

# THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

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## RIVALRY

### 1 Herd purpose

Other people, who are not quite real to us, are the source of all our reality. I do my utmost to make my own life mean more than that of others, by trying to make it mean more to others. I am sure that their lives have worth only if they add to the worth of my own. And yet my own life has purpose only if it means something to them. So high and so low do I rank my own standing and that of my fellow beings.

Anything, however purposeless, seems worth doing so long as someone else is watching. And nothing, however purposeful, seems worth doing if no one is. And each of us knows what is worth watching. It must be whatever everyone else is watching.

We need meaning because we are gregarious or pack animals. Dogs have a very strong need for it. That's why they are so dependent on their keeper.

We are self-willed but not self-reliant. And we are self-conscious but not self-aware. I don't know what matters, but what matters to others is good enough for me.

## **2 Rivalry**

Our meaning is competitive. We don't need a meaning. We need a goal to strive for, and a rival to vie with. Life has all the importance of a futile but ferociously contentious game.

I don't much care what the purpose of life may be. But I do care if my own life appears to have less purpose than others'.

We don't want to get what we esteem. We esteem what others want to get, and then we try to get that.

I feel infinitely more diminished by the insignificant margin by which some close-by insignificant person might surpass me than I do by the infinite disparity between my own dim nothingness and the immensity of space spangled with all its suns. We measure our size and worth not by the scale of vast nebulae and constellations, but by the small huddle of people round us who will die so soon.

## **3 The ego is the measure of meaning**

Our horizons of time and space are fixed by our egoism and not by our awareness. We may think like philosophers whose souls float serenely above the fray. But we must feel and act like men and women, embroiled in a fierce daily tussle to keep our head up in this world. Copernicus and Darwin revealed to us how small we are, but to make us feel it was beyond them. We have not shrunk one inch in our own eyes since we found out that the cosmos is made up of billions of galaxies, and that we are just one transient and fortuitous form of life among millions.

Most of us are terrified not by the enormity of space, as Pascal said he was, but by the imperceptible interval by which others overtake us. We gaze up at the stars and know that we are nothing. But they are silent and far away, and everything that is close at hand shouts to us that we are all in all. It's not my own triviality that torments me, but the trivial comparisons I make with the trivial people who chance to be next to me.

## **4 The lives of others**

We see how vain the lives of others are, but we can't feel their anguish. And so we fail to grant their significance or to sympathize with them. And we feel our own griefs piercingly, but we can't see how vain our life is. So we deem that we are fraught but important. I'm certain that my own life streams with deep pain and rich sense, while others beam with joy but don't mean a thing. I care too languidly for them to wince at their pangs or to grasp how much their concerns count

for them. I have no idea what elation or unease they might feel, not because I lack self-forgetting imagination, but because I don't share their hungry perspective.

How could I see that such small nuisances or satisfactions look so large to them from up close, since my own sight is narrowed by the small nuisances and satisfactions that press so close round me? We can't guess how such a trivial cause could make others so happy or unhappy. And they can't see how trivial it is.

## **5 The sham of our success**

For most of us the meaning of life is the career of our egoism. And the sham of our success is the sole truth that we live for.

We all know what the meaning of life is, or we act as if we do. It is to get as much as we can into our own hands, and to leave as little as possible for our neighbours.

Few people feel a strong need to give a meaning to their lives beyond their own careers and pleasures. But the creeds tell them that they do and then supply them with a thin stopgap to fill it. Religion is a patched-up answer to a question which most of us fail to ask.

The gods were born to answer not some grand metaphysical need for meaning but our gross physical fears and greed. And if we do feel a personal need for God, it is because he serves as such a convenient vehicle for our real personal needs.

We know full well that the things people seek are a sham. But we still hate to see others get more of them than we do. The sole goods that we prize are those that we can compete to win more of than our rivals. We waste our lives hustling to grab the expensive fakes that everyone else has their eye on. However hollow we find the world, we still know it to be the one thing that can fill our hollow hearts.

We use up our lives in brutal rivalry and self-serving illusion. And we find peace and wisdom nowhere but in the grave. There we at last cease to care for all the phantoms that we chased through life. Wisdom, as Job said, is not in the land of the living.

## **6 The game matters because we are playing it**

When we win the game, most of us judge that the game must be worth playing. And many of us judge the same just by playing it. We don't do things because we know why they are worth doing. We know that they must be worth doing because we do them. Life jams our satchel with

junk. And we don't shuck it off, since we feel it weigh so heavily on us that it must be laden with gold. We make our meaning by exaggerating how indispensable we are.

We spend every effort to bring our schemes to realization, since we refuse to spend the one slight effort of assaying their true value. 'It is humanity's worst flaw,' Hebbel averred, 'to strive passionately for things before it finds out what they are worth.' But don't we reckon them so precious only because we strive so avidly for them? A purpose does not fill my eyes because it's so vast, it looks so vast because it fills my eyes. And it fills my eyes because it stands so close to me. We don't set our heart on a thing because we judge it good. We judge a thing good because we have set our heart on it.

For most of us the purpose of life, which we never lose our faith in, is whatever we plan to do next. It's always just in front of us, and it's still just out of our reach.

## **7 Our self is our meaning**

We fancy that we are gravely disillusioned by the world. But we are just disheartened that we have gained such a low place in it. What wrings my soul is not the doubt that life in the main might have no value, but the fear that it may have less value for me than it does for everyone else. Would it cause me such anguish, if I played a more prominent part in it? Yet we prize goods proportionate to the stake that we have in them. So if we are engaged less and achieve less, it's not we who seem to count for less but the world.

Though many of us query if life has a meaning, no one doubts that their own does. And the less life as a whole means, the more you have to cling to the one thing that seems to give it a meaning for you.

It's wonderful what a vast sum of value egoism adds to things. How the whole world is changed, when I add the small pronouns I and me to it. Nothing that happens to us would matter, if it were happening to someone else. Fiction tells of what matters immensely though it has happened to no one.

We are a morass of fortuities, set ways, happenstance, dry lusts and diminutive ardours, strange twists, kinks and vacancy. 'According to our meriting,' as Montaigne shows, 'we can never be despised enough.'

## **8 Our own vocation gives all life its meaning**

If it is the case that we make our own meaning, then a murderer makes meaning by murdering, and a torturer by torturing. A race commits genocide not as an outburst of unprompted barbarity, but to impose sense on the world by affirming its own kind.

We don't make our own meaning. We let others make it for us.

Most of us are sure that whatever lends meaning to our own life must be what lends meaning to the whole world. By some professional vanity we take it that everyone else aspires to the very thing that our own vocation vows to provide. So the philosopher feels sure that all the rest of us long for wisdom, and the priest that we thirst for faith, and the poet that we would starve from lack of poetry sooner than from lack of meat and drink. But we all grow more and more obese in this prosaic world. If we really died for want of truth or beauty, the world would have been unpeopled an age ago. But we are more likely to die from their possession.

How jealous we are of the honour of our own profession, most of whose other practitioners we feel an unqualified scorn for. And though we may not think much of the rest of the human race, we think a great deal of ourselves for belonging to it.

## **OUR NOTHINGNESS**

### **9 We are nothing**

What could be so easy as to be nothing, but what could be more insupportable than to know it? To recognize that you are nothing may cost you all that you have. And yet if we believed it for real, we would know that we had nothing that could be hurt.

Once you've come to see that you are nobody, what can you do but long for the day when you turn back to a sod? We have one hope left us, which is the end of all hope. I'm ground to powder under the cold stone of my nullity.

How could we see how empty we are? We are all so full of our own projects and importance.

It must be so easy for others to live or to die, but it's so hard for me to do either. My road is rugged but necessary, theirs is smooth but leads to a dead end.

Life rages like fire, and vanishes like smoke. Our years scud like the gusts of wind rustling through the trees. And there will soon be no trace that they once blew so high.

Life is a spume playing for an instant on unfathomed oceans of death. Like enchanted swimmers, we drown, and cease to feel the tumult of the years as they roll above our heads. 'A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday.'

It takes a special kind of pride to see that you are nothing. So it's a good thing for us that we have only the ordinary conceit that tells us that we are all in all.

## **10 Trying to be somebody**

We make life a touch worse than the nothing that it might be, since we spend it in the frantic striving to make ourselves a bit more than the nothing that we are.

What sad nobodies we are. And what a flat nothing we will make of the earth, in our vain quest to prove that we are not. We will go to any length to try to make something of our nothingness. And we don't doubt that everything does. We squander our vain existence to cram it with enviable vanities. And so we will crunch up the broad earth to add a gram to the weight of our own bustling importance. Those who have nothing will fight like tigers to keep hold of it.

Nothing is harder to conquer than the nothing that we are. We fight it all our lives, but it always wins in the end.

How do we bear the stress and strain of being nothing? By labouring at such a press of duties and desires, that we dream that we must be all in all.

We are stranded between the truth that we are nothing and the faith that we are everything. And the ingratiating faith duly drives out the heart-parching truth.

My insignificance is the one significant fact in the universe for me, and my own nothingness is everything to me. I have no doubt that it's easy for others to be nothing, since they mean nothing to me. But it's so hard for me to be nothing, since I am all in all to myself. On good days I know that I'm a failure. On bad days I think that my failure matters.

## **11 Being nobody is harder than being nothing**

Most of us are sure that we are somebody, and that we are like no one else. But in fact we are nobodies, and we are just like everyone else.

If the thought of my nonentity solaces me, it's because I know that those who seem to be more than me are nonentities too. We are content to be nobodies, so long as we seem to be worth a bit more than the nobodies whom we vie with. We can bear the knowledge that we are nothing,

so long as we are something to someone. And we don't mind that we might be objectively nothing, so long as we are not social nobodies. Though we may not care to be immortal, each of us still hopes to be a jot less mortal than the rest of our sad clay.

## **12 Finite to fail but infinite to venture**

Always seek that end which, if won, suffices, if unattained, ennobles. 'The aim,' wrote Browning, 'if reached not, makes great the life.' Most of us have failed before we've made a start, since we don't dare to dream of the high ventures that might justify our unsucccess. If you can't win, dedicate your days and hours to the one thing you know to be worth failing at. 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' It will waste your life, but what of that? It was not worth much in the first place. You might as well lavish it on some high cause as let it leak away on the trail of some mean gain. 'What we pay for with our lives,' Porchia says, 'never costs too much.'

What you love will strip you of all that you own, and leave you with no recourse but to love it more. We are done in by what we adore, which is all that keeps us alive.

Find the one thing that you do better than living, and spend your life doing that. Living is for those who have nothing better to do.

We pass our life's pilgrimage most pleasantly by fastening our eyes on a distant target and busying our hands with the daily task.

Human kind by its striving can degrade the grandest object or dignify the meanest one.

## **MEANS AND ENDS**

### **13 Our ends eat our life**

Life seems not worth living, if it lacks a goal to strive for. But once life has a goal, we cease to live it and use it as a mere means to reach that goal.

We lose sight of our goals. We fix our eyes on the means that we use to reach them or on the perquisites that we hope to reap from them.

The universe has found its purpose in fostering a form of life which has figured out that it has no purpose. And the end aimed at by mindless evolution seems to have been to rear up a species with a mind to put an end to it for good.

Purposes and projects can keep you company as well as people. But when they turn cold, they too will break your heart and leave you bereft.

## **14 Our means eat our ends**

Some ruthless people don't scruple to employ any means to reach a goal. And some are ready to degrade any goal by recruiting it to work for their own ends. How flippantly we disregard real goods, such as truth or honour, and how heartlessly we press them to fight for our own cause. Our sole end is our own self-interest. Everything else we use as an implement to serve this.

We have a prodigious capacity for confusing means and ends which is primed by all the force of nature and all the fraud of custom. We make use of most real goods as mere means to an end. And most ends are not worth all the pains that we take or cause to reach them. All our ends are by-ends. We hug our means, but dare not know or name our aims.

Where the goal is a worthy one, such as happiness or our salvation, we lose sight of it and glue our eyes to the low road that we have singled out to lead us to it. But where the journey is the thing, as in living, travelling, experience or learning, we streak through the passage and keep our minds fixed on its end.

We can't get up much ardour for an action unless it's leading to some goal. And yet we can keep our minds fixed on a goal only so long as we are involved in the process by which we hope to reach it. As soon as we get there we lose interest.

## **15 The madness in our method**

We plot meticulous strategies to carry through schemes which we took up without a thought. We keep on refining our neat procedures, while still neglecting the aims to which we have pledged our lives. And so we will at last puzzle out the best way to the worst end. 'Perfection of means and confusion of goals,' as Einstein said, 'seem to characterize our age.'

Our goals seem rational, since we scheme so ingeniously how to get to them. A minor functionary might say with grand ungodly godlike Ahab, 'All my means are sane, my motive and my object mad.' There is more madness in our method than method in our madness.

We persist in elevating illusions into ideals, and then we cling to such low habits that we fail to live up to them. We set a noble purpose to strive for, but then we map out a hundred byways which will lead us away from it. So we have to give a pretext for these by elaborating rubrics and protocols, magical spells and potions, mumbo-jumbo and observances, insisting that we can



reach it only by adhering to these. Some men aspire to emulate Tolstoy's grand example, and so they grow a beard and don a peasant smock.

## PURPOSE

### **16 We need the illusion of purpose**

How hard it is to walk the smoothest road, if you see no goal at the end of it. We have to trudge on and on, just because we have no object.

We need illusions if we are to have a hope of being happy. And the illusion that we need most of all is the illusion of purpose. We glut our hunger for meaning with the most unrefined fare. Any activity makes us feel that we have a goal. And any goal makes us feel that we have a worthy purpose. Because we need meanings, we also need lies. Most of our meanings we patch up out of our shared self-deceptions.

We stand in such pressing need of a goal, how could the one that we hit on be more than a sham that we shape to fill this need? Where we are egged on by a strong imperative, be it for love, truth or purpose, we will seek out some inane replacement to meet it. 'It is our usual custom,' as Swift says, 'to counterfeit and adulterate whatever is dear to us.'

The mind or soul that made this cosmos seems not to care much for mind or soul.

Our life depends on having something to do as if our life depended on it. Don't we all need some ample unavailing obsession, in order to hide from our own hollowness?

### **17 We live for purpose not pleasure**

Who of us could long stand the strain of ease and comfort? As Tocqueville wrote of citizens in democracy, 'Life would lose its savour, if they were freed of the anxieties which harass them, and they appear to cling to their cares more than aristocratic people do to their pleasures.'

If we didn't have some stern purpose to oppress us, how could we endure life's intolerable oppressiveness? If the gravity of our goals didn't hold us down, we would float off into empty space.

We think too superficially to grasp that we live for some end much deeper than enjoyment. Pleasure may be the bait that lures us, but purpose is the hook that holds us. From minute to minute we are led on by pleasure. But from day to day and from year to year we toil on the trail of our goals.

Enterprising people believe that they bear with their elected servitude in order to snatch a few gratifications. But they want to get these only to help them bear the servitude which is so dear to them. Those who think that they live for pleasure and not for purpose are like mules that suppose the owner who works them is there to feed them hay.

Most of us never find peace. The plain pleasures which we enjoy don't satisfy us. Yet we don't enjoy prosecuting the more serious career which we trust will meet all our needs.

The ecstasy of living distracts us from the emptiness of life.

## **18 Our purpose devours our life**

The meanest purpose looms large enough to eat up all my hours, and convince me that the world is worth sacrificing for it. If a cause seems worth consuming my life for, then I feel sure that it must be worth consuming the world for.

With what zeal and dedication we serve the emptiest cause.

The human race is an experiment to test if life is worth more than the living it. We need a purpose to thrust us on through life, since we see no point in the mere living it.

If living is the goal, we would do well to leave it to the animals, who live so much more beautifully than us.

We grow happy by striving for a goal that we won't reach. And why should we care how unhappy we make the people round us by our striving?

Deem a single purpose all in all, and you will soon deem the whole world nothing at all.

What dry stalks of purpose stoke the raging blaze of our meaning and importance. And we will incinerate the globe to keep it alight.

What makes life unendurable alone makes us endure it. We are harassed by the selfsame wants and hopes that we live for. And so we pay with our happiness to get what we deem we could not be happy if we lacked. Like moody Ahab, we are 'damned in the midst of paradise.' We long for peace, and we are all the time conducting this one last push to secure it, while we fight to fend off the death that will give it to us.

## **19 Diversion**

Our capacity for neglecting the essential is one of our most essential qualities.

You can tell the essential. It is the one thing that all are busy neglecting for their own sport or profit, as the great books are the few that no one wants to read. Isn't the life that none of us dares to live the sole one that would be worth living?

We are in a great rage to waste our time. But we are determined to waste it solely in the way that we want. And we lose patience with anyone who would try to make us waste it in some manner that we don't wish. But we love those who help us to waste it in just the fashion that we like. Even those who have nothing to do won't hesitate to knock you down if you dare to get in their road while they're doing it.

The triviality of life would crush me, if I weren't rapt up in the trivial occupations which prove to me how much it means. 'We are so trivial by nature,' Céline wrote, 'that only our diversions can stop us dying for real.'

The value of life is worn away by the mere act of living.

## **20 Life seems precious because it is all we have**

We might not be so sure that life had such an incomparable value if we had anything with which to compare it. Would it seem so precious, if it weren't the one thing that we can call our own? We assume that it must be all in all, because it's all that we have got.

What mendicants we are, that all we have is life. And what misers we are, that all we want to do is hang on to it.

Life is a false perspective, which the angel of death will soon set right.

## **FUN AND MONEY**

### **21 The world and our wants**

The world belabours you like a brainless tyrant. Give in and learn to collaborate, or it will thrash you.

The world is always too much and never enough for us. We are too small to hold out against our lust for the world, but we are too large to let it fill us. If we had a shred more pride, we might not need the world. And if we had a shred less, it might suffice us. Like Caliban, we are bewitched by airs which waft to us from a place where we don't belong. Life overwhelms and disappoints us. It affects us too violently and yet means too little, till the end comes and engulfs us in its vacancy.

If you want to grasp how little you matter, think of what the world will look like ten days or ten minutes after you're gone. And if you want to grasp how little most of your fuss and schemes and perturbations matter even to yourself, imagine that you are ten miles or ten years clear of them. So short a space will have turned them to smoke. And though they may still grime your skin, they will have left no trace on your soul. 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on.'

## **22 The sad carnival of life**

We were just a bubble of desires and self-deceptions which death will soon burst. As Montaigne writes, 'We are not so full of iniquity as of inanity. We are not so miserable as base and abject.' This world, being so hollow, is just the thing to engross our own hollowness. 'There is no lack of void,' as Beckett said.

This life would be hell, if it didn't end, purgatory, excepting that it won't mend us, and paradise, if we could feel all its shuddering bliss. We visit it like a sad carnival, its shabbiness veiled by the conniving night, our eyes dazzled by its uncouth foolery. So we perspire, feel ill and giddy, lose our bearings, and stay too late. We hope that it will go on and on, and we just wish that it would stop.

God made life so sad, and we've spared no pains to make it stupid and frantic as well. We found the night gloomy, and we turned it to an idiot twinkle to cheer us. The lamps pulsate and the music blares in this house of fools. But it is mortgaged to death and daubed with the blood of all that lives.

## **23 Fun and money**

The world now welcomes only what is practical and marketable or what is light and entertaining, money and fun, fun and money. If we are not making money, we expect to be having fun. We sack nature for our work, and consume kitsch as our pastime. We spend half our days being false for profit, so we can spend the rest being false for pleasure. The world bribes you to drudge for barren usefulness by recompensing you with frivolities and relaxations.

We are all now lotus-eaters. And we have just enough energy to elbow our fellow addicts out of the way in our fever to pounce on more of our drug of fun and money. 'Amusement,' as Pope wrote, 'is the happiness of those that cannot think.'

Everything now must amuse us or else must pay. And each year the wealth banks up, and the fun grows more furious.

We are no longer pilgrims but commuters shuttling noisily between fun and money.

We put up with long stretches of boredom in our rage to be amused. But we soon lose patience with the arduous things which might lead us to the truth.

## **24 Leisure and civilization**

Imagination languishes as an unloved recusant in this cold empire of utility. A person, caste or age is worth just as much as it makes of its leisure. We make infantile amusement, and that too has to be profitable.

The task of a high civilization is to breed a class that has the time and brains to be bored. But each of us now is lashed on so fast by our lust for pleasure, that none of us feels the ennui that might stir us to think or create.

Art and poetry, like the rest of the savages, have been hounded from the world by mechanized utility, and roped off on a few state reservations. Art is feral, kitsch is tame.

As the human race gets more senile and rich, its desires grow more juvenile and crude. What it craves is pert chit-chat, junk food, screaming music, cut-price sightseeing, spectator sports and vulgar fun.

What a world we have made. We have shaped a life that is ruthlessly real and worthlessly factitious. We bow down to the vacant icons of kitsch and the brutal solidity of money. This world is what we have created because we don't care for the real things that it purports to be a means to.

## **25 The idiot angels of technology**

All our clever devices have made labour more productive and leisure more sterile. We have so many functional appliances which save time, that we need to keep inventing entertaining ones to waste it. How could we do without our machines? They procure us so much money and so much fun. They have made a world as shallow and vacuous as our own hearts. We count on our new digital playthings to divert us, while our old industrial machines seal their work of terminating us. As soon as the masses had learnt to read and had the leisure to do so, electronic toys had to be devised to waste their time more amusingly and vacantly.

Kitsch is the brightly illustrated hoarding behind which our demolition of the world goes on apace.

Technology has rejuvenated our old race, and infused it with the restless drive of spoilt adolescents.

## **26 Humanism**

Humanism flatters us that we are exceptional in our nature and central to the purpose of the universe. No wonder that we are all now humanists, puffed up as we are with our own sacred afflatus. It is the apotheosis of a species alienated from the earth and intoxicated by its own omnipotence. The god that it bows down to is a self-adoring and suicidal deity. We are as pitiless as gods, and just as doomed.

Secular humanism has tamed and gelded our kind far more effectually than any creed could have done.

The mortal animal has grown or shrunk to a baffled god, distracted by joy, or dazed by woe, lost amid the wreckage made by its all-powerful prostheses.

To swap theism for the cult of humanity is to exchange a god of imagination for the idol of our self-admiration. Human beings can't help believing that individually and collectively they are the finest things in creation.

The humanity that humanism sets on high is the one generation now alive that we chance to be part of. It cares nothing for its long heritage which it will lay waste for its own brief gain.

## **FUTILITY**

### **27 Choice or chance**

You raise up the house of your being brick by brick from each choice that you make. And some find too late that what they have built is a narrow stockade.

Character may make your destiny, as Heraclitus claimed. But it is chance that makes your character.

Chance holds such sway in our lives, just because no single chance has much impact on it. In cheap fiction it's clear that fate has the steerage of the characters' course, since one small accident can send them off on a new trajectory.

Fate deals you not just the cards but the skill to play them. Our faith in our own free will is one of the haughtiest delusions that our pride has fashioned for us. Others include our codes of right and wrong, teleology, the gods and the soul.

## **28 Futility**

Life is squalid, arduous and futile. So we seek out gaudy luxuries to bedeck its squalor. And we indulge in enervated pleasures to lighten its hardships. And we try to overleap its lack of purpose by our driving haste.

Life is trivial, transitory and futile. If it were not, what place would it have for us?

Life comes and goes in a long series of brief trivialities, 'a quick succession of busy nothings,' as Austen put it. Once they have reached their close, the happiest and unhappiest lives weigh equally in the scale of futility. They may have felt quite different, but they mean the same.

The heftiness of our sorrows at least hides from us the hollowness of our futility.

Life, like the cosmos, is more full of nothing than of something.

I use up my gifts in striving for footling and despicable goals. I say goodbye to a thousand ill-spent days. We make anything an apology for why we forgot to live. We link one vain day to the last, and hope that they will add up to a chain of purposeful years.

## **29 Our futile urgency**

The oppressive instancy of life proves to us that it must be worth living. We spin so dizzily, that we can't see that all we do is vanity, 'disguising our insignificance by the dignity of hurry,' in Johnson's phrase. The mad dash that makes us futile makes us sure that we are not. Everything that we do spares us from perceiving the nothings that we are.

Life is a long tussle between the worthwhile and the urgent, till death looms as urgency's crowning victory. We at last lose a match that was never worth the winning.

Those who are proud of leading such full lives are too dull to have anything but hollow ideas. Their own lives are so brimful, how could they grasp that the world is so empty?

We lead our vacant or full lives in order to escape from the vacancy which might have taught us what we are.

### **30 Our sad futility**

Our futility would be poignant, if it didn't rattle with such uproarious self-satisfaction. And yet if it were not so strident, we might start to doubt if it meant anything at all.

Life, like a good party, is so loud and whirling, that you can't hear what you think or what anyone else says.

How could we see how dark the world is, when our own beaming self-belief lights it up so brightly for us?

Our own lives seem so full of purpose, how could we see how futile life is? And most of us are too self-delighting to feel how sad life is. But a few make so little of their own life, that they see through the littleness of all life.

### **31 Perpetual motion**

We don't mind where we're heading, so long as we have to career faster and faster to get there. We prove our significance by the speed that we race at and the racket that we make. How would we know we were living, if we didn't raise so much dust? All our bustle makes us feel alive. Yet it will bequeath nothing but death.

Beauty and nobility used to command us to go slow. Now greed and kitsch urge us on to go ever faster.

Our velocity acts as the gauge of our greed and self-consequence. But all that we'll leave of our fevered hurry will be our patient dust. 'Demanding all, deserving nothing,' as Carlyle wrote, one small grave is what we'll get.

Moving fills for us the space of meaning. Their lives seem to mean most who move quickest. We have nowhere to go, and so we have to keep on the move. 'Our nature is motion,' as Pascal says. 'Unrelieved inactivity would be death for us.'

We have now learnt to go so fast, that we take it that speed must be the purpose of life.

We may know that we're on the road to nowhere, but why would we let that stop us?

### **32 Unredeemed**

Why is it that thinkers such as Pascal, who diagnose our predicament so truthfully, then prescribe such unconvincing correctives? He was half right. Our nature is unregenerate. But



there is no redeemer. We know that there is no hope for us, because we are always so desperate to sink our hopes in the next messiah. The sole divinity that might be worthy of our devotion would be one that lacked the power to deliver us. It's the false messiahs who swear that they can save our souls.

We have no cure but a mere sequence of insidious diseases, which vary and so give us respite and the feeling of a cure. 'This life is a hospital in which each patient is possessed by a desire to change beds,' as Baudelaire put it. Such is our hopeless plight, with all its vain religious and philosophic therapies. 'When a large number of treatments are proposed for an illness,' Chekhov said, 'you know that it is irremediable.' The palliations that we clamour for show that we have no wish to find a cure for our sickness. We just want to be rid of its bothersome symptoms.

Each new blow makes us forget how badly off we were before. Our maladies at least take our minds off our true malady.

## SUPERFLUITY

### **33 Grace and necessity**

The arts can thrive only in societies that place a high value on form, leisure, ceremony, hierarchy and what is supernumerary.

The great monuments of thought and art which lend human life its meaning mean nothing at all to most people. They see in them nothing to fill their bulging purses or their vacant minds. Truth for most of us is a thing far less serious than our own amusements. Because we take our own trivial affairs so seriously, we can never be really serious.

It is the task of civilization to ensure that priceless works are made and passed on to the future, in spite of no one caring whether they are or not.

Our society is made up of people who have nothing better to do than live, and so our society will soon die.

Where everything must pay its way, nothing that we make is worth the making. And where everything is useful for something, nothing is of value for its own sake.

We have lost our readiness for the two best adventures, noble action and noble thought. We gave them up, when we found that they don't pay.

### **34 Our true values are nothing that we need**

All the most precious goods that give life meaning, such as poetry, wonder, or truth, are short-lived, unloved and contingent. They came too late, and they're already gone. People have lost the relish for unnecessary grace. We only cheapen the noblest goals when we call them needs. We don't need art or science. Why else would they be of such incalculable value? But we do need creeds and machinery and kitsch. And these must be crass and empty, since they are so well fitted to our use. And we feel no need for truth, though we do stand in constant want of our truisms.

What we take to be deep personal needs are learned responses to social imperatives and incentives. We don't feel much need for art or truth or faith. But conformity, self-interest or prestige may lead us to think that we do.

If there is one thing needful, you can be sure it is the one thing that none of us feels much need for.

### **35 Dare to be useless**

Only what serves no purpose can be an end in itself.

What is useful is ignoble. And all that our society now values is what is useful.

Keep to the essential, and the world will have no need of you. Hope for no reward for your devotion apart from failure and futility.

You must risk the worst irrelevance, if you aspire to rise above fallow usefulness. 'The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.' The one fruitful work is the work that you don't need to do. And the task that you were born for is the one that will gain you the least pay. A fecund mind has not found its true vocation till it is doing what no one has a call for. And it should need no fee save the sense of its own teeming superfluity.

### **36 Truth is not a human need**

Most of us are agnostics on the great questions, not because we find it so hard to make up our minds what we think of them, but because we give them no thought at all.

Most of the deepest truths are too scandalous or else too obvious to be spoken. But few of us care so much for the truth that we see how scandalous it is. How could we be horrified by what it shows us? We are just too heedless of it for that.

Ideas bore us. Truth disgusts us.

Few of us think enough to be perplexed by life's mysteries. We're just scrambling to ride its rapids with as few bumps and overturnings as we can manage, while scooping up all we can of the rich jetsam that floats past.

The human mind, with all its vast capacities, is more contentedly occupied in shopping than in the contemplation of truth or beauty.

Most of us don't want to waste the small sum of thinking that we are willing to do on mere ideas. We save it for what matters to us, our scheming and self-congratulation.

Few of us care enough about the truth even to resist it. It never comes so close as to cause us a fright. We are too far away on the trail of money or merriment.

### **37 The uselessness of art**

The best authors are the utterly expendable. They write the books that don't need to be written. It is the unnecessary books that last. But it's the beneficial and ephemeral ones that each age dotes on. They serve their time and pass from the world.

'All art is quite useless,' as Wilde said. Art realizes superfluous designs by economical means. But nature, marvellously frugal and monstrously wasteful, works by thriftless courses to reach its narrow goals.

Necessity may be the mother of innovation and invention, but superfluity is the mother of imagination and creation. 'The superfluous, a very necessary thing,' as Voltaire put it.

All things in excess, so that all things balance. 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom,' as Blake wrote.

Artists fuse the superfluous and the essential, the unstinting and the thrifty, the supple and the strict, the delicate and the severe, grace and heft. The best, like Milton, Melville or Proust, tackle truth so directly, that they may appear to ramble inconsequentially, and they distil its essence by indulging in an exuberant irrelevance. They bless us with their sweet intimacies and their obscure immensities. 'Out of the strong came forth sweetness.'

The one excuse for useless things is the exuberant excess of their imagination.

### **38 The dead-end of duty**

Indispensable people and books are soon superseded. Each age bursts with its discarded stockpile of them. 'The graveyards,' as De Gaulle quipped, 'are packed with indispensable people.' Make yourself irreplaceable, and you will soon be out-of-date. To race to keep abreast of the latest developments is the shortest way to become obsolete.

Some of us are lured to waste our life on vain schemes since they cost us so little effort, and some because they cost us so much.

The route of duty leads to a reputable futility. We live our urgent and respectable life by discharging the duties that the world demands of us. But we live our real and meaningful life when we do the duties that we demand of ourselves.

The pliant self-seeking which makes us futile makes us fit and useful for the world.

## **SUFFERING**

### **39 Suffering and sense**

The god of this world thumps and pummels your clay. Is the potter moulding you as a glorious receptacle to hold celestial liquors, or shattering you to strew your dust on the litter heap?

Affliction works like a carver to perfect the few who are marble hard. But it mauls those who are too soft and sensitive. 'Misfortune,' Napoleon remarked, 'is the midwife of genius.'

I suffer, and surmise that I must be owed, and owed in the coin that I value, be it love or lucre or repute. I assume that there are all sorts of goods that I can buy with my woe, as if someone had need of it and would pay a high price for it.

Artists and the elect know that it is their fate to go through trials of fire. But they hope to do it in a genteel spiritual way that will cost them no actual pain or loss.

Some incorrigible wrong must lurk at the heart of the world, which nothing is able to right. 'The gods themselves,' Melville says, 'are not forever glad.' They know too much to be blessed.

To live in this world is to be gruellingly excreted through Satan's anus.

We believe that we have ceased to feel intensely because we live at second-hand. But don't we assume that we should feel intensely because we think at second-hand?

All that makes life easy to live makes it scarcely worth living. And all that goes to make it worth living makes it hard to live.

#### **40 Beautiful suffering nobodies**

There is so little to both living and dying, why do we find it so difficult to do either?

When we come to the end of our days, we'll be dismayed to look back on how much we suffered, and find how little it meant. How mortifying that we have left no mark on this world which has marked us with such raw scars. My life could scarcely have cost me more, or have counted for less.

It's just as well that we have been entrusted with no boon more precious than life. Think what an unhallowed mess we would have made of anything more pure.

Life is a pearl of great price but small worth. At its best it is somewhat worse than nothing.

What trivial miracles we are. The world swarms with beautiful suffering nobodies.

When all that is superfluous and ephemeral has been burned and purged from us in the fires of affliction, we will be left with what is primary and permanent. And we will find that this amounts to nothing at all.

Even if life passes you by, it will still knock you down in its rush. It's as sickening as the stink of souring garbage from the lorry as it trundles past.

Suffering has no meaning. It's only those who make others suffer that make their own lives mean a thing. 'Not to perish of internal distress and uncertainty when one inflicts acute suffering,' Nietzsche says, 'that is the badge of greatness.'

### **WISDOM**

#### **41 Wisdom**

Wisdom is out of tune with all sound instinct, which rates the worth of a thing by whether or not it happens to be mine.

You need more sound sense to take salutary advice than to give it, as you may need more generosity to accept a gift than to bestow it.

'Better be wise by the vicissitudes of others,' urged Aesop, 'than by your own.' The wise know how to make the most of their own folly. But fools don't know how to make anything of another's good sense.

The wisdom of the ages has been built up by the young daring to bring down the smug discretion of their witless elders.

Where once the world would have consulted sages for guidance in its great challenges, it now looks to celebrities, actors and hucksters.

Wisdom and philosophy can't make any of us strong enough to do without the world. But the world makes most of us happy to do without wisdom and philosophy.

## **42 Wisdom values the right things**

The wise value the right goods, at the right rate, for the right reasons, and strive for them with the right ardency and the right detachment. They know that few things in this world are worth much more than indifference. Who can tell placid wisdom from impassioned heroism?

We don't cease to care for the things of the world when we have ceased to prize them. We still aim at things that we have long left off esteeming. And these are the very things that will break our hearts. So we fade to haggard ghosts of purpose, still mad to reach goals which no longer mean a thing to us.

The wisdom of age, like a veteran commander, has learnt not to waste its force fighting skirmishes that it won't win against enemies who are not worth vanquishing for a prize which is not worth attaining.

## **43 The wisdom of the intellect and the wisdom of the will**

It's so easy to know what is worthy of our real esteem. But it's so hard to quell our appetite for all the junk that we know is not. The wisdom of the intellect does not translate into a wisdom of the will. Wisdom is not prudent, and the intellect is not wise.

The intellect is well aware that life is not worth living. But what chance does it have in a duel with the rampant ego?

The great way of wisdom is known. It has been written down in many books. But it is so much at odds with our nature and conduct, that it seems more like a satire on them than the goal to which they are progressing.

We pay more heed to information than to wisdom, and to anecdotes than to information.

Most fools think that they are just ignorant, as Franklin said. And many merely shrewd people presume that they must be wise.

Wisdom is the health of the mind. Intelligence is its strength. Knowledge is power and provocation. Wisdom is weakness and restraint. So we of course crave more and more knowledge, but have no use for wisdom.

Our knowledge is the tool of our illusions.

#### **44 Reluctant wisdom**

Wisdom is a clinic, which you go to when you're stricken, but are keen to vacate as soon as you've rallied. Or else it's an emergency fund that you keep in reserve and hope you won't need to draw on, and which will be no help when disaster skittles you.

We grow wise by necessity. We would far rather have prospered. All of us live by the adage that 'tis better to be fortunate than wise.' We would prefer to land the meanest prize than the loftiest wisdom.

The lessons of wisdom are good enough for others, but my mission is too important to be bound by its restraints.

Who would care to grow wise, if they had the power to please their pitiless will?

#### **45 Too rich to be wise**

We would rather have enough money not to need to get wisdom than be wise enough not to need money. 'Wisdom is good with an inheritance.' There will be plenty of time to get wise once I have got rich.

Most of us are too prosperous to need wisdom or else too poor to pay for it. The needy don't doubt that they will find time to be wise once they have earned a few more dollars. And the rich don't doubt that they would be free to be wise if they weren't bound by the duty to add to their wealth. 'The abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.' Peace of mind is one luxury that the rich can't afford.

The price of wisdom we know is above rubies, but who would not choose to have something less expensive and more workable?

The supply of wisdom has never been large, but it has at all times been in excess of the demand for it. As Blake wrote, it is 'sold in the desolate market where none come to buy.'

#### **46 Philosophy and the love of unwisdom**

Philosophers have ceased to profess wisdom since philosophy has become a profession. It is now one more officious and rewarding trade that keeps us from the love of wisdom. 'We have professors of philosophy,' Thoreau lamented, 'but not philosophers.'

British philosophy has been a department of british philistinism.

Most philosophy is a spilt puddle of language which science just steps over.

Most philosophical concepts don't make sense of the world but only of other philosophical concepts.

To philosophize used to be to learn how to die. Now it is just a busy pastime to help us to forget that we have to.

#### **47 Always a fool**

My wisdom shows me what a fool I've been, but it can't make me less of a fool. 'I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me.' I have to tell myself ten times a day what a dolt I am. But I wake each morning convinced that I'm as clever as can be. 'A man finds he has been wrong at every preceding stage of his career,' Stevenson wrote, 'only to deduce the astonishing conclusion that he is at last entirely right.'

Most of us don't grasp what we had to know from the outset, till we arrive at the end. 'Life is like playing a violin solo in public,' Butler wrote, 'and learning the instrument as one goes on.' And how mortifying to find out at the last that the strings that we had spent such studious years mastering were good for nothing but to scratch out a few squeaky notes. It's so hard to get life right, that it's a mercy that it doesn't matter.

We learn so much in a few green years when we're young. But all our days fail to teach us what fools we have always been.

#### **48 The folly of wisdom**

The supreme wisdom is to live for the moment. But how mad we would be if we ever tried to do that.



My flimsy wisdom has pulled down the props of my vast folly, to demolish my life. We are such born fools, that to set out to live in congruity with wisdom would be the most foolish thing we could do. So it's just as well that we are too shrewd to try that.

The blunders that prudent people make may be just as costly as those made by the foolhardy. My cool calculations may fool me as fatally as my hottest impulses. My imprudence stoops as low as the perils which my clumsy caution would sink me in. And my reckless fiascos aimed at no higher mark than my shifty triumphs have reached.

Wisdom sends the wise mad, to teach them a deeper wisdom. The artist is blessed with a crazy power to make works of the profoundest sanity. 'The madness of the wise,' as Burke wrote, 'is better than the sobriety of fools.'

## **49 The misery of wisdom**

How is it that the great spate of our misery leaves such a thin trickle of wisdom?

The thoughtless joy of birds and children mocks our doleful wisdom. Birdsong seems to come to us from some blest abode far out of reach of our earthbound sorrows.

You don't pluck the fruit of wisdom. You drag it with bloodied hands from a tangle of briars. And then it turns to ashes in your mouth. It dulls the tang of living. Yet it fails to quench your thirst for more and more life. It won't heal the smart of your whippings, but it still poisons your triumphs. It strips you of all the worldly junk which is not worth possessing, but it won't supply you with anything more worthy. Cut the bands of your fantasies, and you'll still be pinned to life by your despotic desires, though unable now either to fulfil or to esteem them.

Who knows how to take life with the gravity or levity it deserves? It may be the few who have made up their mind to end it. 'The wish to die,' as Kafka wrote, 'is the beginning of wisdom,' as the Book of Job or Ecclesiastes also show. For one who has seen the truth, merely to go on living is to lie.

## **50 Wisdom and prudence**

The wise know what they are, the shrewd know how the world works. Prudence wants to gain the world, wisdom lets it go. The wise choose the right end, the canny seek out smooth expedients to reach the wrong one. Wisdom is simple, prudence is ingenious. Wisdom basks in the bliss which prudence spends all its life saving so anxiously to buy. Calculation shows you how to grab all the trash that you crave. But restraint releases you from the lust for it. The sage

knows how to be happy, the prudent how to prosper. Wisdom questions your goals and tempts you to drop out, discretion feeds your desires and helps you to slot in. Wisdom weighs and refuses, the shrewd flatter and pamper those whom they need to use.

The worldly wise warn us not to trust others. True wisdom warns us not to trust ourselves.

Sagacity has learnt that life is an empty sieve, cunning helps you to keep on replenishing it. Wisdom schools you to want no more than you need, shrewdness guides you how to get what you don't even want. The prudent have foresight, the wise have insight. Prudence knows the way to gain, courage masters its fear of losing, while wisdom trains you not to crave. Yet we don't want to learn wisdom, but only the craft to appease our oafish will. Our cleverness is our clownishness accoutred by cunning.

Practical people know the use of a thing. The wise know its true worth.

## **51 Restraint**

We refuse either to stint our rude will or to strain it to serve some end greater than our crude wants. I lack the self-control to curb my lust for gain, and so I have to ply a sneaking prudence to try to feed it. I have to set my slyness to work to make up for my dearth of unsparing wisdom. The ogre Greed bears the lame dwarf Reason on its shoulders, to guide it how to gorge its blind imperious cravings.

The collective wisdom of the ages can do nothing to stop the havoc wrought by our wised-up age of greed.

Most of us have neither the calm thoughtfulness to rein in our avidity for vile things nor the high imagination to aspire to great ones.

Wisdom has saved no one, but our inventiveness will soon rig us out with the equipment to do away with ourselves.

I don't want more wisdom, since it would stand in the way of me desiring more of all the other dreck that I want.

Wisdom would teach us to sit still, but our curiosity keeps us on the go. Knowledge craves more, wisdom keeps you to the core. We are too clever to be wise, and too rich to be content.

Wisdom would show us how to make the best use of our time. But who has the time to heed it? We are all in such a mad hurry to hive away the wares that waste our time.