

PSYCHOLOGIES

LITTLE BOOK **OF WISDOM**

52

*Meditations to guide you
through each week of the year*

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through each week of the year*

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The *Psychologies* team believes that everything we stand for is underpinned by Socrates' wise words: 'An unexamined life is not worth living.' Our aim is to help you understand yourself better, and to enrich your relationships with those around you. This can only be achieved by embarking on a personal journey of reflection and self-discovery. In each issue, we provide you with the tools, insights and inspiration to help you achieve this.

For this *Little Book of Wisdom* (the second in our 'Little Book' series), we look to quotes from modern and ancient philosophers to guide you through each week of the year. We believe their wise words will inspire, challenge and help you approach life in a fresh, positive way.

To help you further, we tasked our contributors — philosophical teachers and writers Samantha Vice, Andrea Hurst, Helen Douglas and Tobias Louw — to comment on these gems and help us understand their relevance to our everyday lives. From the pens of Confucius and Marcus Aurelius to Shakespeare, Iris Murdoch, Mark Twain and Paul Gauguin, we explore themes such as love, wisdom, grief, friendship, hardship and beauty in our quest to help you make sense of the world we live in.

Whether you conscientiously work through our book week by week, or dip into it when you need some spiritual sustenance, we hope these words will nourish you.

Have a good week — every week of the year.

Best,

TRACY

4 THINKERS



DR SAMANTHA VICE is senior lecturer in philosophy at Rhodes University. She completed her PhD at the University of Reading, UK, and returned to South Africa in 2003. She is co-editor of *The Moral Life* (Palgrave) and *Ethics at the Cinema* (Oxford University Press), and has written many papers on various aspects of moral philosophy.



DR ANDREA HURST is a research associate and postdoctoral fellow at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth. Her research interests fall within the domain of continental philosophy and, inspired by the work of Kierkegaard, Derrida, Heidegger and Nietzsche, she's published nationally and internationally on what may be called 'complexity thinking'.

52 meditations



HELEN DOUGLAS is a philosopher in private practice in Kalk Bay (www.philosophy-practice.co.za). She has published articles in several journals, including *Philosophical Practice*, *Radical Psychology* and *Janus Head*. Her first book, *Love and Arms: Violence and Justification After Levinas* (Trivium Publications) will be published in the US this year.



TOBIAS LOUW is a professor of philosophy at the University of Fort Hare, where he has lectured since 1985. His main interests are hermeneutics (the theory of interpretation), ethics, history and sociopolitical philosophy, with a passion for the ancient Greek and contemporary German and French philosophers. He has been published in a number of journals and books.

Autumn



God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please – you can never have both.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON (US, 1803–1882)

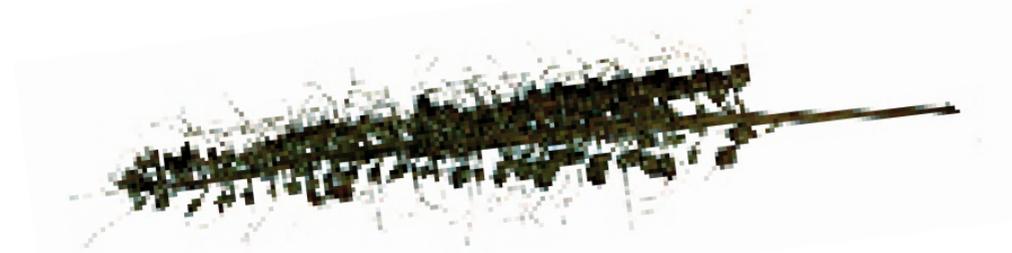
Emerson's observation flies in the face of traditional philosophies, which see 'wisdom' as an alliance between truth and repose. Ancient philosophers promised 'peace at last' (or jouissance, pure satisfaction) on achieving enlightenment; that is, when you finally uncover the simple truths about life, the universe and everything. Enlightened contemporary philosophers are more in tune with Emerson. Wisdom, they say, is recognising that the human condition is complex. Its truth is the discomfort of lack, paradox and dilemma, and our quest for jouissance is just a desire for the impossible. Therefore, if you choose repose (if you pretend you have resolved life's paradoxes or achieved a state of jouissance), you no longer live in the truth. If you accept that paradox is our truth, there is no repose. This is a good thing! It is the constant vacillation between life's dilemmas that keeps philosophical questioning alive. **ANDREA HURST**

All are lunatics, but he who can analyse his delusion is called a philosopher.

AMBROSE BIERCE (US, 1842–1914)

We are lunatics because we operate under two delusions: that experienced reality is just what it appears to be, and that we can ultimately explain all existence. Philosophers understand that 'what is' and what 'appears to be' are different. All that there is, they say, are energies that stimulate our senses. We build up coherent reality by making sense of these otherwise inchoate energies. Because we interpret them only through our limited cognitive powers, what 'appears to be' is a man-made fabrication. This means that the whole nature of anything exceeds what we can know from particular human perspectives, leaving our knowledge-systems open to mystery and surprise. **A.H.**





Philosophy, like medicine, has plenty of drugs, few good remedies, and hardly any specific cures.

NICOLAS CHAMFORT (FRANCE, 1741-1794), *Maximes et Pensées*

The 'medicine' that philosophy offers to cure the superficial chatter of everyday life is a dangerous mix of poison and cure, whose effect goes either way. Philosophy can give you a poisonous sting that leaves you staggering in perplexity over taken-for-granted conventions. This confusion arouses your curiosity and liberates you from conventional constraints, making possible the kind of critical thinking that leads to improvements. But, since philosophy acts by paralysing powerful moral constraints, it is also perilous. Its 'cure', the passionate, transgressive daring that empowers you to think and act for the good, is also just what makes wickedness possible. **A.H.**

Only that in you which is me can hear what I'm saying.

BABA RAM DASS (US, 1931)

We easily say 'I hear you' in conversation, or 'I get your meaning'. But genuine understanding wants more. In saying you understand, you show only that your 'ear' is intellectual. You may be concerned about me, or sympathetic, without really hearing me. Understanding happens only as empathy, when something in you *is* me. Imagine that I am a thief. Facing me, you just cannot understand how I could justify taking what is not mine. Then comes the shock realisation: you are doing the same thing, just a different version of it — say, those hours at work you spent surfing the net for fun. Something in you is a thief too: now you can understand me. Being a thief, of course, does not exhaust all the possibilities of being me or being you. Beyond this partial identification, there may be nothing else in you that is me. You always only hear me partially. **A.H.**

Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.
After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.

ZEN BUDDHIST PROVERB

The moment of enlightenment is described variously by the world's different sages, except in one respect. On all accounts, you could say, it feels just like falling in love: nothing about your everyday tasks and needs actually changes, yet everything is different. The same apple is sweeter, the same sorrows are sharper, and the same old tasks lose their tedium. What makes the difference? It has to do with bringing a state of mind to your everyday life and work in which, as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger says, you do not forget that you should be astonished by the wonder (not just the beauty and joy, but also the anguish) to be found in even the most mundane tasks. But enlightenment must move beyond a state of mind to become a state of being. Achieving insight into how you should be is useless without the courage to actually be this in practice. **A.H.**



If you think you're free, there's
no escape possible.

BABA RAM DASS (US, 1931–)

Here's the paradox: French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre insists that humans are doomed to be free. If you mistakenly think you're not free, no escape is possible. How so? Well, you succumb to the prison of 'learnt helplessness', since your cynicism about the possibility of freedom removes your drive to escape. It is only if you think you're free that escape becomes possible. Baba Ram Dass argues the opposite. But what does he mean? If you mistakenly believe you are free, that you have escaped all imprisoning constraints, you just place yourself in a maximum security prison. No prison is harder to escape from than the delusion of freedom, since you don't even see the chains that bind you and have no reason to think of escaping. It is only if you think you are not free, that escape becomes possible.

A.H.



The virtue of the gentleman is like wind; the virtue of the small man is like grass. Let the wind blow over the grass and it is sure to bend.

CONFUCIUS (China, 551-479BC)

This reflects Confucius' teaching concerning the relationship between leaders and followers. As imperceptible as wind, leadership is only ever seen as an effect on the grass. Commanding others by compulsion and punishment (heavy winds) will ensure outward conformity (bent grass) because people fear punishment. Yet this is not true leadership. By contrast, the best leadership is a relationship of imperceptible influence on others and harmonious resonance, rather than forceful imposition. Those who do develop this kind of leadership power never try to become leaders. They do not consciously cultivate leadership skills, and neither do they ever try to impose their will on others, however good their intentions might be. Instead, they concentrate on cultivating internal, personal virtues. Then, according to a resonance that can't really be explained rationally, others tend to imitate such virtue, just as grass follows the direction of the invisible wind. **A.H.**



The foot feels the foot when it feels the ground.

BUDDHA (SIDDHARTHA GAUTAMA)

(India, circa 563-483BC)

The Greek term *areté* (excellence) means that things best become what they are supposed to be when performing their proper function. A foot does not do this when it sails through the air, but when it steps on firm ground. It is only in the relation between foot and ground that the foot first becomes itself. In turn, the fullest development of *areté* for the foot only occurs when it steps on good ground. By analogy, you come into your own as the human you are supposed to be only in relation to others (things and people). This means you can only come into your own in a favourable physical and social environment. For example, you cannot become the pianist you are supposed to be in a culture that deplors western music and burns pianos in bonfires. This places a shared responsibility for human excellence on all of us. **A.H.**

The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth.

NIELS BOHR (Denmark, 1885–1962)

There are clear rules, of adequate evidence and logical validity, to distinguish between correct and false statements. But concerning truth, something peculiar happens. Stephen Hawking commented that the history of science traces our gradual awakening to the profound truth that there is an underlying order in the universe. Yet he also resists Einstein's famous claim that 'God does not play dice'. Instead, he says, God is quite evidently 'an inveterate gambler, who throws the dice on every possible occasion'. He finds it profoundly true that the universe keeps surprising us by an underlying element of chaos. We can only understand this quirky situation, in which the opposite of one profound truth is another, by accepting that the human condition is best described as a paradoxical state. Concerning profound truth, we are in over our heads: we cannot ultimately decide between cosmic order and chaotic chance. **A.H.**

Our greatest pretences are built up not to hide the evil and the ugly in us, but our emptiness. The hardest thing to hide is something that is not there.

ERIC HOFFER (US, 1902–1983), *The Passionate State of Mind*

The great human pretence is the facade of bustling activity (things to do, people to see, interests, events, worries, chatter) that we throw over our fear of abyssal nothingness. We don't fear nothingness for nothing. Something dreadful happens when everything you value dissolves, loses meaning, and you find yourself spinning without a compass, unable to act in an empty world, arid in heart and soul. Facing the barrenness of what once seemed vital, suspecting that present concerns are equally fragile, death would give welcome release. We would even settle for evil and ugliness to hide the terror of nothingness. But nothingness is hard to hide, and to hide from. **A.H.**



Genuine tragedies in the world are not conflicts between right and wrong. They are conflicts between two rights.

GEORG HEGEL (Germany, 1770–1831)

Consider land claims. You could define 'land' as a commodity to be owned and traded. You could just as easily call 'land' a sacred cradle for ancestral spirits. These definitions derive from opposing sources of authority. Who has the final right to define what land is? The answer becomes important in a conflict, between capitalist developers and an indigenous community, for instance. The tragedy is that there is no ultimate right and wrong here, only two rights. Both authorities have legitimacy but there is no hope of satisfying both simultaneously. Since neither party can recognise the other's authority, the right to define is decided through power, not authority. This can be overcome if both parties recognise the groundlessness of their own source of authority. That recognition is the condition for inventing new, shareable, definitions. **A.H.**



Nothing encourages creativity like the chance to fall flat on one's face.

JAMES D FINLEY (1917–2003???)

It's peculiar that while facing a potentially global environmental disaster — the greatest risk ever of falling flat on our faces — our creative response has been sluggish at best. Not only have we done too little too late, but instead we pour energy into denial and delay strategies. The real threat of impending doom leaves us paralysed by disbelief. Ironically, the risk posed by other humanly fabricated disasters, like wars, engenders far more creativity. Somehow ingenuity flourishes when the potential catastrophe involves an imagined ideological enemy. Just think of the creative and ingenious engineering feats that are performed when there is any threat of war with another nation. But what if South Africa had invested vast sums in creative strategies to harness renewable energy, instead of a submarine? **A.H.**



It is the eye of ignorance that assigns a fixed and unchangeable colour to every object; beware of this stumbling block.

PAUL GAUGUIN (FRANCE, 1848-1903)

Stereotypes are convenient; they assign fixed meanings to objects and this consistency aids efficiency, making it difficult to do without them. But they harbour serious dangers. Stereotypically, underground subway stations are transit zones; harried gaps between places of meaning or beauty. One violinist, who played during rush hour in the Washington DC metro, demonstrated how easily stereotyped knowledge becomes a stumbling block. Of the thousands that passed by, only a handful slowed, stopped briefly, or gave him money before hurrying on. Nobody applauded. Tellingly, only the children, pushed and tugged on by parents, paid attention. This incognito violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the world's greatest musicians. Participating in a perception experiment, he played music famed for its complexity and intricacy on a 3,5 million dollar violin. What more are we missing due to stereotyping? **A.H.**

Winter





Every man bears the whole form of the human condition.

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE (FRANCE, 1533-1592)

The highly individual project of gaining self-knowledge results in the realisation that we are all the same. We share in the human condition, and learning about ourselves therefore connects us to others. In the privacy of our honest and probing self-reflections, and if we are careful to avoid self-deception and comforting illusions, we discover the facts of human nature and existence common to all. In this shared condition we can take comfort: we are not alone. Others have suffered as we do, others have found happiness and meaning within just this condition; we do not live alone, and neither then do we die alone. **SAMANTHA VICE**

To change your mind and defer to correction is not to sacrifice your independence; for such an act is your own, in pursuance of your own impulse, your own judgement, and your own thinking.

MARCUS AURELIUS (ROME, 121-180)

We are often uncomfortable with accepting correction or advice from others, feeling that to do so would be to give up our autonomy or mistrust our own instincts. Changing our minds or admitting a mistake is seen as a sign of weakness. However, if we care about self-improvement and the pursuit of truth, changing our minds can rather be a sign of intellectual strength and independence: We show that we are no slave to error, that we do not take our vanity and insecurity to be more important than getting things right. In the light of values that we have thoughtfully chosen and made our own, we can adjust our opinions and admit our errors. The impulse to remain true to our values, the ability to correct ourselves, and the courage to diverge from comfortable paths comes from the best part of ourselves — our power of rational thought. **S.V.**

Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.

SUSAN WOLF (US, 1952)

Our lives are meaningful when two different dimensions of value meet. The first is personal satisfaction. A meaningful life gives us pleasure or makes us happy. At the same time, however, we do not wish to enjoy just anything and we do not think that a life filled with just any kind of pleasure is meaningful. Lives that gain pleasure from only trivial or harmful pursuits, for example, lack meaning. So the second dimension of value is that of objective value. A meaningful life will be one in which we take pleasure in, and are fulfilled by, things that really are attractive and worthwhile, rather than things we simply crave or mistakenly value. The quest for meaning therefore requires that we discover what is really valuable, and then, if necessary, change ourselves so that we are able to take pleasure in just those things. **S.V.**



... at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. ... The moral life ... is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices.

IRIS MURDOCH (UK, 1919-1999)

Our choices and actions say something about the kind of people we are. We construct ourselves through our daily activities and thoughts, and so a project of making ourselves better must go on at every moment of the day. Every small choice we make, every way we choose to interpret a situation or to see and respond to another person, contributes to the creation of the self. And then, if we have made ourselves a certain way, when we are faced with challenges or difficult decisions we will act in a way that is a reflection of that self — the choice is already made for us. If we are good, our actions cannot be bad. So truly changing our lives requires an ongoing effort to change our inner selves, a task that cannot be carried out in odd moments of rest from the practical business of living, but must rather imbue every aspect of our existence. **S.V.**



Death does not always mark the boundary of a person's life as an end that stands outside it; sometimes it is a part of that life, continuing its narrative story in some significant way.

ROBERT NOZICK (US, 1938–2002)

Death can complete a life in the same way that a satisfying ending completes a story. The ending has a significance that extends backwards — it retrospectively gives meaning to the beginning of the story, to its development and to our interpretation of events and characters. Some endings are therefore satisfying culminations of a story, fulfilling its potential, unveiling its hidden dimensions, and giving it a pleasing unity and point: the ending can feel just right. Similarly, the way we die can say something about the way we have lived. We should therefore consider our deaths in the context of our lives and, as far as it is in our power, strive to make them reflective of who we are. We can view ourselves as the heroes of our own stories and reflect on how we wish the story of our lives to be told — to ourselves and others. **S.V.**



The unexamined life is not worth living.

SOCRATES (Greece, 469–399BC)

To be human is to be reflective, to be able not only to live but to think deeply about how to live. When we examine our lives we are led to reflect on what we value and whether it is in fact worthy of being valued. As we wonder about the way our lives are going, about what we spend time on, who we spend time with, what the quality of our interaction with the world is, so we are led on more deeply to question what is fundamentally important and whether our lives are oriented towards this. Self-reflection therefore becomes a deepening engagement with the world around us. A complacent or ignorant life is a life that denies a defining feature of the kind of creatures we are; we make ourselves less than we could be and so live less valuably. **S.V.**

We have lived quite enough for others: let us live at least this tail-end of life for ourselves. Let us bring our thoughts and reflections back to ourselves and to our own wellbeing. ... The greatest thing in the world is to know how to live to yourself.

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE (France, 1533-1592)

Concern for others is proper and praiseworthy, and a necessary part of living a good life. We may have built a meaningful life on caring for family, friends and colleagues. But our lives can become too filled with the demands of others and we must not forget to be concerned with ourselves, to pay attention to our own wellbeing and improvement. This is a difficult task, one that requires maturity, courage and persistence. It is difficult to know ourselves, and difficult to take responsibility for the selves that we discover through the long process of self-reflection. Now, in our maturity, after a life lived within the clamour of other voices, we must find a place of quiet and return our attention to ourselves. **S.V.**



We care about more than just how things feel to us from the inside; there is more to life than feeling happy. We care about what is actually the case.

ROBERT NOZICK (US, 1938-2002)

Imagine you could plug into a machine that would give you all the pleasurable experiences you desire. But you wouldn't trade your present life for a life that is permanently 'plugged in'. However wonderful the experiences of achievement, variety or excitement could be, we want not only to experience, but to be actually doing what we are experiencing. We want to have written a novel, climbed a mountain, run a race, brought up a child - not merely to have the experience of having done so. However valuable pleasurable experiences are, a good life also requires that they be *our* achievements, and that they track reality and thus connect to our world. This means that a life of only pleasure, or a happy but deceived life, cannot be a good life. Feeling good is valuable, but it is not all that matters; we want to live lives that are real. **S.V.**

Beauty is life-saving.... Beauty quickens. It adrenalises. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living.

ELAINE SCARRY (US, 1946)

In the presence of beauty — of a person, of nature, of art, of objects — we are overwhelmed by an experience that makes us forget ourselves. We are for a moment oblivious of our troubles and disappointments, we can forget the overwhelming presence of evil in the world, and we can be completely taken over by an immediate and pure pleasure. We come away refreshed and strengthened, ready to meet the demanding world again with renewed optimism. For we know that it is possible for the world to be perfect, for evil to have no grip on us. Beauty is a reminder of perfection, and so a call to make ourselves and our world better. **S.V.**



Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice. It is selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues.

IRIS MURDOCH (UK, 1919-1999)

Because the quality of our inner selves so often colours our interactions with the world, we need to purify ourselves of selfishness and fantasy if we are to see the world correctly. In the truly humble person, the egotism and greed that characterise so much of our living are absent. She has a direct and unclouded vision of the way the world really is; she does not get in the way. Her selflessness allows her to see others as they really are, in a spirit of love and justice. Because we are so naturally aware of ourselves and so obviously not perfect, humility is the most difficult character trait to achieve. And because we cannot care about others and the world beyond ourselves if we are too caught up in our own concerns, humility is necessary for morality. **S.V.**



To refrain from imitation is the best revenge.

MARCUS AURELIUS (Rome, 121–180)

When someone has wronged or angered us, their wrong can fill our minds and infect our days. We cannot forget it and feel that something must be done; sometimes we try actively to harm or frustrate them in return. But if we react in this way we are giving that person power over us; in particular, the power to make ourselves worse than we were. It is more virtuous, as well as psychologically healthier, to ensure that we never do as they do, that we never imitate them in any way. In this way we are active in improving, rather than harming, ourselves, and our adversary is denied the satisfaction of seeing their actions or words influence us in the very way they had hoped for. **S.V.**

Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it.

ANDRE GIDE (France, 1869–1951)

Certainty can be dangerous. It closes down the curiosity that leads us to new exploration and knowledge. It closes down our receptivity to the world and it can lead us to impose our own, perhaps false, beliefs on others. Living in doubt, while often bringing insecurity, is at least honest: it admits that we are not perfect, that we can get things wrong, that we are not omniscient. We should all be seekers after the truth, and try always to improve our opinions by considering new evidence, re-evaluating old reasons, trying out new thoughts. Because we have so many strategies of avoiding the truth, of believing things because they are comforting, and of ignoring evidence that would destabilise our cherished beliefs, we should always be wary of saying we know the truth with any certainty. **S.V.**

A self exists only within ... 'webs of interlocation'.

CHARLES TAYLOR (Canada, 1931)

Who we are is not our achievement alone. We become the person we are in relation to other people and the cultural practices in which we grow up; they give us the languages with which we define and understand ourselves. We therefore become who we are, and who we will be in the future, through conversations with others. These needn't always be comfortable or friendly; the languages we have been given need not be ones we approve of. Our conversations with our defining interlocutors can be resentful or respectful, antagonistic or loving, but even when we try to escape from the influences that shape us, we are still doing so against the framework they provide for us. To be a person is to live within an echoing network of conversations. **S.V.**

Spring



A person's ideals are concerns that he cannot bring himself to betray. They entail constraints that, for him, it is unthinkable to violate. Suppose that someone has no ideals at all. In that case, nothing is unthinkable for him; there are no limits to what he might be willing to do.

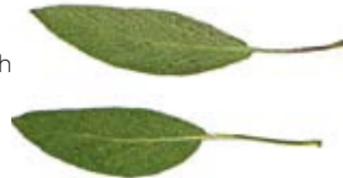
HARRY FRANKFURT (US, 1929)

We often resent and chaff against constraints. But there is one kind of constraint that we need if we are to live with integrity — the fundamental kind of value that we call 'ideals'. Our ideals place limits on us: they prevent us doing certain actions, they ensure that we feel a chastening shame if we do, and they place some actions beyond what is even conceivable for us. These constraints give us identity and definition, and provide our lives with meaning. If we remain true to them, we have a guide for our lives, and we become reliable and constant. Others know where they stand with us, and we know what we stand for and what we can expect of ourselves. In respect to our ideals we are not free, but to be free in this realm would be to lose our identity and integrity. **S.V.**

We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd.

THOMAS NAGEL (US, 1937)

To be human is to live always from two perspectives. The first is the perspective of engagement. We take up projects and care deeply for their success, we care for ourselves and for people who are special to us. The way we live, and that we live at all, matters to us. All of this we do and must do. And yet, at the same time, we can also critically reflect on our lives, take a step back and see ourselves and what we care about from a distance. From this second, objective point of view, we are of no more importance than the next person. Neither perspective can be escaped and it is their irreconcilable presence that makes our lives absurd. To be human is to learn to live from both perspectives at once, to be immersed in our lives and yet be humble enough to know our insignificance. **S.V.**



Love is knowledge of the individual.

IRIS MURDOCH (UK, 1919–1999)

To love someone is to know them intimately. But really knowing someone is a long and arduous task, because people are complex and always changing. We need to know their situation, their history, how they became the way they are. We are pushed ever into the direction of minute particularity. We also change in our pursuit of knowledge. As we learn more about the world and about others, as we develop our intellectual and emotional resources, and as we learn to really see people, we are changed and grow ourselves. And so we come to the people in our lives in ever-changing ways, from different perspectives, with different ways of understanding. **S.V.**



It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.

JOHN STUART MILL (UK, 1806–1873)

Humans have capacities for intellectual thought, curiosity and complex emotional engagement, not only for simple or instinctive experience. Some pleasures are therefore more valuable to us than others, even when they are accompanied by the special disappointments and difficulties that our natures also make possible. We find pleasure in the fruits of frustration and hard work. In fact, we gain greater pleasure the greater the challenge. We find satisfaction in being active rather than passive, in using all our capacities — mental, physical and emotional — to their fullest. We would not trade this complex life for the pleasures of a life of ease. However great in quantity such pleasures, the pleasures of human life, with all its frustrations and disappointments taken into account, are of greater quality. To give these up for the life of a happy fool is to give up living a fully human life. **S.V.**



The meaning of life is from within us. It is not bestowed from without, and it far exceeds in both its beauty and permanence any heaven of which men have ever dreamt or yearned for.

RICHARD TAYLOR (America, 1919–2003)

We might think that an independent power or order is necessary to bestow meaning on our lives, and that if there is nothing beyond the human realm, there is nothing from which human life can derive meaning. We may believe without God, or fate, or 'spirit', or the idea of a happy afterlife, there is no purpose to our earthly strivings, our lives and our deaths. However, we are mistaken in yearning for some transcendent source of meaning, for we can make meaning for ourselves, from within human life, and without a transcendent realm. By raising a family, pursuing a satisfying career, caring for friends, creating beautiful or useful objects, we make our lives meaningful. And it is not in the products of this activity that meaning lies, but in the doing, the pursuing, the creating itself. **S.V.**

Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour and moral courage it contained.

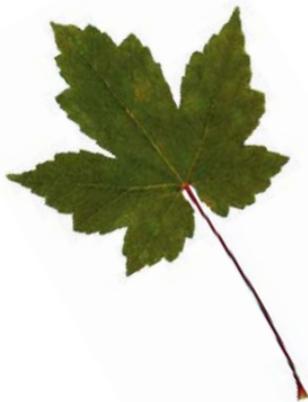
JOHN STUART MILL (Britain, 1806–1873)

Everyone should be allowed to live as they see fit, provided they don't harm others. Personal autonomy and the freedom to pursue one's own view of 'the good life' is a fundamental value, to be protected even when it is pursued in idiosyncratic ways, or if it fits uncomfortably with our established customs and beliefs. It takes courage and energy to follow one's own path in the face of ridicule or contempt, and these are just the qualities that societies need in order to renew themselves and remain vital. If no one tried out new ways of living and thinking, society would soon stagnate, there would be no more progress, no innovation, no refreshing originality. And it is often from eccentrics that new theories arise that may take us closer to knowledge. We should encourage and value those who pursue their own paths — from them, things of value might arise for all of us. **S.V.**

The weakest of all weak things is a virtue that has not been tested in the fire.

MARK TWAIN (America, 1835–1910)

It is very easy to think of ourselves as virtuous. For the most part, we go through our lives obeying the moral rules we have been taught — we don't murder or steal and we aren't gratuitously cruel. When we live comfortable lives in which our basic needs are met it is easy to obey these rules. But the test of whether we are really good is whether we can still do as we ought to in the face of hardship or temptation. When our interests are at stake, do we lie or cheat? When we are faced with unfriendly persuasion or threats, do we maintain our integrity and stand by what we believe in? Our virtue might turn out to be very weak indeed. Only when tested can we know our real characters, and know that our actions stem from our steady character, rather than lucky and comfortable circumstances. **S.V.**



If man makes himself a worm he must not complain when he is trodden on.

IMMANUEL KANT (Germany, 1724–1805)

We have duties to ourselves as much as to others, and one such duty is that of self-respect: to maintain the dignity that is our due as rational human beings. The way we conduct and carry ourselves, and the quality of our interactions, signals to others what kind of treatment we expect from them as our right. If we consider ourselves to be unworthy of respectful treatment, and do not complain or stand up for ourselves when we are treated in a demeaning way, we are failing in our duties to ourselves. And when our behaviour shows that we consider ourselves contemptible or lacking in dignity, we cannot then justifiably complain if others treat us disdainfully. It is our own responsibility not to behave in ways that invite demeaning treatment from others. **S.V.**

One should opt for what is difficult. It is good to be alone, because solitude is difficult. It is also good to love, because love is difficult.

RAINER MARIA RILKE (Germany, 1875–1926)

This poet believes challenge and danger bring out the best in us, even though it may be easier to surrender and avoid conflict. To retain our balance in life amid all sorts of contrary influences is a continuing struggle. To maintain our character in the face of regular onslaughts is sometimes near impossible. Still, to grow and flourish without some degree of discomfort is simply not the way nature intended us to live. **TOBIAS LOUW**



Of all the gifts that wisdom grants us for living happily, the greatest, by far, is friendship.

EPICURIUS (Greece, 341–270BC)

According to the spirit of his time, Epicurius devoted his energies to addressing the issue of human happiness. He proposed that finding happiness entails building an intellectual world of our own. In his opinion, this meant avoiding worldly honours and trophies, focusing instead on serene detachment and creating a balanced and noble mind. This ancient Greek is reported to have said that it is better to be rational and unhappy than to be irrational and happy. Importantly, although many of his followers were hermits, they revered friendship as one of the highest pleasures. Friendship forms the basis of happiness and removes the threat of loneliness. **T.L.**

The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.

GEORG HEGEL (Germany, 1770–1831)

Minerva is the ancient goddess of wisdom and this fragment is one of the most classic images of philosophy. At the time of writing it, Hegel felt a darkness was falling — that old philosophy had nothing new to offer a world that was waking up to the Industrial Revolution. He felt we needed a fresh approach. To the ordinary eye, early evening tends to blur borders as common objects lose their obvious meaning. When darkness falls, normal sight is of no use and the superior sight of the owl is needed. What Hegel was implying was that, in order to account for the meaning of this new, industrialised world, the philosopher needed to look anew and show the way. Change is expressed by the image of the rapid darkening characteristic of early evening and impending darkness. Conventional wisdoms are challenged and the hunter's ability to see in the darkness is recognised as a crucial advantage. **T.L.**



The expression most fragrant with the scent of life ... is ... the word 'incitement'.

JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET (Spain, 1883–1955)

Incitement has no role in physics and natural science, which is guided by the principle of cause and effect (for example, a ball will move a certain distance depending on the force applied). However, this Spanish author uses the word 'incitement' to explain his understanding of life as a 'deluge of overwhelming possibilities'. Away from the physics books, there is a disproportionate relationship between cause and effect, he tells us. Consider the trained thoroughbred that explodes into a gallop by the slightest touch of a spur, or the crowd that rises to its feet when a celebrity walks on stage. The author is highlighting the fact that in life, an effect is often much greater than the actual physical force applied. **T.L.**

To know what questions may reasonably be asked is already a great and necessary proof of sagacity and insight.

IMMANUEL KANT (Germany, 1724-1804)

What is truth? Can we know the ultimate truth? And if we claim to, how can we know for sure? Kant suggests that the best starting point is to determine whether something is meaningful or not. This starts by investigating the questions presupposed by any kind of statement. Why? Because, according to Kant, an 'absurd question may call for an answer where none is required'. Such a question will embarrass the questioner and worse, mislead an uncritical listener into producing an equally ridiculous answer. Kant cautions against this situation. **T.L.**

Summer



So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great.

JOB 2:13, THE BIBLE

Four friends together in such desperate straits, and they don't say a word? One imagines they're each desperately trying to find something appropriate to say, but can't come up with anything that isn't trivial or cruel. Rather, it's a silence in which the friends share Job's truly unspeakable grief. If someone close to you is in distress, by all means do what you can to alleviate it. But when there's nothing to be done, no sense to be made and nothing to be said, sometimes the best you can do is just sit together, even on the ground. And if you're the one who is suffering, may you have such friends who can bear to sit silently with you and be still with everything that hurts. **HELEN DOUGLAS**



Anyone who does not get angry when there is reason to be angry, or does not get angry in the right way at the right time and with the right people, is a dolt.

ARISTOTLE (Greece, 384–322BC)

We are often pretty doltish (or worse) with anger, but giving it up entirely isn't the solution. We need to think about how we can be skilful with the power of anger. Aristotle's words are instructive. First, you need a proper cause. Is anger appropriate when you have been inconvenienced, when the world doesn't behave in the way you'd like it to, when you feel insulted? Maybe. Maybe not. This is the kind of judgement that calls for — and develops — maturity. If you do have good reason to be angry, then how can you express it effectively to bring about the change that is demanded? Anger is a wild and dangerous creature. Do you ride it, or is it riding you? Once, someone I cared about was terribly angry with me. It felt devastating, but, perhaps because it obviously cost him something as well, it strengthened rather than endangered our connectedness, and served to wake me up to a serious wrong I had carelessly and thoughtlessly done. What a surprise when anger comes as a gift. **H.D.**

Never stay up on the barren heights of cleverness, but come down into the green valleys of silliness.

LUDWIG WITGENSTEIN (Austria, 1889–1951)

Clever thoughts grow barren when they lose touch with the ground of experience. We can sense it. The atmosphere gets very rarefied, thin and lonely up there. Such intellectual flight may be prodigious and dazzling, but it is really just a soap bubble. Nothing comes from it. We must be grateful for whatever pops that bubble in a friendly way — the essence of silliness — so that we may come to our senses again in the green, coursing exuberance of real life. **H.D.**



This above all: to thine own self be true/
And it must follow, as the night the day/
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (UK, 1564–1616)

So says Polonius to his son Laertes in *Hamlet's* first act. At one level, this is about personal autonomy: don't follow the crowd or be dictated to by other people's expectations. Be faithful to your own experience and values. But at a more subtle level, this is advice for those times we feel torn or at odds with ourselves, when we feel a gap between how we are living and how we ideally should and could be. This consciousness — our conscience — may not be a pleasant feeling, but it is a true guide, a lodestar. To be 'true' to ourselves in this sense is to be properly aligned or aimed. When we learn to navigate by this inner sense of right (a learning, by the way, that really does not entail bashing ourselves over the head when we go astray), we become true to our own selves. And, as night follows day, we also become less false in our relationships with others. **H.D.**



Love, and do as you will.

ST AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (North Africa, 354–430)

What do you do when you don't know what to do? When you're up the proverbial creek and all your standard rules to live by have packed up and deserted you, these kind and beautiful words remain helpful. First, orient yourself. Love. Open your tender heart to the entire dreadful situation, yourself in it, and all the others with you. This can hurt, of course, with all the pain of a heart breaking open. Be brave, and be of good cheer. And then, keeping your heart open and available, do as you will. This takes practise, and mistakes can be made, but to act according to a will that is guided by love leads to few regrets and generally allows things to work out for the best. **H.D.**

We have been capable, and must constantly be more so, of thinking deeply about our problems so as to be able to act correctly, to act strongly so as to be able to think more correctly.

AMÍLCAR CABRAL (Guinea-Bissau, 1924–1973)

Thinking and doing are plaited together in a life, and thrive best when they are in proper balance. People often complain that they think 'too much'. What's usually happening is either they're thinking too much for the comfort of the people around them — in which case, they should be encouraged to carry on — or they're thinking unproductively, whether overthinking themselves to a standstill or swooping through the same territory over and over with nothing being resolved. The escape from this is to act. Don't stalemate yourself. Take a chance. Thinking deeply, act as strongly as you can. Even if this is to keep still or withdraw, you can be deliberate and awake in it. **H.D.**

There are two or three things I know for sure.
But they're not always the same things – and I'm
not always so sure.

DOROTHY ALLISON (US, 1949)

The way we carry our knowledge is important, particularly when living in such uncertain and insecure times. When you're standing on the edge of a cliff and feel the ground crumble beneath you, your instinct may be to hang on for dear life to anything that seems rooted enough to keep you from sliding away. But if we hold too tightly and fearfully to what we believe, we become dogmatic and rigid, unable to live the life we meant to save. At the same time, to hold too loosely to what we know is just as mistaken. Whether cynical, nihilist, relativist or ironic, dogmatic disbelief comes across as insincere, irresponsible or just ungrateful. Allison's words strike a nice balance, and it's not incidental that she gets there with humour. At any given moment, we can know enough, with enough certainty, to move forward. We needn't worry that what we know and our confidence in it changes over time. It might even mean we're gaining in wisdom, even as we know (for sure!) that we've still got a way to go. **H.D.**



If we pass on our suffering to others, it
becomes 'evil'. The saints are eaters of
suffering; they consume it, transform it, and
use it for the creation of being.

CS NOTT (UK, 1887–1978)

Our first instinctive response to suffering is likely to be repulsion: 'Ugh! I don't want this, get it off!' And then we hurl it (or we try to) onto someone nearby — a stranger or somebody we love. What began as suffering now becomes an 'evil'. In Nott's term, a 'moral wrong'. Should we just keep it to ourselves then? That can also go wrong. On one hand, by bearing our suffering stoically, we may prolong it. Who will know to come to our aid? On the other, we could get caught up in a false drama of martyrdom, which is just a sneaky way of again passing our misery to others. Or we can let the 'saints' inspire us. What a marvellous image Nott gives us: not just to endure, but to eat one's own suffering, to consume it like a fire burns up wood. And in the process to transform it, to change its vile nature into the very stuff of life. **H.D.**

You cannot manipulate things without manipulating persons. We have to create the time to love persons. All failures of civilisation are erotic failures.

MARTHINUS VERSFELD (South Africa, 1909-1995)

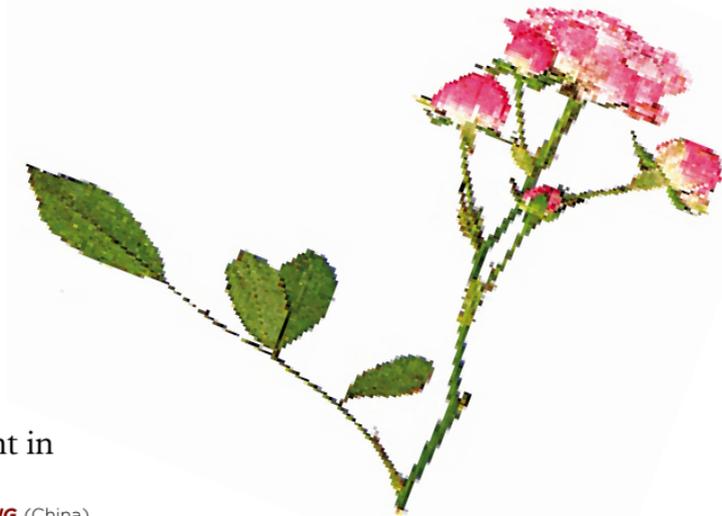
When time is short and needs are pressing — whether at a sociopolitical or personal level — we like to turn to technology. We want to fix things as rapidly and efficiently as we can. Unfortunately, this tends to be one of those good intentions that pave the way to hell. Human beings and our institutions are not machines. We can't simply be updated with the latest version from Microsoft. We won't be moulded and manipulated to order, and trying to do so is just wrong. To cite Immanuel Kant's first principle of ethics: it treats people as means rather than ends in themselves. On top of that, it rarely works. Technology can indeed improve the quality of our lives, but we should remember that it is secondary, a means and not an end in itself, derived from our concern for persons and their wellbeing. In other words, from love. In this sense, our social and personal 'technological' failures are first of all the result of our failure to make time to know and be with each other. **H.D.**

Philosophy poses the question: what should we do to have the best possible lives? I'm afraid we haven't made much progress in arriving at an answer to this question.

JACQUES DERRIDA (France, 1930-2004)



Philosophy's question is a good one — one of the best — but we have to imagine Derrida smiling when he makes this apology, because there is such pleasure in the everlasting pursuit of an answer. Some days, understanding may rest beguilingly within our grasp. Other days, we're lost in some trackless desolate plain waiting for a way to open and allow us to go on. In our quest, for such it is, we develop patience and courage, humility and faith. We encounter the rich resources of the world, of history, of ourselves and each other. We learn how to see and how to move, discovering ourselves in intricate tangles of responsiveness and responsibility. In its inability (so far) to arrive, philosophy's question keeps us on edge; restless, vigilant and vital. **H.D.**



To strengthen what is right in
a fool is a holy task.

I CHING (China)

This line comes from a commentary on youthful folly, the obtuseness that comes with inexperience. How do we respond to fools? (This includes the one in the mirror.) Scornfulness comes easily, but that just feeds a nasty arrogance in us and doesn't do the fool much good either. It's better to meet fools with compassion and curiosity, to see how we can help 'strengthen what is right' in them. (Equally, there's no point in chasing after fools. The fool in need of instruction should first approach the teacher with a good attitude.) Any situation in which someone has to ask another for help is fraught with the possibility of humiliation. It needs to be navigated with a certain degree of grace, which lends the vocation of teaching its sense of good work, right livelihood or 'holiness'. **H.D.**

The thousand mysteries around
us would not trouble but interest
us, if only we had cheerful,
healthy hearts.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE (Germany, 1844-1900)

When we strive to understand the world, our findings are directly affected by the attitude of our approach. A miserable heart has a narrow gaze, concerned only with what may threaten it. When we are sick at heart, the mysteries of the world suffocate us with the weight of an infinite feather mattress. If only our hearts were cheerful and healthy! But that desire points precisely to one of the world's better mysteries: that it is the heart's nature to be healthy and cheerful. Nietzsche (who is not remembered as a happy guy) seems to suggest that what troubles us is caused by a point of view we need not adopt. Of course, we each need to test this for ourselves, but there is an avenue here to the possibility of a freer and more spacious way of life. **H.D.**



The greatest of all human pleasures is to seek truth in conversation.

ALBERTUS MAGNUS (Germany, 1193/1206–1280)

We live our lives in language, because we are social creatures. Making sense and seeking truth is always a bridge between oneself and others, between me and you. We tell each other how things are, documenting our experiences with the words we share, and testing the words against our experience. Where there is a gap between us, we stretch to each other in conversation, from the Latin *con + versa* ('to turn with'). We find ourselves in the words we speak, in our response to others and *their* words. We find ourselves in listening and being listened to. With each exchange, we discover our loneliness and fall just a little bit in love. Our differences need not be cause for hatred when they feed our common pursuit. On the contrary, without difference, what would there be to say, to be intrigued by and to argue about? **H.D.**

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