ways perhaps more fulfilling.
Leslie Terebessy

**Telephones**

What is the effect of telephones on people’s levels of stress; the sudden interruptions of phones ringing, where the person receiving a call never knows who is at the other end of the line or what kind of message is waiting for him?

**Television**

To many, confined in their homes, a TV is a window on the world. Television brings us closer to strangers and distances us from family and friends.

In this way, television facilitates the decline of families. In how many households do people talk less because they watch television?

**Tradition**

**Keeping Up with the Times**

Becoming and remaining modern requires us to do many things. It requires us to keep on learning all the new technologies that are being constantly invented.

It requires us to do everything more quickly. It also means adopting a contemporary lifestyle. In what ways is such a lifestyle different from a ‘traditional’ way of life?

While we are frequently reminded of the benefits of modernity, not many people ask about its disadvantages.

**Modernity and Humanity**

Scientific thinking and the technologies made possible by
Reflections

science have had a profound effect on how we think, and relate to people.

It is clear that progress has made us more modern. But has it also made us more humane?

**What Is Tradition?**

It is difficult to generalise about something as broad and varied as ‘tradition.’ But this argument can be made about many, if not all generalisations. Every experience is unique.

It can therefore never be placed in any single category along with any other experience. This means, however, that we cannot generalise about anything – period.

But if we cannot generalise, we cannot hope to gain understanding and knowledge. All knowledge is expressed in a generalisation of one kind or another.

To say that we cannot generalise, therefore, is tantamount to saying that we have to give up the quest for all understanding and knowledge.

Traditional communities differ from modern communities, among other things, in that they provide a stronger sense of belonging to its members.

The ties that bind communities appear to be loose. The difference between a traditional community and a modern one can be seen in the difference between the old-fashioned, extended family on the one hand, and the specifically modern, fragmented family on the other.

Traditional ways of life are rooted in established customs, morals and religion. Heritage is the equivalent of a moral home. A person who is willing to abandon his heritage runs the risk of becoming spiritually rootless.
Modern man appears to have a cavalier attitude to his heritage. His perspective is rooted in the view that people may find their way through as they go along *without* the assistance of tradition.

Tradition places an emphasis on following established ways. Non-traditional ways of existence are characterised by a willingness to *experiment*.

Traditional ways foster peace. Quarrels are rare. Lawyers thrive today, while they were practically unheard of in traditional societies.

Formerly, people put a great deal of emphasis on responsibilities. Today we talk rights and self fulfilment.

The non-traditional person rebels from time to time, possibly because he or she feels enslaved or restricted.

In traditional communities respecting one's parents is essential. This is true of a traditional society in any part of the world. In the so-called ‘modern’ societies, parents are not respected nearly as much as they are respected in traditional ones.

Religion advises us to be aware of God at all times. Religion advises us to pay attention to the teaching of the prophets, and to practice righteousness. However, tradition is being critiqued in countless ways.

Tradition, according to its adversaries, reflects a biased understanding of man and his place in the scheme of things. It has therefore become necessary to protect tradition and the traditional way of life.

This does not mean that we have to reject “modernity.” It just means that we have to adapt to modernity in ways that
does not compromise our attachment to traditional values.

**Traditional Values**

How can traditional values be preserved in the era of modernity? For this it is necessary to know what may change and what needs to remain constant. Principles need to remain the same; however, their manifestations may change. For example, justice may be practiced in different ways. How we help people in need may be less important than that we help them. There is no point in becoming ‘modern’ if the price we have to pay for this modernity is a broken family, a disoriented generation, and a disintegration of one’s way of life. The challenge is how to adapt to modernity without succumbing to its risks.

In the rush ‘embrace’ modernity, a few people reject everything ‘traditional.’ They throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water.’ This is a mistake. The point is to get rid of the bathwater, not the baby. Such people are unable to tell the difference between a valuable tradition and an ‘unwarranted accretion.’

A successful integration of modernity and tradition requires keeping what is best in tradition and adopting what is best from what modernity has to offer. Thus, it is acceptable to utilise modern technology, so long as it is done for good rather than evil purposes. It is for this reason that we need to attain and retain knowledge of ethics.