



Changing the Story: **A Neohumanist Educational Philosophy for the Anthropocene**

When the underlying spirit of humanism is extended to everything, animate and inanimate, in this universe – I have designated this as Neohumanism. This Neohumanism will elevate humanism to universalism, the cult of love for all created beings of this universe.

~ P.R. Sarkar (1982)

By Dr. Kathleen Kesson

I AM WRITING this article from my home in Vermont (USA), which has often been touted as a potential “safe haven” for climate refugees. Located inland, with 75% of its land forested, and a reputation for neighborliness and progressive politics, it has until recently avoided some of the catastrophes we hear about daily in the news. A long and snowy winter – yes – and the occasional power outages and muddy back roads in spring when the snow melts. And a couple of major floods in the living memories of people here.

I watch the steady rain that has poured for days now, falling into a ground already saturated. This should be good news for a state that has

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recently been experiencing drought conditions. But torrential rains this past week destroyed bridges and roads throughout the state, and hundreds of businesses and homes have been lost to the raging waters of our overflowing rivers. The two towns closest to me, Barre and Montpelier (the state capitol), are devastated. All this, on the back of continuing smoky days from Canadian wildfires, and an unusually late freeze that destroyed the crops of many of our local farmers. It is probably safe to say there are no safe havens. While those (individuals as well as nations) with the fewest resources are likely to suffer the most, we are all in this.

A new narrative is emerging in the ongoing story of Planet Earth. We have lived for the past 10,000 years in the relatively stable (climatically) Holocene Era, a period that enabled the rise (and fall) of numerous civilizations (GR: *Holos*, ‘whole’ + *cene* ‘new’ ‘recent’). A significant number of scholars from the sciences and the humanities now agree that we have entered the Anthropocene, a new era in geological history (GR: *Anthrōpos*, ‘man, human’ + *cene*, ‘new’

‘recent’). While debates about concerning the chronological boundaries of this era, the geological indicators, and the details of the complex dynamics of interacting systems (atmospheric, climatic, geothermal, hydrological and biological), it is clear to the majority of the world’s scientists that human impacts on the earth are causing perhaps irreversible damage to the planetary ecosystem. We are witnessing the “great acceleration” — unprecedented species extinction and loss of biodiversity, increasingly dangerous weather patterns resulting in loss of life and property, and extensive pollution of our waters, air, and soil. New assaults on planetary life come to our attention daily. The question posed succinctly by American philosopher Roy Scranton (2018), is “We’re doomed. Now what?” How do we make the shift from the Domsday scenario in which we currently find ourselves towards the optimistic future promised us by Shrii P.R. Sarkar, in which “Neohumanism will elevate humanism to universalism, the cult of love for all created beings of this universe?” (1982).

Neohumanism requires the cultivation of an ontology that is relational, that understands there is no separation of self and other, of knower and known, of subject and object, but rather endless flows of being and becoming in which we are deeply interconnected with everything in creation, visible and invisible, material and molecular, objective and subjective.



While action on all fronts is urgent, education is a primary vehicle for cultivating the “new human,” those who embrace this love of all created beings and align their actions with such deeply felt convictions. This urgent need for a new story, a paradigm shift in education, has finally been recognized at the very highest level of policy, in a recent (2020) report from UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), titled *Learning To Become WITH The World: Education for future survival*. The working paper on the future of education was commissioned from the Common Worlds Research Collective, an interdisciplinary network of researchers “concerned with our relations with the more-than-human world” (CWRC, 2020). Anyone familiar with the tenets of Neohumanism will note the nearly seamless alignments of their “seven declarations” with the vision of Shrii Sarkar, articulated in his 1982 book *The Liberation of Intellect: Neohumanism*.

First, as Sarkar did, they advocate for the preservation of the best ideals of Humanism — namely that of justice — but state that it must be extended beyond the exclusively human framework. They note that we must begin to think of ourselves as ecological — not just social — beings. Education, they say, must no longer be a vehicle for promoting human “exceptionalism,” but rather help young people develop a more relational ontology in the face of the catastrophic times that are upon us. We must, in this sense, discard conventional individual and social developmental frameworks in favor of fostering collective dispositions and convivial, reparative

human and more-than-human relations. We must learn to become with the world, not stand apart from it, and a spirit of universalism must embrace multiple and diverse human worlds as well as the multiplicity of our entanglements in multispecies ecologies. To facilitate this transformation, we need to adopt an ethics that is collective, more-than-human, and reparative. See CWRC, 2020 for a more comprehensive articulation of this summary.

As you will see in the remainder of this paper, Neohumanist education shares the essence of these educational aims. Predating the UNESCO report by some 30 decades, it takes us even further down the road with its focus not just on transformational aspirations and theories, but the pedagogical practices that might enable us to attain these ideals. Below, we take a comparative look at the philosophies relevant to the Humanist era and the Neohumanist era.

Educational Philosophy in the Humanist Era

Philosophy is the love of wisdom (GR: *philo*, ‘loving’ + *sophia* ‘knowledge, wisdom’) and education is a very practical activity. A practical philosophy of education, then, should help us to make wise judgements about our teaching practice. Philosophies of education define what it means to be human and the nature of mind and consciousness, and articulate the aims and purposes of education. They explore how knowledge is constructed and how people learn. They help us to clarify our values, and provide visions of the “good life.” For example, the



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Cultural Transmission model of education values knowledge of the past, and understands the primary aim of education to be inculcating the values, beliefs and knowledge systems of the existing culture into the new generation. The individual is seen as something of a “blank slate” ready to be molded into the form of human valued by the existing society, or at least by the dominant classes in a society. Teaching methods, in this model, are characterized by a prescribed curriculum, the teacher as an authority, regular testing, and behavioristic methods of control such as rewards and punishments.

Sometimes radically differing ideologies, values and beliefs give rise to new philosophies of education. For example, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries there was a reaction against

modernism, with its mechanistic materialism, science, new technologies, and emerging bureaucratic society. The Romantics, as they were called, did not accept the idea of the human being as a blank slate, rather they believed us to be born with innate powers, or a divine spark, and they thus embraced the deep feelings of the individual soul and its emotional, spiritual, poetic and artistic nature. Romantics bemoaned the disenchantment of the world, and sought to reestablish the mystery, magic, mysticism, and myth that had characterized much of human history. Teaching methods, in this framework, lean towards the “drawing out” (LA: *ēdūcere*, ‘lead out’) of the inclinations and potential of the child and of pedagogies that encourage awe, wonder, and the imagination. This philosophy

influenced the development of what would later be known as Holistic education (for its attention to the whole child).

Pragmatic (or developmental) theories of education associated with such thinkers as John Dewey and Jean Piaget sought to reconcile the contradictions between the emphases on outer experience (the Cultural Transmission model) and inner experience (the Romantic model) with the notion of learning as a transaction between inner and outer modes of knowing. Pragmatic approaches to education value democracy as the most efficacious form of social arrangements, and teaching methods in this framework are characterized by inquiry-based and experiential curricula, cooperative group learning, and the cultivation of reflection, logic and reason as primary forms of problem-solving.

Challenges to Pragmatism and Romanticism came with the advent of Critical Pedagogy, a philosophy of education that takes a hard look at the social structures that construct our worlds. Drawing upon a Marxist conceptual foundation, Critical Pedagogy insists that we acknowledge the ways that capitalist relations, racism, sexism and other forms of oppression have limited the full development of human powers, and that we shape an education grounded in the development of critical thinking in order to understand and overthrow these limitations.

In the 1980's a Holistic education paradigm (with roots in the preceding century) began to take its place as a recognizable way of thinking about education. Holistic educators focused on the interconnectedness of experience and reality, the relationships between the whole and the part, the student as an active, participatory and critical learner, and respect and reverence for the inner life of the child (See Mahmoudi et al, 2012). Many holistic thinkers subscribed to the notion of "ultimacy" – the idea that inherent to human development is a drive toward wholeness and the capacity to attain a "peak state" of realization, with resultant attainment of primary human values such as compassion and integrity,

accompanied by an overarching state of well-being (Forbes, 2003).

It's important to note that all of these existing philosophical approaches, the spiritual and the secular, are very much grounded in Humanistic concepts and classic liberal traditions, ways of thinking that place human beings in the center of the picture (anthropocentrism), and which value the autonomous individual with their capacity to gain self-knowledge through reflection and to better understand the world through the application of reason. The old philosophies of European Humanism provided humanity with a vital service by liberating us from much of the superstition and irrationality of the medieval Christian Church and initiating an era of scientific thought and rationality, and

the contributions of Humanistic philosophy to individual rights, freedom, and self-determination should not be understated. But

just as these philosophical commitments are necessary but not sufficient to guide us through the Anthropocene, existing educational philosophies, even the progressive and holistic ones of the 18th, 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries are inadequate to steer us through the era that is upon us. Neohumanism, while

drawing upon many of the important tenets of Humanism as well as many of the best practices of modernist education, emphasizes new ways of thinking/being that are uniquely capable of educating the "new human" — persons with the knowledge and dispositions to care about the welfare of all the species of the planet and to live in harmony with the ecological constraints that we are only now coming to terms with in the Anthropocene.

Educational Philosophy in a Neohumanist Era

Neohumanism and Ontology. Ontology (GR: *ōn, ont-* 'being' + *-logy* 'study of') is the study of what it means to be human, including the broad categories of being, becoming, existence, and meaning. Neohumanist educators are fortunate



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in that Shrii P.R. Sarkar articulated a comprehensive philosophy of Being to draw upon, a philosophy that encompasses the mundane and the cosmic, which understands the known universe as dynamic, and that defines the human as a multi-dimensional being engaged in a quest for realization and spiritual understanding.

One main idea that profoundly shaped Humanist thinking is the idea of the individual, the “I” as a bounded entity, surrounded by stable substances and objects in space that constitute separate “others” to manipulate, utilize, and transact with. This concept developed in the context of the Western Enlightenment along with the subjugation of nature and the application of reason and logic to all of the problems of existence. This sense of separation, mastery, and control in concert with an economic system predicated on resource extraction, endless growth, and needless consumption has led us to the ecological tipping point at which we find ourselves. Neohumanism requires the cultivation of an ontology that is relational, that understands there is no separation of self and other, of knower and known, of subject and object, but rather endless flows of being and becoming in which we are deeply interconnected with everything in creation, visible and invisible, material and molecular, objective and subjective. It requires that we learn to be with the world, as the UNESCO paper advocates, not stand apart from it.

In the context of relational being and becoming, virtually all aspects of education

require reconceptualization: everything from our notions of individual achievement to our valuing of independence and autonomy, from our theories of human development and cognition to theories of experience and academic subject matter. If everything is in process, or relational, then we must awaken to the profound interdependence between the human organism and the environment, the life histories and trajectories of ‘objects’ and our own implication in these, as well as the human connection to transcendent levels of mind. A Neohumanist curriculum would embrace this multi-dimensionality, the whole of ontological experience.

Neohumanism and Epistemology. Epistemology (GR: *epistēmē* ‘knowledge’+ *-logy* ‘study of’) asks fundamental questions about the nature of knowing. How is knowledge constructed? What are the sources of know-ledge? How do we come to know anything? How can we know what is true?

Throughout our Humanist history, Western models of education have spread across the planet, resulting in the loss of language, tradition, culture, and indigenous ecological knowledge. Some scholars aptly call this “epistemicide” (Santos, 2014). In the process of valuing a particular version of scientific investigation and reason over all other forms of knowledge creation, and in the context of conquest, patriarchy, and economic imperialism, ways of knowing that exist outside these contours have been marginalized or suppressed: embodied knowing, contemplative knowing, intuitional

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knowing, narrative knowing, aesthetic knowing, mythic knowing, and intergenerational knowing. Neohumanist educators need to cultivate an epistemological pluralism, while understanding that all ways of knowing are not necessarily equal, and that different epistemologies are suited to different tasks and purposes.

Knowledge is not a “thing-in-itself” that can be transmitted from one isolated mind to another, or from a digitized environment to a human brain via language or image. Knowledge is part of an ever-changing system, a pattern of relations, and is embedded in culture (Bowers, 1993). Language shapes how we perceive and understand the world, and we transmit worldviews and taken-for-granted cultural habits with every word we utter. A relational philosophy asks more of us than that we simply “teach” or “acquire” neutral facts about academic subjects. To truly know anything, in a deep way, we must embrace the occasion of knowing in its temporal multiplicity: understanding the past (how the knowledge was made) the present (what does it mean to me in this moment?), and the future (what are the consequences of this knowing?) We must expand the boundaries of our sources of knowledge: What might it mean to discard a notion of an “us” who think and a “them” that do not? Can we learn to “think like a tree?” Can we learn to put traditional ecological knowledge (much of which has been exterminated along with the people and cultures who have acquired it) alongside empirical science?

Neohumanism, unlike some spiritual pedagogies, does place a value on rationality and

critical thinking. Rationality, in its deepest sense, is the capacity to question the sources of knowledge, to be skeptical about truth claims, and to be mindful of the ways in which knowledge has been used to manipulate, subjugate, obfuscate, and render powerless. It encompasses more than simple reason and logic: true rationality must be informed and tempered by contemplation. To speak of contemplation is to open up horizons of knowing of which humanity has only has the faintest of glimpses. In this regard, we can say that our understanding of Neohumanist epistemology is in its infancy. P.R. Sarkar refers to *parā vidya* (spiritual, or intuitional knowledge) and *aparā vidya* (mundane knowledge). While there are certainly sages and enlightened people who are gifted in the ways of spiritual knowledge, and many excellent educators who are adept at leading young people to deep intellectual understandings of the world, there has yet to emerge a comprehensive pedagogy that seamlessly integrates these two poles of wisdom in ways that do justice to the integrity of both domains. That, I believe, is the task of Neohumanist educators.

Neohumanism and Axiology. Axiology (GR: *axia* ‘value’ or ‘worth’ + *-logy* ‘study of’) encompasses questions of value, and includes the study of both ethics and of aesthetics. What do we consider to be of worth? What constitutes the good, the true, the beautiful? How should we live? For educators, this extends to important questions of what is worth knowing and what should be taught.



Millions of young people are rising up, shouting out that they will no longer tolerate the destruction of their planet. It is up to all of us who care about these “new humans” to support their yearning.

Cultural pluralism has brought about a sense of ethical relativism, and there is uncertainty about what if anything, can be considered a cardinal value. In our late-Humanist society, in which ‘Man is the measure of all things,’ capitalist ethics have become the dominant social value, and the market is the ultimate arbiter of ethical questions. Should we endanger fragile habitat in order to drill for oil? Of course, if profit is the main value. In the relational, process philosophy of Neohumanism, in which the inherent value of all living things is acknowledged, ethical principles need to evolve to regulate these many and varied relationships. Sarkar rejects the kind of simple rule-based morality encoded in many traditions, yet subscribes to the notion of overarching ethical principles under the broad umbrella of the question: Does this contribute to the welfare of all?

The curriculum can no longer be constructed to serve dominant economic and political interests, as it is currently, but must address the deep interconnections that we are coming to understand between and amongst humans and

all ‘other’ life forms. In a Neohumanist curriculum, ethics are infused across the curriculum; every subject from biology to history is approached through an ethical study framework. In the study of ethical dilemmas (and we face countless of them in this new era), it is important to cultivate the arts of reflection, deliberation, and discriminating judgment, to invoke, as Sarkar suggests, both reason and intuition. In this way, ethics can become, as he proposes, a facilitator of personal and social transformation – a tool for expansion.

In modern Western societies, the arts are commodities, with ascribed value based on notions of uniqueness and scarcity. In a Neohumanist world, the arts could serve more ancient and life-preserving functions, involving young people in participatory aesthetic experiences that create and recreate the fundamental stories of our existence – our human bonds, our relationships with plants, animals, sea and sky, and the mythic stories that carry forth and transmit the blueprints of a moral universe (see Kesson, 2019).

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Changing the story

Worldviews and paradigms are narratives – stories about the world, about human possibility, about relationships, and about meaning. Central to both the UNESCO report and Neohumanist education philosophy is the emergence of a new story, a “cosmic creation story” (Swimme, 1988) conceived to inaugurate a new era of human and planetary health, a “transformation out of a world that is...mechanistic, scientific, dualistic, patriarchal, Eurocentric, anthropocentric, militaristic, and reductionistic” (Ibid. p. 47). A story that tells us “that the universe is not static; that the universe is expanding each moment into a previously nonexistent space; that the universe is a dynamic developing reality” (Ibid. p. 50). A story that tells of our “entanglement” in a web of life, one that understands all of creation to be alive, intelligent, and self-organizing, one in which we have been freed from the false sense of separation from the rest of nature, one in which we have awakened from the slumber imposed by capitalism, materialism, consumerism, conflict, spectacle, and all the other distractions devised to convince us we are alive. The great opportunity before us today, says Swimme (2011) is

To tell this new universe story in a way that will serve to orient humans with respect to our pressing questions: Where did we come from? Why are we here? How should we live together? How can the Earth community flourish? (p. 5)

Indeed, these are the questions at the heart of Neohumanist education theory and practice. Together they form the core of a curriculum designed to prepare young people for the challenges of the Anthropocene, to provide hope, and enable them to survive and thrive into the future. The UNESCO report is an aspirational document, written from a perspective of an imagined future in which humanity did make the right decisions, took the proper fork in the road. It calls for a number of conceptual shifts, mostly to an understanding of humans as ecological beings – full participants in a larger web of life.

They speak of abandoning totalizing epistemologies in favor of “pluriversal perspectives” and linking education to the logic of ecological survival.

From Shrii Sarkar’s perspective, the adoption of a set of beliefs is necessary but insufficient for the deep paradigmatic transformation to this “new humanism.” In Neohumanism, the process of cultivating a deeply ecological, post-human mindset depends on more than just new content; decentering the human requires a proto psycho-spirituality, that is, the conscious mental effort to expand the radius of one’s care outward from the limiting sentiments of Humanism to a universal love for all and a concern for the common welfare. From a Neohumanist standpoint, “the ‘baby’ of spirituality was thrown out with the ‘bathwater’ of organized religion (Vedaprajnananda, 2006, p. 28), and we must cultivate a non-dogmatic spirituality based on contemplative practices and authentic morality in order to truly realize the high ideals promoted by the Humanists. Alongside this, the attribution of moral standing and rights must be extended to all creation in order to overcome the anthropocentrism fostered by classic Humanism: “The recognition of the existential value of plants and animals,” and even more recently, of bodies of water and land, “adds an ecological dimension to Humanism” (Ibid., p. 29). Only with such a “deepening of Humanism with a psycho-spiritual approach and the widening of Humanism, with an ecological component” (Ibid., p. 29) might we finally have the effective tools we need for tackling the enormous ecological and socio-economic problems facing our global society.

The study of meditation or “contemplative science” is a young field, but the hundreds of neuroscientific studies on meditation and brain function in recent years are leading to some remarkable conclusions. Even beginning meditators experience less reactivity to stress, better focus, less mind-wandering, improved memory, and increased capacity for empathy. For longer term meditators, the benefits are even

greater, including a “greater neural attunement with those who are suffering, and enhanced likelihood of doing something to help” (Goleman & Davidson, 2017, p. 273). It is here that we begin to glimpse the transformative possibilities of contemplative practices. People who have attained a level of contentment with their lives, in whom the transcendent states achieved in moments of contemplation have become enduring traits are able to extend kindness, care, and generosity outward, in ever expanding circles, and “these positive altered traits have the potential for transforming our world in ways that will enhance not only our individual thriving but also the odds for our species survival” (Ibid. p. 291). We can see here the necessity for engaging in disciplined contemplative practice in order to realize the Neohumanist aim of extending the feelings of love to all creation.

In Shrii Sarkar’s words, “The sense of universalism should also be awakened in the child. Etiquette and refined behaviour (sic) are not enough. Real education leads to a pervasive sense of love and compassion for all creation” (1981). This “love for all creation” is not an abstract, sentimental emotion. It is a deep commitment to the common good, not just the common human good, but the good of all beings. It is a recognition of our “entanglement” – the inescapable fact that human flourishing does not occur in an individual vacuum; it is the result of our interdependence in an ecosystem that includes all life, animate and inanimate. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the rocks that seem so solid, the mycelium networks in the soil, the creatures who crawl, the creatures who fly, the creatures who slither, and those who swim in the waters – human beings share spiritual kinship with all of creation.

Neohumanism asks us to reconsider the fundamental aims and purposes of education. Rather than educate so that a tiny sliver of people rises to the top of the global income chain, we need to educate all people for the art of living well on a fragile and sacred planet. The new vision of reality is one of relationship, the cultivation of deep relationship with all of creation and between the past, the present moment, and the future. Millions of young people are rising up, shouting out that they will no longer tolerate the destruction of their planet. It is up to all of us who care about these “new humans” to support their yearning for an

education that is relevant, meaningful, purposeful, just, and joyful, which nurtures the human spirit and its innate love for all creation, and which enables humanity to create a survivable and “thrivable” future.

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Portions of this article appeared previously in Gurukula Network, January 2020, issue 49, under the title of “Neohumanism: A philosophy of education for the Anthropocene.” Watch for the publication of Dr. Kesson’s forthcoming book Neohumanist Education: Theory and Practice for the Anthropocene from Information Age Publishing.