

**POSITIVE  
THINKING &  
THE MEANING  
OF LIFE**

**Marcus Freestone**

# POSITIVE THINKING AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

MARCUS FREESTONE

2<sup>nd</sup> Edition

(After re-reading this I decided that a few irrelevant paragraphs could be cut out. Those are the only changes I've made.)

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INTRODUCTION

DECISION MAKING AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONSCIOUS AND  
SUBCONSCIOUS COGNITION

THOUGHT CONTROL

HOW PATTERNS BECOME ESTABLISHED

IMAGINARY CONSEQUENCES OF IMAGINARY ACTIONS

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

THE FALLACY OF DIGITAL THINKING

CONCLUSION: CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

## INTRODUCTION

I am not a therapist, I'm a writer and musician who happens to have an interest in psychology and philosophy. This book is merely an exercise in collating various ideas and revelations I've had during the past few years which have proved very helpful to me and may also be to you. All I have done is talk openly about things I've discovered, techniques I've used, mistakes I've made and successes I've enjoyed. It's a somewhat disjointed, abstract piece of work but then that's what my life has been like. If some of it sounds a bit like a journal, that's because it's been lifted directly from the journal or notes I kept on a particular course. In some cases I have kept the integrity of the spontaneous thoughts and avoided any rewriting in order to maintain the original insight.

I would also like to point out that I wrote some of this two to three years ago and have since overcome many of the problems described within. However, it makes sense to leave these parts as they are in order to describe the problems that many people *will* be having. I apologise if sometimes the narrative thread seems to waver somewhat but it's the ideas that matter not keeping track of which I personally have or have not used lately.

This is not an academic work and these are my own personal views on what I've encountered. Other people may view the same material/ideas in a different way. I have encountered many books where simple concepts are verbosely extrapolated in an off-putting manner. Therefore I have cut this book down to the bare minimum and am giving it away for free in the hope that people will find it useful. Any comments on this work are more than welcome.

## DECISION MAKING AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONSCIOUS AND SUBCONSCIOUS COGNITION

I've known for years through studying mainstream psychology and Gurdjieff and Ouspensky that the subconscious brain does most of our processing but I hadn't realised the huge disparity between the processing power of the conscious and subconscious. Whilst the subconscious brain can process 11 million bits of information a second, the conscious brain can only process 11 bits a second. That means the subconscious is a top range quantum computer whereas the conscious is a ZX81 that's been dropped in the bath and hit with a rock fourteen times.

This means that if, as I have done for years now, you try to take conscious control of much of your subconscious decision making, you will overload your poorly equipped and already overcrowded consciousness. Our conscious mind has an elaborate system of filters that allow us to ignore most of what goes on around us, and it is there for the very good reason that our consciousness is already operating at full stretch. We are enmeshed in a constant loop of thoughts>feelings>actions because we always think about and react to our actions afterwards.

It seems that the latest results of neuroscientific inquiry indicate strongly that in depth analysis of decision making is the prerogative of the subconscious brain. It is irrelevant why or how this imbalance between conscious and subconscious cognition has come to be the case – it is simply a fact and these are the parameters that we have to operate within as conscious entities.

I recently heard a scientist say that the job of therapy should be the reverse of its current preoccupation – it should actually *discourage* people from thinking about themselves. If the subconscious does the vast majority of our decision making (indeed, it has long been established in psychology that subconscious decisions and memory function are almost entirely accurate, whereas

conscious ones are hugely error prone) then we should 'disengage' and let it get on with these processes. In that sense, it seems that much of the 'new age' idea of letting go of your conscious self is actually correct, but that many forms of 'inner work' are in fact counterproductive and actively harmful. Our brains are the result of three billion years of evolution and it is therefore arrogant folly, even dangerous, to think that we can improve upon that. I myself have spent several years consciously going over and over hundreds of major life decisions with the result that I've made hundreds of disastrous decisions and brought my life to a standstill. The other result is that I've overloaded my conscious mind with masses of unnecessary information and impaired my conscious cognition significantly.

It seems therefore that people who are successful and get where they want to be in life are good at sitting back and letting their subconscious, instinctive decisions inform their actions, whereas people like me keep messing it up by conscious interference. It seems that good decisions are subconscious ones that are presented to our conscious awareness as a fate accompli – we go against them at our peril! It goes against everything I've ever believed about human existence, but it now seems unavoidable that the best way to live is to trust your instinctive, emotional reaction to situations and 'go with the flow'. I've lost count of the thousands of times I've prevaricated over a decision that was presented to me by my subconscious because I had some intellectual objection to it. I've argued with myself in bad faith many times and often actually chosen *what I knew to be the wrong decision* because for some nebulous reason I didn't like being told what to do, even by my own mind! I've been so obsessed with the idea of freewill that I've fought against all ideas of our subconscious being in charge and wholeheartedly signed up to the ideas of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, which state that we should devote our lives to wrestling away control from our 'subconscious robot'. However, I now realise, rather late in the day, that we in fact *are* subconscious robots for perfectly valid evolutionary and biological reasons and that we should not, indeed *cannot* fight against it.

However let us not despair. Despite our lives being ruled by our subconscious SCRIPTS that cannot be deleted, we can counteract them by consciously instigating new scripts. There will be more on this in two pages time so bear with me.

In bed last night I had the sudden revelation, after starting to read yet another psychology book and realising I was no longer interested, that I'm still in the cognitive patterns of a former self. I'm still thinking in terms of studying and needing to learn more about the human brain and the universe - but why? I've outgrown all that now, neither my mind nor the universe hold any more mysteries for me; I understand *all I need to understand, so why am I continuing to accumulate further information?*

I began studying, essentially, to have enough intellectual ammunition to argue against religion and superstition and to sort out the mess in my head-I've achieved both of those goals now so surely any further study of these subjects is wholly redundant? I trust my subconscious instincts implicitly now and they're telling me to move onto something *entirely* new. That's one of the reasons I'm writing this book; I'm hoping it is the final stage of my studies and that I no longer need to think about all this because I do it subconsciously.

In many ways, my studies of psychology, philosophy and esoteric ideas have actually harmed me in that they've lead me to reprogram aspects of my mind that should be left alone- that's why I think my subconscious has been rebelling in recent years, but that's over now: my mind is a completed project, now i need to move from thoughts to actions. Any science I hear on the radio or read now seems boringly basic because, other than mathematical intricacies, I know just about everything about all the subjects I'm interested in, and the initial reasons for studying them no longer apply.

A few years ago I challenged many of my preconceptions and opinions and changed a lot of them, but I've since lapsed into complacency and have retained the thinking style of the old me from fifteen years ago. In the same way that we haven't evolved to adapt to modern technology, I haven't adapted my lifestyle (for want of a better word) and ways of doing things to my new cognitive architecture and positive outlook. Last night I knew what to do but now it's evaporated and I can't get a handle on it. I think it concerned a completely new fresh start i.e. drawing a mental line under the past thirty eight years and making entirely new decisions as to what I want to with my life based on how I feel about things now rather than just following the decisions I made twenty years ago. I am a totally different person now than even three years ago and I see things differently, yet I'm still going after my teenage ambitions. I need to take a step back and look at myself objectively, as far as that's possible, and make a new assessment of my abilities and construct an entirely new plan of action. I need to lift old, artificial restrictions and assess the person I am now.

One thought I had last night was that I no longer have to prove anything because I'm my own man now and there's nobody left to whom I have to prove anything. I no longer feel any need to justify myself - therefore, do I really want a public career? Do I need public approval? Is that why I'm sharing this book with you, to validate my own existence?

I feel that somewhere 'out there' is an exciting, adventurous life, but most people's lives are entirely drab and one place is much like another – *it's the eyes with which you look at the world that determine your level of interest, not the world you look at*. Also, you get out life what you put into it: if you avoid everything and don't make any decisions then you cannot fail - this can be very seductive.

Another concept that has obsessed me for many years is SCRIPTS, the subconscious programmes laid down throughout our lives by our experience, environment, thoughts and behaviour. This means that the saying "They'll grow out of it" is entirely false. Nobody grows out of any habit or behaviour, once formed, unless they consciously challenge the habit from within or are forced by external factors to change; unchallenged it will remain for life.

Several years ago I realised that many of the negative feelings I held about myself and opinions about how the world worked and my place within it were based on things I heard thirty years ago and never updated. When you are very young you have yet to develop the social & cognitive skills to challenge other's opinions or overcome any detrimental environmental factors; an infant trusts it's parents implicitly and it is an unpleasant part of growing up when we have to accept that our parents and all adults are fallible, if not positively incompetent. Even when you realise there is no objective rule book for life and everyone is merely floundering in the same existential void, not everyone develops confidence and self belief. *I* certainly didn't, so consequently when I was seven and acquired a step father who constantly told me I was useless and lazy, that opinion became ingrained in me and I considered it an incontrovertible fact. I began to live *down* to his opinion. For thirty years I gave up on life and drifted along on the path of least resistance; I became the subconscious robot described by Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, buffeted around by external forces and rarely exerting any freewill. It is only during the last two years that I have begun to drag myself out of this nihilistic vortex.

A cogent example comes to mind: when I was about twelve I half-heard a news story that parents were going to have to pay for you to go to university. Without question I accepted this and never bothered asking in school whether it would be possible for me to go, I just assumed that university was for other people, those with encouraging parents. One day when I was sixteen I walked into the careers room and found everybody I knew filling in the application forms for University. Nobody had ever mentioned these forms to me or where you got them from so I just assumed that I was excluded and

never bothered asking. Even when I fully realised the situation I still never bothered applying - the word *university* was never mentioned in my house, I don't think they knew what it meant. Nobody ever asked me what I wanted to do so I lapsed into doing nothing. My sense of self was so weak I just let life happen around me without ever really participating.

Over twenty years later, despite years of meditation, psychotherapy and soul searching, I am only now just shedding this absurd burden that I am somehow not entitled to anything. I still feel it sometimes when people talk about holidays. I've only this year finally had a proper holiday as an adult; I grew up thinking that getting a plane somewhere was a gargantuan luxury to which I would never be entitled, as was owning a car, a house or having a well paid job and freedom of choice. My upbringing taught me that I was at the bottom of the heap in all respects and didn't deserve to aspire to anything. All this became a self fulfilling prophecy and thus I obtained the life I felt I deserved, one of narrow drudgery and disillusion. I couldn't shift my paranoid delusion that I was somehow excluded from the world of holidays, car ownership and general entitlement - I knew intellectually that it was nonsense but I still lived that life and was disconnected from the world of other people and their ambitions which they believe will come true. I had hundreds of ambitions, but not the belief that they would ever be fulfilled.

I have long had the talent and intellect to achieve all my ambitions and more yet because of the way I think and the decisions I make, or more often *avoid*, I haven't really achieved any of them yet. I am living proof of the old occult saying, "as a man thinks, so he becomes". [N.B This was written two years ago, since when I have published eight books and fifteen albums and achieved many other personal goals, so progress is *always* possible].

There will be much more about scripts and how to counteract them later on.

I once did a course called 'Fear Busting' and gained a very positive outcome from it: I remembered that I have successfully overcome many fears in the past. In fact, *every time* I have confronted a fear I have overcome it fairly easily - school bullying, my first job, breaking off an engagement, performing standup comedy, teaching and lecturing; I faced up to and mastered all of them. What I took away from the course is that *in recent times I have more often than not failed to confront fears and problems; I have trained myself to retreat into my shell*. I now do my utmost to not retreat from problems and am enjoying much success. I also *do not* fear new situations, I look forward to and embrace them. Many people in the class seemed to have been genuinely terrified at the prospect of attending - I've always thought of myself as a deeply shy, neurotic person but I can't understand how anyone can fear an evening class which is entirely voluntary!

Another of the main things I got out of this course was the realisation that I'd been brought up to believe I couldn't cope with life whereas I actually cope very well in most situations, *so long as I don't believe this childhood fallacy*. I finished the course with the intensely happy thought that I can easily do, in fact greatly enjoy, things that clearly terrify a majority of people - this is a major achievement for me which I usually forget about. I need to constantly remind myself that I am good at things and am fairly accomplished, despite my current straightened circumstances and the impression I clearly often give to other people. Unfortunately I also realised on this course that although I rarely think negatively I'm still often acting negatively and that's how people judge me. It's as if the part of my brain that deals with communication and presenting a front to the world hasn't caught up yet. Because I'm so out of practise at dealing with people I'm returning to past defaults. Plus I haven't overwritten my scripts about how people perceive me.

However, I did write down something very positive during a part of the course when I was feeling

alienated: "Disagreeing with a statement or group opinion is not an inherently negative stance, even if some people choose to perceive it in that way. I have an analytical, scientific and empirical approach to life and I will not apologise for this in the face of people thinking I should not be this way."

I need to be reminded that I am actually by nature a very positive, imaginative, ambitious person and that the depressive side of me *is the aberration not the real me*.

[THE REMAINDER OF THIS SECTION IS BASED ON NOTES I MADE DURING VARIOUS EXERCISES UNDERTAKEN ON COURSES.]

Most of my alienation from people comes from my own actions and my pathetic reticence to initiate social interactions. I'm psychologically incapable of imagining how anyone else thinks; I think it's an impossible task but most people falsely think they can genuinely see things from another's perspective. The one thing above all else I've learned in my life is the unbridgeable chasm between what we say and what we think. Human consciousness evolved long before language and therefore our innermost thoughts and feelings are independent of language, which is why we have such trouble expressing our feelings. Even when I'm concentrating very hard on getting a particular point across to somebody I'm always aware of and frustrated by my inability to accurately transcribe what's in my head. I think much of human communication is futile because all parties just go on thinking what they were thinking before because they haven't understood the other person.

How much of my power do I give away to other people? [I HATE THE PHRASING OF THIS QUESTION BUT THE ANSWER I WROTE IS USEFUL SO I'VE INCLUDED IT] This is an uncomfortable question to confront because this is something we do not want to admit to in ourselves - in fact I think we all do this every day but act in what Sartre called *bad faith* and pretend to ourselves that we're not. I don't think anyone is ever entirely free from this problem. We give away some of our power every time we consider someone else's opinions when it's nothing to do with them, or decide to do or not do something because we feel guilty or embarrassed about how certain individuals or the nebulous *society at large* (i.e people we will never meet) will judge us.

Personally I do very little of this now because I live on my own and have no contact with relatives so there's nobody around to take away my power anymore. Nevertheless, I still cannot say I'm 100% authentic in all my dealings with people; indeed on a recent course I believe I've let somebody manipulate me because I behaved in an unrealistic manner and thereby let them steal some of my power. Of course, people can steal your power or you can give it to them, both are equally problematic.

This was a major problem in my childhood which I've only just overcome. For example, when I was 13 and had to choose my GCSE subjects I wanted to do Drama because I enjoyed it and wanted to be a writer. My father said Drama was "a waste of time and no good for getting a job" and I ended up not choosing it because I was so weak willed, even though I never lived with my father and had no respect or deference towards him.

On another course I did a lifeline exercise which unlocked something very obvious that I should have realised twenty years ago. We had an arc going from birth to death and we had to put a cross at where we thought we currently were and then put where the most significant events of our life fell. Having to cram in the significant events of my life in such a small space on a *scaled* assessment of my total life span made it really obvious how miniscule a part of my life all the bad things have occupied, and therefore how foolish I've been in letting them become some a massive part of my consciousness and

personality. It gave me an amazing sense of perspective on the good/bad balance of my life to date. I've never done anything autobiographical like this and it was probably the best exercise I've ever done on any course.

Firstly, even if I'd had more time, I couldn't think of an endless list of tragedy and trauma in my life – there are only 4 or 5 terrible things I've experienced and they only take up chronologically about 3% of my life thus far, although I've wasted about 50% of my life being traumatised by failing to deal with them afterwards. Setting my life in perspective in this manner is something I've tried and failed to achieve over the last 20 years – finally succeeding is a gigantic weight off my mind and I'm confident that the benefits will begin to accrue over the coming weeks and months as this revelation sinks into my subconscious and assimilates itself. Secondly it was also a great comfort to realise that in the last year I have successfully dealt with 95% of this junk that was clogging up my mind. Thirdly I also found the start of the exercise positive. I've had a long term obsession with my own death since the funeral of a friend when he was 11 and I was 12. Two years ago I would almost certainly have put the cross right next to death and filled in everything before it with negative, depressing events because I was convinced it would only be a matter of time before I gave up and killed myself. Now I put the cross just over half way along, which means I estimate my death to be at age 70 which is probably about right given my general health and family history. However, actually visualising my life span in this way was not at all negative – I found it an incredibly happy thought that I have so much free space in front of my current position to carry on enjoying and improving my life and becoming happier and more successful. The last two things I wrote were “Last 6 months – massive progress towards peace of mind”, and “Next 2 years – earning money and breaking out of rut; financial and career success, stability and contentment.”

Something else I covered on a course was framing and reframing. I was very pleased to realise that I've been doing this for years i.e. taking a positive rather negative attitude towards the same situation. An example of this was last week's life-death arc exercise where I reframed my whole attitude towards the bad parts of my life, getting them in a much more realistic perspective. I've also been doing this with autosuggestion to reprogramme my subconscious habits – you frame something as if you have already achieved it so there's no room for failure. More on autosuggestion later.

We did a group exercise about three of the presuppositions of NLP which concerned people's behaviour. I mentioned a time when I was homeless and a close friend put an extreme interpretation on my behaviour. I maintain that I was behaving normally given my situation but he just couldn't see that. I was at first very reluctant to talk about this part of my life, which was ten years ago, and I noticed that I looked away from the other people in the group while I introduced the subject. However, afterwards I felt it had been a very cathartic experience and that I was able to deal with this part of my life without getting depressed or upset because I had contextualised it last week on the life-death arc.

Most of these presuppositions I agreed with and some of the ones other groups dealt with chimed particularly with me. “The person with the greatest flexibility will have the greatest chance of succeeding”: I've always had a tendency to focus on one overriding goal and neglect many other things I should be doing. “All procedures should increase choice, the more choices you have the greater the possibility of success” - I've often diminished my life by taking the path of least resistance and not considering choices in any depth at all. I also often end up dithering between choices to the point where external factors make the decision for me, thus negating my freewill. “If what you are doing is not working, do something different” - I do this all the time with computers, trying to reinstall some software over and over again from the same package somehow imagining that it will just suddenly



work. I'm also very stubborn and will often self-defeatingly refuse to change tack and just keep hammering away at the same thing, sometimes until I ruin the things altogether through overkill or carelessness.

**SELF LIMITING BELIEFS:** if you don't think you can do something then you won't even try; it is this that has caused me to waste so many opportunities in the past. Also **BEHAVIOURAL FLEXIBILITY:** trying different ways of achieving things. Are you stuck in a secondary gain loop & therefore won't change unsuccessful behaviour because you're getting something out of it e.g. avoiding something you don't want to face?

## THOUGHT CONTROL

The brain is very good at finding patterns but also at lulling us into not noticing them. Negativity and defeat-proneness can become such a way of life that you cease to even notice its presence.

Earlier I touched on **SCRIPTS** and repeating patterns of behaviour. This is the fundamental basis of human psychology. When faced with a situation your brain scans through your lifetime of memories for a similar situation and prompts you to react in the same way, even if this has previously lead to negative or self-defeating consequences.

In order to overcome this and establish new patterns of thinking and behaviour, it is not enough to merely make oneself aware that this proces is occurring in you. You have to make **REPEATED** assertions until new patterns overwrite your old scripts. So how is this done? One word: autosuggestion.

This may sound like some kind of creepy mind control, but don't panic. Autosuggestion only works if you want it to, and you don't need to go to an expensive therapist or fondle crystals in order to instigate this process.

It is really extremely simple. Firstly, you need to decide the problem you wish to tackle, or the behaviour or though process you wish to change. Do not try to do everything at once. Take one specific, clearly defined thing and think about what exactly you wish to achieve. I will start with the common example of giving up smoking and then go on to an example from my own life.

You need to phrase your autosuggestion as if it is the future and you have already achieved your goal. So instead of saying "I will give up smoking" (which is vague and undefined), you would say "I have no desire to smoke. I do not need cigarettes." This is **FRAMING** your idea in positive terms. You are telling yourself that this is the person you are **NOW**. Frame your goal in as few words as possible, and also be both specific and realistic. It is pointless to day "I will be a millionaire" unless you have a concrete plan in place to earn a million. Also avoid undefined phrases such as "I am happy" or "I feel better" as they have no frame of reference, nothing on which your brain can get to work.

When you have your phrase (one or two short sentences at most) all you need to do is memorise it and repeat it quietly to yourself in your head twenty or so times just as you are beginning to fall asleep. Do not think about it during the day. Do this for two weeks and then either forget it or move on to another period of autosuggestion.

This may sound like an odd thing to do but believe me it works (and I am not a therapist or someone trying to sell a system, just a writer sharing something that has been of great use to me). It becomes second nature very quickly and, with a little practice, you won't even have to remind yourself to do it. The trick to starting this technique from scratch is to not think about it too much, just relax and let your

mind do the work for you. It may feel odd at first to 'let go' of conscious control of your thoughts, but as you will be on the edge of sleep it will be happening anyway. Even if you forget one night there's no need to panic, just do it the next night. It may be an idea, especially if you've never done any meditation or anything like this before, to carry on your first autosuggestion period for a bit longer. I say two weeks because that's how long it takes to program an idea into your subconscious or form a new behavioural habit.

You may find, as I did, that after a few goes you don't even need to do autosuggestion per se anymore; that you can, if you concentrate, will an idea into your subconscious in one go by just focusing intently on it for a couple of minutes.

This technique can be applied to anything. One I did (and I'm paraphrasing myself as this was thirteen years ago) was "Other people's opinions no longer affect me. I am in charge of my own life." After a couple of months, when I had long forgotten about the period of autosuggestion, I suddenly realised that it had worked and the cluster of things to which I had been referring were no longer bothering me at all.

You can substitute any idea you like: "I don't enjoy over-eating and I don't need to to it", "I don't get angry, I sort out the problems" etc. Once it has worked on one occasion, you will then have confidence that it will work again and subsequent enactments become much easier.

One note of caution, however. I used autosuggestion to stop smoking eight years ago. I did such a good job that just walking past somebody smoking in the street would turn my stomach. After eight months of not smoking and not even thinking about it or having any cravings or withdrawal symptoms, I got drunk and 'decided' (that would be a generous word for what my brain was doing at the time) that I fancied a cigar (it was just before xmas and I'd had a very boozy lunch with a friend). Immediately I had this thought, my subconscious kicked in and fought back, forcefully reminding me that I didn't smoke and didn't want to. One of my lifelong problems is that I don't like being told what to do (*even by myself*, and now that I write that I realise I will have to address it later on) and I ended up spending a confusing ten minutes deprogramming myself and then bought a pack of cigars. I think at the time that I saw this as some kind of victory over myself (*you can't tell me what to do*).

And the moral of the story (apart from don't do autosuggestion after a few pints and a few whiskies) is that autosuggestion is not permanent and can be overwritten at any time. This is probably a good thing – you wouldn't want *any idea* indelibly and irrevocably chiseled into your brain – but something to be wary of nonetheless.

The ideal situation to arise from all this is one where you don't have to think about any kind of cognitive techniques at all, they just run automatically in your brain as and when required. Once you've mastered autosuggestion and the conscious willing of ideas into your subconscious, you may be able to move on to a more immediate technique. This is something that I came up with myself (sort of) – self-administered CBT

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy has been frequently used to deal with anxiety, depression and many other problems. As an alternative to medication, it is usually highly successful and often works in a very few sessions. I realised a few years ago that many of the techniques I was using that were based on the work of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky were very similar to CBT Therefore I will now summarise their work, before detailing how I've combined it with CBT to great effect in my own life.

George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff and Petyr Demianovich Ouspensky were, respectively, a Russian/Greek/Armenian medical student, traveller and mystic and a Russian journalist. During the first half of the twentieth century they joined forces and devoted their lives to what they called 'the work'. This was a practical system of psychological, philosophical and physiological techniques for

improving oneself and raising one's consciousness. It involved strenuous physical work, study and self-observation.

The stop exercise was something frequently practised at the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, which was established in France in the early 1920s. At a random moment Gurdjieff would ring a gong. At this point everyone would have to freeze in whatever position they were in, and also (and this is the really hard part) freeze their *thoughts*. You would then observe everything possible about yourself in that instant of time: your physical posture, the muscles involved in maintaining that position, and your immediate thoughts. The mental part of the exercise is the really important part, though Gurdjieff asserted that physical and mental work and improvement were inseparable.

Stopping your thought process in its tracks is extremely difficult (and let's not get into the endless and unproductive circle of saying that it's impossible because thinking about thinking is also thinking etc etc). For our purposes, however, it is an extremely useful thing to practice. Try it now. Close your eyes and focus on what is uppermost in your mind. How do you feel about these thoughts and why are they there? What was the preceeding thought?

The point of this is to accustom oneself to *noticing your thoughts*. This may sound totally unnecessary but most of our thoughts pass through our minds without us being consciously aware of them. This is entirely necessary, for otherwise we would be constantly overloaded with trivial information about our immediate environment and physiological state, but a lot of important thoughts also slip through the net and we find ourselves making important decisions without realising that anything at all has happened.

The ultimate goal is to instantly notice negative, unnecessary or erroneous thought patterns and nip them in the bud immediately. A useful analogy here is proofreading. I worked as a journalist for a couple of years and have been writing for twenty five years. All that editing and proofreading has lodged itself in my subconscious. A proofreading program has been written into my brain, so that whenever I read a book, newspaper etc typographical errors leap out at me because I'm unconsciously scanning for them.

CBT is a psychotherapeutic tool for dealing with dysfunctional or unwanted patterns of thought, behaviour or emotion. It does not claim to be able to eradicate entirely negative thinking, distorted self-perception etc, rather to change the patient's attitude towards those thoughts. Rather than getting 'caught up' in or 'running away with' those thoughts, C.B.T encourages people to adopt a more realistic approach to processing these thoughts. The goal is to get the patient to *notice their thoughts* and *observe themselves more objectively* – which is an almost identical goal to the one Gurdjieff and Ouspensky had. CBT is also, unlike a lot of types of therapy, designed to be administered in a short intensive course. Once the patient is equipped with the cognitive tools, they can carry on by themselves.

So the idea of self-administering this is simply to program yourself to be on the lookout for unwanted, negative thoughts and observe them when they occur. Don't get angry at yourself, just observe them. If you become aware that you are being unnecessarily negative, the pattern will immediately break. After some time of practising this you may find that you can sense when negativity is about to occur and stop it before it even starts. If you have ever had any kind of therapy or counselling, you will be familiar with the type of approaches needed to change negative thought patterns, and you should be able to apply them yourselves without outside help.

## HOW PATTERNS BECOME ESTABLISHED

During a recent edition of BBC Radio Four's excellent programme 'The Infinite Monkey Cage', cognitive neuroscientist Brian Butterworth raised 'The Dosdoevksy Question': people sometimes make choices which are unexpected, even though they will in some way be worse off, in order to assert their freewill. This can even take the form of self-destructive behaviour.

I can give an example from my own life. During a period some years ago where I was drinking very heavily every evening for months on end I got a perverse kick from the fact that I was 'testing my mortality', that I was in some strange way proving 'them' wrong: 'See, I can drink two hundred units a week and hold down a job because I am master of my own life'. Although I've never taken drugs myself, I think it's fair to hypothesise that a lot of people who do are 'enjoying' a similar existential kick; it feels like taking control of your life, when it's obviously the complete opposite. Cognitive dissonance allowed me to maintain the illusion that I was enjoying myself and making sound, logical decisions.

I have observed myself on countless occasions prevaricating endlessly over trivial decisions in order to kid myself that I am exerting freewill. In fact, this leads only to increasingly inefficient decision making and a lot of wasted time.

Everything we do in life involves choices and decisions, but many of these are made in Bad Faith. In 'Being and Nothingness', Jean-Paul Sartre gives an excellent example of this, of how we often negate or abdicate freewill. Imagine, he says, that you are walking down the street in a negative frame of mind when you bump into a friend. You force yourself to smile and offer a pleasant greeting. After the encounter your mood has lifted. In other words, you *made a choice* to put yourself in a positive mood. In which case, he observes, it logically follows that you also *made a choice to put yourself in a negative mood in the first place*. At some conscious instant you *chose not to do* what you are capable of and did when you saw your friend, put yourself into a positive state of mind.

We are constantly deceiving ourselves in this manner. When we don't want to do something we invent a spurious excuse for getting out of it, but then pretend to ourselves that there was a genuine reason why we couldn't do it. I do this myself every day of my life; if you analyse your own thoughts I'm sure you'll find many of your own examples. We constantly lie to ourselves. Sartre's point is that we are always aware of the fact of our lies but chose to ignore this awareness. However, you can never be unaware of something you have thought or done – there is no Freudian box into which you can seal a memory. I contend that much of the mental anguish we experience is caused by Bad Faith nagging away at us from a corner of our brain.

This is the way of human consciousness – we are constantly divided. I believe that this is the mechanism from which guilt arises. Coming to terms with that and minimising its impact is vital for mental wellbeing.

Albeit on a subconscious often unnoticed level, we choose our emotional state every second of our lives. Emotions are not something external that 'happen to us', they are things we choose to do to ourselves. In which case, we can extend Sartre's argument to a further conclusion: what we call 'emotional problems' are actually 'decision making problems', and it is therefore entirely in our power to sort them out. The method we would use for this is the aforementioned combination of the Gurdjieff stop exercise and self-administered CBT

Another piece of the equation came to me recently while reading Richard Dawkins' 'The God Delusion'. He used the example of sexual desire: it does not cease if you use contraception (or indeed are gay) and therefore remove the original Darwinian impetus, the propagation of your genes. The

behaviour continues even in situations where the original reason for the behaviour's existence no longer applies. Upon reading this, I immediately realised that I could extend this idea and apply natural selection to the confines of a single lifespan. For example, it may well be that a certain type of behaviour arises/evolves in a certain set of circumstances at some point during your life. This behaviour (or thought process, opinion, fear) may well continue after the initial reason for it has ceased to apply. If you tie this in with what I've previously said about repeating patterns of behaviour and the Dosdoevksy effect, as well as the psychological phenomena of *reinforcement* (either positive or negative), this is one further explanation of why we often keep doing things in the same old way when this behaviour is long redundant. One can imagine that a perfectly natural, perhaps even evolutionarily prudent, childhood fear could migrate into becoming an irrational adult phobia. Indeed, it is highly likely that phobias about harmless animals, objects or situations have their ancestral roots in something similar that a distant generation was perfectly justified in being wary of.

It may well be that, using this type of reasoning, you can find the cause of something in your own life of which you wish to be unburdened. You may find, to use an example from my own life that has just occurred to me, that at an early age you avoided internecine conflict in the family home by hiding in your room or running away in some manner, and that this behaviour of avoiding people has unfortunately become a general attitude in adulthood. A more trivial and amusing example is that I was often nagged when I lived in the family home for not doing the washing up and for collecting several mugs at a time in my bedroom. Although I am now forty one and have lived on my own for ten years, I still find the washing up piles up and I only do it when I run out of plates, and that I do still collect mugs in my living room. Hmm, I'm going to have to sort that out...

I can, off the top of my head, think of a distressing number of examples of behaviour or thought processes/opinions which persisted for years, sometimes decades, after the original impetus had disappeared. Thankfully, due to my practice of the techniques contained herewithin, I have managed to successfully countermand most of these and am constantly on the lookout for erroneous thoughts or behaviours.

Not that this is a panacea for all ills. I still experience periods of negative thinking: perhaps I am lacking in sleep and too tired to apply these techniques, or for some other reason just don't have the energy to change my state of mind. Or, for some self-defeating reason, *I choose not to*.

At this point I will include some notes I wrote some time ago during a period of serious depression after reading a particularly insightful and useful book (please allow for the negative tone, I was feeling pretty awful when I wrote these words):

“It seems I have a mixture of the three types of depression – non-melancholic, melancholic and psychotic melancholia – in addition to having a *depressive personality*. THIS IS IMPORTANT, IT MEANS I HAVE LOW SELF-ESTEEM AND NEGATIVE THINKING EVEN WHEN I'M NOT DEPRESSED. I may also have Bi Polar II which, like diabetes, is a far less severe form. That's the only conclusion I can come to after reading the superb 'Dealing with Depression' by Gordon Parker. My mood swings are so rapid – from happiness to suicidal thoughts and back again within a few hours on a regular basis – and I had no response to SSRIs; both these and other aspects of my condition (psychomotor retardation, appetite gain, craving cigarettes etc) strongly indicate melancholic depression, bi-polar II & depressive personality. This seems to be an extremely difficult combination to treat!

I also seem to have delusions, in the way they're defined in this book i.e. illogical thinking. Other than that, it mentions CBT, the Gurdjieff stop exercise, and many things I KNOW ABOUT ALREADY

AND CAN ENACT, YET WHICH HAVEN'T CURED ME. My conclusion thus far is that I am essentially a negative, self-defeating person, even when not depressed.

I also have poor interpersonal skills and *social aversion* i.e. I tend, even when not depressed, to avoid people, see rejection and abandonment everywhere. This has entrenched itself over the years as a fundamental personality trait whereby I have ridiculously high expectations of friends and relationships, which are bound to lead to disappointment and a feeling of rejection or failure on my part.

Cognitively I know all this yet EMOTIONALLY I still, for some reason allow myself to become depressed because on some level I think either that I deserve it or that there's no point coming out of it because my life is shit anyway and I think that most of the time, even when not depressed. Therefore, what I need to change is my approach to life and my daily activities, not treat myself for depression again.

Basically, I retreat into depression, I now think, to let myself off the hook in the sense that I don't have to bother doing anything i.e. PURSUING MY DREAMS WHICH ARE ALL GOING TO FAIL ANYWAY SO WHAT'S THE POINT?"

It's quite difficult to read that again, but also very encouraging because I no longer think in that way and it seems like some other person. In the intervening passage of time I have changed the way I think about myself. I no longer see myself as somebody with a clinical condition over which I have no control. I now think more in terms of being somebody who is chronically prone to boredom and defeatedness and so I now do my utmost to be as mentally and physically active as I can every single day. Although I am by no means living my dream life, I have made considerable and hard won progress in that direction and in many ways this has been the best ever year of my life. I am constantly learning new skills and taking tiny, incremental steps towards significant goals. The devil makes work for idle minds...

When you're in a situation of stress or fear the hypothalamus introduces cortisol, a stress chemical, and adrenaline into your central nervous system. This results in the 'fight or flight' mechanism. Once you have extricated yourself from the situation these chemicals begin to dissipate. However, if you return to the situation within thirty minutes, the chemicals will immediately shoot back up to maximum level, making you stressed or fearful again. This is why some people are in an almost constant state of stress or anxiety, because they rarely have a long-term break from the triggers. Also, these chemicals don't just disappear, they have to go somewhere. The effects of this can be headaches, sickness, sweating, increased heart rate etc.

Also, whenever your brain encounters a situation it scans for something similar in order to decide how to react. So, the more often you become stressed, the more often your central nervous system will react in the same way again. Therefore, in order to avoid this cycle, you have to remove yourself from the triggers for a sustained period of time, certainly more than half an hour, before you will be able to return and deal with them calmly and rationally.

We can't control all the external events in our lives, or the actions of other people, but we can control the way that we *react to them*.

## IMAGINARY CONSEQUENCES OF IMAGINARY ACTIONS

Inefficient thinking and unnecessary worrying. Two of the biggest problems, I contend, that we humans face on a daily basis.

Our brains have evolved to seek out patterns and also to REPRESENT the world. A memory is a RE-PRESENTATION of a past event, not a piece of indelible film. This may not surprise you, but it may be hard to grasp that our very view of the world, all the stimuli you are processing at this very second, is also never one hundred percent accurate. When we look at an object we see not the thing itself but a reflection of the light bouncing off it, which enters our eyes upside down and is then projected back to us the right way up. Any kind of processing is vulnerable and error-prone: it takes only a tiny fault in our brain-wiring for us to see or hear things that aren't there. For example, it has been shown that many schizophrenics have a very simple but devastating fault in their auditory canal that causes some of their own thoughts to sound like they are being whispered in their ear. In fact this very week I heard on the radio the case (not as uncommon as you think) of a woman who constantly hears music in her head as if it is being played in her immediate vicinity. At first she complained to her neighbours because it sounded as if the music were being played very loudly next door. It is now thought that many people suffer from this, but never tell anyone for fear of being thought 'mad'. You don't have to have a mental illness to get these sort of problems: anyone can experience schizophrenic type symptoms without actually having schizophrenia. I once experienced one of my thoughts as if it were being shouted very loudly in my head and it was in a voice totally different to my own. As I was at that time on a psychology course I found the experience quite interesting and certainly wasn't at all worried by it, but I can see how many people would have found it frightening (as indeed I may well have if it continued to occur every day for many weeks).

My point is that this type of *sense processing error* can occur in anyone at any time. Our peripheral vision is only twenty percent accurate so it's by no means surprising that people often see things which aren't there 'out of the corner of their eye'. I myself frequently experience the erroneous sense of a static object moving when I move my head. This is a perfectly 'natural' hallucination (in the sense that it can arise out of normal brain functioning) yet only a few hundred years ago most people would have thought that they were seeing actual inanimate objects moving (in fact this may well be at the root of the belief common among ancient Greek philosophers that all matter was in some way 'living', and the later belief among alchemists that all matter could be 'reanimated').

A concomitant of all this is that, counter-intuitive as it sounds, our brains and our senses are constantly lying to us. Our imagination is also very good at making things up and presenting these fruits as if they have come from our external senses – some times we just can't tell the difference. The myth of us only using ten percent of our brains is entirely fallacious, but what is true is that the brain needs constant 'exercise'. If areas lie dormant for too long they will activate themselves and find something to do. If you've ever meditated you'll know how hard it is to clear your mind and think of nothing - it is all but impossible. If you don't have enough brain activity going on, something will start happening. This may take the form of *erroneous extrapolation* (don't bother googling that phrase, I've just invented it).

What I mean is that you may find yourself expending much mental energy worrying about something that hasn't happened yet, but your over-active imagination has persuaded you is a tangible problem that requires your attention. We worry about the possible consequences of as yet non-existent actions, consequences we have no way of predicting; we worry about situations we are not yet in, or which have long past; we worry about what other people may or may not be thinking about us; we

worry that we should have behaved differently in the past; we worry about what *might* happen: all this is a waste of mental energy that can only lead to stress and unhappiness. One of the most difficult aspects of human consciousness is concentrating on the here and now. Meditation can help with this, but it still requires a substantial effort to focus on the tangible present to the exclusion of everything else that is floating around your brain.

Colin Wilson has been outlining these sort of ideas for over fifty years, and many of his books have been a huge influence on me. I recently read his autobiography 'Dreaming To Some Purpose' and much of it chimes precisely with what I've been thinking about while writing this book. To quote just one example, he uses the phrase *upside-downness* to illustrate the state of mind where negativity turns your whole world view on its head. "[This] is one of the worst perils we face. You could almost imagine it as a kind of homicidal demon whose job is to depress and discourage us, and whose ultimate triumph would be to make us commit suicide." [p. 349]

This is a worryingly accurate description of some of my past negative episodes. I only read this two days ago, yet I have felt for many years that there is 'another person' in my head who wants me to kill myself. When we are in this state of *upside-downness* all logic goes out of the window and we easily find ourselves believing anything. When depressed I spend an inordinate amount of time worrying about things that either happened decades ago and which I cannot change (and don't exert any influence on me now in any case) or the consequences of events which I imagine will happen at some point in the future. I sometimes worry more about these things than actual life-events which *are* happening to me. I also sometimes start down the path of *hoping* that something will go wrong and then worrying about the imaginary consequences – these are the insidious actions of the 'homicidal demon' lurking somewhere in my head. In rational moments I can dismiss all this as nonsense, but sooner or later it ends up catching me out again (though I am happy to report that I can now often 'head him off at the pass', or simply ignore him until he shuts up like the attention seeking child he is).

## COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Cognitive dissonance is a pernicious, yet seemingly necessary and inescapable, aspect of human consciousness. Put simply, it is the ability of our brain to hold two polar opposite, totally contradictory thoughts at once. This ability would have evolved because without it we would quickly be driven insane by the innumerable paradoxes of our existence. It gives us the capacity to assimilate contradiction and nonsense without our brain ceasing to function, but it also gives us the capacity to believe things for which there is no logical justification or empirical evidence. It allows us to simultaneously believe that something is true but also acknowledge that it might be false. This inbuilt sense of illogic can have dangerous consequences, as can our inability to accept things that seem *counter-intuitive*. It *looks like* the sun goes around the earth; it *looks like* the earth is the center of the universe; it *looks like* there must be a spiritual dimension beyond the physical which accounts for all the things we don't understand; it *looks like* there must be all these global conspiracy theories because otherwise we have to accept the mundanity of our existence.

I believe that failure to counteract cognitive dissonance accounts for much of the wrong thinking and negativity in the world. It leads to us living in the state which Sartre characterised as Bad Faith.



## THE FALLACY OF DIGITAL THINKING

Undoubtedly one of the stupidest sentences ever uttered is “You're either with us or against us”. I'm not just saying that out of righteous hatred of one of the most divisive, unevolved idiots ever to *disgrace* the face of the earth, but rather because it is a perfect example of the sort of erroneous dualistic thinking that bedevils human existence. What he meant by this utterance was that any country that declined to join in the 'coalition' that invaded Iraq was ideologically opposed to the coalition and by extension supported September 11<sup>th</sup> and (a subtly implied threat) a legitimate target for American revenge.

In effect this statement says that if you do not believe in or agree with something then you *must* agree with it's polar opposite. This sort of 'black and white' thinking (and we'll come to that phrase itself in due course) is one of the biggest problems facing us today. Human beings have evolved over the last few million years into people who feel safe with predictability; we are constantly monitoring our environment for things we cannot understand or predict and we become highly anxious and defensive when we find them. We need to be able to predict what is going to happen next so that we can scan our memories for a previous similar experience and utilise the same coping mechanisms again – this is the process we call learning. Our ideal world would consist entirely of experiences and situations that are *either or* – i.e. Black or white. In reality 99.99% of our experiences are a sludgy shade of grey and we never undergo *exactly* the same experience twice so we have to carry out the exhausting task of assessing each experience on its individual merits and not comparing it to something *similar* but not *identical* from before and merely copying that course of action.

Well, that's how human society should work, but a cursory glance proves that it doesn't. As I write this there is incessant talk of a global recession and the bulk of the reaction seems to consist of comparing this situation to previous ones. This is logically invalid and futile. For some reason – the random exigencies of evolutionary adaptation no doubt – we appear as a species to be able to evaluate things on their individual merits. How many music or film reviews have you read that don't compare the current work to a previous one? “The best thing since a previous one...”, “Not as good as the one they did last time...” etc. There seems to be a global, all encompassing obsession with the past, and with comparing new things to old ones. Could it be that the past is safe, predictable and comprehensible and that analysing it fulfills our basic need for predictability? If we can compare our current experience or situation with an old one then we can comfort ourselves with the false idea that we can cope with the current situation because it is nothing new and therefore nothing to be frightened of. Look at you own life and see if you can honestly say that it isn't ruled by this fallacious coping mechanism.

Back to the opening sentence, and it becomes obvious this dualistic all or nothing attitude is not merely the prerogative of vengeful presidents, but of all of us. Something is always either 'good' or 'evil', and it is usually heavily implied that if something is not 'good' then it *must* be 'evil': if not a then b. This dualistic fallacy has a devastating effect on our thinking – it leads to one of the biggest mistakes we can ever make: *defining something by a property which it lacks*. This is wrong in every possible way, and the resultant false thinking is manifest everywhere: if you're *not* a Muslim then you *must* be an infidel; if you're *not* a Christian then you *must* be a heretic; if you *don't* rabidly decry paedophilia at every possible opportunity then you *must* be in favour of it; if you *don't* openly disagree with something then you *must* have given tacit consent to it; if you're *not* with us then you *must* be against us. All these arguments are logically, philosophically and in every other sense WRONG, but many people still live their lives by them, and many official decisions that affect us all are made using these erroneous criteria.

It makes for a much happier belief if you believe that your thoughts are never 100% positive or negative, you are never 100% a good or bad person – everything is on a continuum.

## CONCLUSION: CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Consciousness is generally understood to be our subjective, internal sense of our own selves – qualia, as psychologists and philosophers have christened it. But we all feel that it is so much more than that. We feel that there is a single, central 'I' inside us, the 'me' that looks out upon the world, thinks about our situation, our environment and other people, and comes to some conscious decisions about what we should do with our lives and how we should act. Some people call this the *soul*, others call it the *mind* – they are all equally wrong. We can certainly dismiss the soul as an outdated, unnecessary metaphysical abstraction which is simply not needed to explain human thought and behaviour, but can the same be said of the mind – the thing which for centuries has been held up by science and philosophy as the grand centre of all that is human? It would seem that the answer is yes.

I've always thought that the whole concept of a mind was unnecessary – to me it smacked of woolly religious-style reasoning. There is a lump of grey porridge in our head that contains all our thoughts, memories, plans and emotions. It is called *the brain* and it can be weighed and measured (after you've died, preferably) and we can put it into a scanner and physically record which areas of the brain are working when you engage in a particular mental or physical task. Thus we have been able in recent years to begin drawing a complex, highly accurate map showing which clusters of neurons are active during, for example, the reading of words, the hearing of words (two completely different, unconnected areas), *imagining* carrying out a physical task (which to the brain is exactly the same as *physically doing the task*), recalling certain distant memories etc. In this way we now know that the brain is *modular* in nature, with specific tasks occurring in distinct neuronal clusters, and that there is no Central Processing Unit in the brain as there is in a computer. The brain/computer analogy does have a limited validity, but they are fundamentally different because a computer *has been designed all at once* and therefore has a centralised command structure, whereas the brain *evolved over three billion years* and is therefore decentralised with individual areas concentrating on specific tasks, entirely independent of other areas and functions.

This can be demonstrated by studies of localised brain injury or malfunction. We now know that, for example, someone can lose the ability to read language but retain the ability to read music *because they are two entirely separate functions located in different brain regions*. As this is the case, surely it becomes impossible to think of us as being a holistic personality? And surely, as we can now measure all conceivable mental activity occurring within the physical brain, it also makes the need for a metaphysical 'mind' wholly redundant?

Indeed, I would argue that the whole area of metaphysics is now wholly redundant. There are only two things that exist in the universe – physical matter and abstract concepts. All human consciousness consists solely of the former – electrochemical impulses firing between the axons and dendrites of various neurons. To attribute human existence or the universe to anything *beyond* physical, chemical interactions is an unnecessary and fallacious epiphenomenal encumbrance. Not only is there no need for any metaphysical, mystical or spiritual aspect to existence, there is absolutely no evidence for it that cannot now be refuted by a brain scan. Indeed, a thoroughly convincing and 'real' religious experience can be induced in the laboratory by electrically stimulating certain brain regions. Until fairly recently, God was the best available explanation for people's subjective experience of hearing voices or having

some kind of 'spiritual' experience. Neuroscience and fMRI have rendered this a redundant, unnecessary explanation. The brain produces *everything* that we feel, experience, think, plan and do – any notions of there being something else involved in the human experience are simply a delusion resulting from outdated modes of thinking.

I quoted Colin Wilson earlier and his theory of *upside-downness*. It is important to conclude this book by emphasising, as he does time and time again in his work, that **THIS IS NOT OUR NATURAL STATE**. Much as I have enjoyed a lot of existential writing, most of it, especially the fiction, gives credence to the lie that the normal state of existence is negativity and despair. Many writers, philosophers and musicians over the years have been guilty of peddling this notion of *romantic nihilism*, that there is somehow something noble or intellectually superior about living in this condition. They look down on people leading simple, happy lives as idiots who should know better. This is a deeply toxic and unnecessary viewpoint. Somebody once said to me 'Philosophy tells happy people where they're going wrong', and I knew exactly what he meant. So in many ways my aim in writing this series of books is the same as Colin Wilson's in much of his work – to combat this nihilistic view of human existence.

I am a hardline empiricist reductionist atheist. I don't even believe that anything metaphysical exists. After decades of study and thought I have tried to narrow down my thoughts on all this to the core ideas and construct an all-encompassing philosophical/psychological *theory of everything*. Here is a tentative summary, which serves as my answer to the meaning of life:

There are only two things in the universe – physical matter and abstract metaphysical concepts. The latter only exist as concepts within the mind of human beings, which consist entirely of physical matter. Indeed, mind and consciousness themselves are unnecessary metaphysical abstractions. Existence, or the universe, is neither *meaningful* nor *meaningless*, it just *is*. Meaning, purpose, coincidence, reason are all metaphysical concepts we have invented. **WHY** questions are null and void, things just *are*. If you believe in a metaphysical entity, there can be no possibility of communication between you and it because you are a physical entity and nothing more. The universe does not know we are here and does not care about us. Fate is an invented, abstract metaphysical concept. Therefore, *there is no meaning of life*. Life is merely our word for the state we find ourselves in.

However, this does not mean that human existence is axiomatically a negative state of being. Rather, we are **FREE** to decide on our own subjective definition of what a good life is and then do our best to try to live it. We are only here for a short time, a blink of a cosmic eye, and we are born without an instruction manual. The joy of life is to explore our own imagination, to think, to be, to create, to experience, to do, to simply live a life and realise how lucky we are to be here at all.

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