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# **On the Wisdom of Life: Aphorisms**

**Arthur Schopenhauer**

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## On the Wisdom of Life: Aphorisms.

The simple Philistine believes that life is something infinite and unconditioned, and tries to look upon it and live it as though it left nothing to be desired. By method and principle the learned Philistine does the same: he believes that his methods and his principles are unconditionally perfect and objectively valid; so that as soon as he has found them, he has nothing to do but apply them to circumstances, and then approve or condemn. But happiness and truth are not to be seized in this fashion. It is phantoms of them alone that are sent to us here, to stir us to action; the average man pursues the shadow of happiness with unwearied labour; and the thinker, the shadow of truth; and both, though phantoms are all they have, possess in them as much as they can grasp. Life is a language in which certain truths are conveyed to us; could we learn them in some other way, we should not live. Thus it is that wise sayings and prudential maxims will never make up for the lack of experience, or be a substitute for life itself. Still they are not to be despised; for they, too, are a part of life; nay, they should be highly esteemed and regarded as the loose pages which others have copied from the book of truth as it is imparted by the spirit of the world. But they are pages which must needs be imperfect, and can never replace the real living voice. Still less can this be so when we reflect that life, or the book of truth, speaks differently to us all; like the apostles who preached at Pentecost, and instructed the multitude, appearing to each man to speak in his own tongue.

Recognise the truth in yourself, recognise yourself in the truth; and in the same moment you will find, to your astonishment, that the home which you have long been looking for in vain, which has filled your most ardent dreams, is there in its entirety, with every detail of it true, in the very place where you stand. It is there that your heaven touches your earth.

What makes us almost inevitably ridiculous is our serious way of treating the passing moment, as though it necessarily had all the importance which it seems to have. It is only a few great minds that are above this weakness, and, instead of being laughed at, have come to laugh themselves.

The bright and good moments of our life ought to teach us how to act aright when we are melancholy and dull and stupid, by preserving the memory of their results; and the melancholy, dull, and stupid moments should teach us to be modest when we are bright. For we generally value ourselves according to our best and brightest moments; and those in which we are weak and dull and miserable, we regard as no proper part of us. To remember them will teach us to be modest, humble, and tolerant.

Mark my words once for all, my dear friend, and be clever. Men are entirely self-centred, and incapable of looking at things objectively. If you had a dog and wanted to make him fond of you, and fancied that of your hundred rare and excellent characteristics the mongrel would be sure to perceive one, and that that would be sufficient to make him devoted to you body and soul — if, I say, you fancied that, you would be a fool. Pat him,

give him something to eat; and for the rest, be what you please: he will not in the least care, but will be your faithful and devoted dog. Now, believe me, it is just the same with men — exactly the same. As Goethe says, man or dog, it is a miserable wretch:

*Denn ein erbärmlicher Schuft, so wie der Mensch, ist der hund.*

If you ask why these contemptible fellows are so lucky, it is just because, in themselves and for themselves and to themselves, they are nothing at all. The value which they possess is merely comparative; they exist only for others; they are never more than means; they are never an end and object in themselves; they are mere bait, set to catch others.\* I do not admit that this rule is susceptible of any exception, that is to say, complete exceptions. There are, it is true, men — though they are sufficiently rare — who enjoy some subjective moments; nay, there are perhaps some who for every hundred subjective moments enjoy a few that are objective; but a higher state of perfection scarcely ever occurs. But do not take yourself for an exception: examine your love, your friendship, and consider if your objective judgments are not mostly subjective judgments in disguise; consider if you duly recognise the good qualities of a man who is not fond of you. Then be tolerant: confound it! it's your duty. As you are all so self-centred, recognise your own weakness. You know that you cannot like a man who does not show himself friendly to you; you know that he cannot do so for any length of time unless he likes you, and that he cannot like you unless you show that you are friendly to him; then do it: your false friendliness will gradually become a true one. Your own weakness and subjectivity must have some illusion.

*(\*) All this is very euphemistically expressed in the Sophoclean verse:*

(Greek: charis charin gar estin ha tiktous aei)

This is really an à priori justification of politeness; but I could give a still deeper reason for it.

Consider that chance, which, with error, its brother, and folly, its aunt, and malice, its grandmother, rules in this world; which every year and every day, by blows great and small, embitters the life of every son of earth, and yours too; consider, I say, that it is to this wicked power that you owe your prosperity and independence; for it gave you what it refused to many thousands, just to be able to give it to individuals like you. Remembering all this, you will not behave as though you had a right to the possession of its gifts; but you will perceive what a capricious mistress it is that gives you her favours; and therefore when she takes it into her head to deprive you of some or all of them, you will not make a great fuss about her injustice; but you will recognise that what chance gave, chance has taken away; if needs be, you will observe that this power is not quite so favourable to you as she seemed to be hitherto. Why, she might have disposed not only of what she gave you, but also of your honest and hard-earned gains.

But if chance still remains so favourable to you as to give you more than almost all others whose path in life you may care to examine, oh! be happy; do not struggle for the possession of her presents; employ them properly; look upon them as property held from a capricious lord; use them wisely and well.

The Aristotelian principle of keeping the mean in all things is ill suited to the moral law for which it was intended; but it may easily be the best general rule of worldly wisdom, the best precept for a happy life. For life is so full of uncertainty; there are on all sides so many discomforts, burdens, sufferings, dangers, that a safe and happy voyage can be accomplished only by steering carefully through the rocks. As a rule, the fear of the ills we know drive us into the contrary ills; the pain of solitude, for example, drives us into society, and the first society that comes; the discomforts of society drive us into solitude; we exchange a forbidding demeanour for incautious confidence and so on. It is ever the mark of folly to avoid one vice by rushing into its contrary:

*Stulti dum vitant vitia in contraria currunt.*

Or else we think that we shall find satisfaction in something, and spend all our efforts on it; and thereby we omit to provide for the satisfaction of a hundred other wishes which make themselves felt at their own time. One loss and omission follows another, and there is no end to the misery.

[Greek: Maeden agan] and nil admirari are, therefore, excellent rules of worldly wisdom.

We often find that people of great experience are the most frank and cordial in their intercourse with complete strangers, in whom they have no interest whatever. The reason of this is that men of experience know that it is almost impossible for people who stand in any sort of mutual relation to be sincere and open with one another; but that there is always more or less of a strain between them, due to the fact that they are looking after their own interests, whether immediate or remote. They regret the fact, but they know that it is so; hence they leave their own people, rush into the arms of a complete stranger, and in happy confidence open their hearts to him. Thus it is that monks and the like, who have given up the world and are strangers to it, are such good people to turn to for advice.

It is only by practising mutual restraint and self-denial that we can act and talk with other people; and, therefore, if we have to converse at all, it can only be with a feeling of resignation. For if we seek society, it is because we want fresh impressions: these come from without, and are therefore foreign to ourselves. If a man fails to perceive this, and, when he seeks the society of others, is unwilling to practise resignation, and absolutely refuses to deny himself, nay, demands that others, who are altogether different from himself, shall nevertheless be just what he wants them to be for the moment, according to the degree of education which he has reached, or according to his intellectual powers or his mood — the man, I say, who does this, is in contradiction with himself. For while he wants some one who shall be different from himself, and wants him just because he is different, for the sake of society and fresh influence, he nevertheless demands that this other individual shall precisely resemble the imaginary creature who accords with his mood, and have no thoughts but those which he has himself.

Women are very liable to subjectivity of this kind; but men are not free from it either.

I observed once to Goethe, in complaining of the illusion and vanity of life, that when a

friend is with us we do not think the same of him as when he is away. He replied: "Yes! because the absent friend is yourself, and he exists only in your head; whereas the friend who is present has an individuality of his own, and moves according to laws of his own, which cannot always be in accordance with those which you form for yourself."

A good supply of resignation is of the first importance in providing for the journey of life. It is a supply which we shall have to extract from disappointed hopes; and the sooner we do it, the better for the rest of the journey.

How should a man be content so long as he fails to obtain complete unity in his inmost being? For as long as two voices alternately speak in him, what is right for one must be wrong for the other. Thus he is always complaining. But has any man ever been completely at one with himself? Nay, is not the very thought a contradiction?

That a man shall attain this inner unity is the impossible and inconsistent pretension put forward by almost all philosophers.\* For as a man it is natural to him to be at war with himself as long as he lives. While he can be only one thing thoroughly, he has the disposition to be everything else, and the inalienable possibility of being it. If he has made his choice of one thing, all the other possibilities are always open to him, and are constantly claiming to be realised; and he has therefore to be continuously keeping them back, and to be overpowering and killing them as long as he wants to be that one thing. For example, if he wants to think only, and not act and do business, the disposition to the latter is not thereby destroyed all at once; but as long as the thinker lives, he has every hour to keep on killing the acting and pushing man that is within him; always battling with himself, as though he were a monster whose head is no sooner struck off than it grows again. In the same way, if he is resolved to be a saint, he must kill himself so far as he is a being that enjoys and is given over to pleasure; for such he remains as long as he lives. It is not once for all that he must kill himself: he must keep on doing it all his life. If he has resolved upon pleasure, whatever be the way in which it is to be obtained, his lifelong struggle is with a being that desires to be pure and free and holy; for the disposition remains, and he has to kill it every hour. And so on in everything, with infinite modifications; it is now one side of him, and now the other, that conquers; he himself is the battlefield. If one side of him is continually conquering, the other is continually struggling; for its life is bound up with his own, and, as a man, he is the possibility of many contradictions.

(\*) *Audacter licet profitearis, summum bonum esse animi concordian.* — Seneca.

How is inner unity even possible under such circumstances? It exists neither in the saint nor in the sinner; or rather, the truth is that no man is wholly one or the other. For it is men they have to be; that is, luckless beings, fighters and gladiators in the arena of life.

To be sure, the best thing he can do is to recognise which part of him smarts the most under defeat, and let it always gain the victory. This he will always be able to do by the use of his reason, which is an ever-present fund of ideas. Let him resolve of his own free will to undergo the pain which the defeat of the other part involves. This is character. For the battle of life cannot be waged free from all pain; it cannot come to an end without

bloodshed; and in any case a man must suffer pain, for he is the conquered as well as the conqueror. *Haec est vivendi conditio.*

The clever man, when he converses, will think less of what he is saying than of the person with whom he is speaking; for then he is sure to say nothing which he will afterwards regret; he is sure not to lay himself open, nor to commit an indiscretion. But his conversation will never be particularly interesting.

An intellectual man readily does the opposite, and with him the person with whom he converses is often no more than the mere occasion of a monologue; and it often happens that the other then makes up for his subordinate rôle by lying in wait for the man of intellect, and drawing his secrets out of him.

Nothing betrays less knowledge of humanity than to suppose that, if a man has a great many friends, it is a proof of merit and intrinsic value: as though men gave their friendship according to value and merit! as though they were not, rather, just like dogs, which love the person that pats them and gives them bits of meat, and never trouble themselves about anything else! The man who understands how to pat his fellows best, though they be the nastiest brutes — that's the man who has many friends.

It is the converse that is true. Men of great intellectual worth, or, still more, men of genius, can have only very few friends; for their clear eye soon discovers all defects, and their sense of rectitude is always being outraged afresh by the extent and the horror of them. It is only extreme necessity that can compel such men not to betray their feelings, or even to stroke the defects as if they were beautiful additions. Personal love (for we are not speaking of the reverence which is gained by authority) cannot be won by a man of genius, unless the gods have endowed him with an indestructible cheerfulness of temper, a glance that makes the world look beautiful, or unless he has succeeded by degrees in taking men exactly as they are; that is to say, in making a fool of the fools, as is right and proper. On the heights we must expect to be solitary.

Our constant discontent is for the most part rooted in the impulse of self-preservation. This passes into a kind of selfishness, and makes a duty out of the maxim that we should always fix our minds upon what we lack, so that we may endeavour to procure it. Thus it is that we are always intent on finding out what we want, and on thinking of it; but that maxim allows us to overlook undisturbed the things which we already possess; and so, as soon as we have obtained anything, we give it much less attention than before. We seldom think of what we have, but always of what we lack.

This maxim of egoism, which has, indeed, its advantages in procuring the means to the end in view, itself concurrently destroys the ultimate end, namely, contentment; like the bear in the fable that throws a stone at the hermit to kill the fly on his nose. We ought to wait until need and privation announce themselves, instead of looking for them. Minds that are naturally content do this, while hypochondrists do the reverse.

A man's nature is in harmony with itself when he desires to be nothing but what he is; that is to say, when he has attained by experience a knowledge of his strength and of his weakness, and makes use of the one and conceals the other, instead of playing with false coin, and trying to show a strength which he does not possess. It is a harmony which produces an agreeable and rational character; and for the simple reason that everything

which makes the man and gives him his mental and physical qualities is nothing but the manifestation of his will; is, in fact, what he wills. Therefore it is the greatest of all inconsistencies to wish to be other than we are.

People of a strange and curious temperament can be happy only under strange circumstances, such as suit their nature, in the same way as ordinary circumstances suit the ordinary man; and such circumstances can arise only if, in some extraordinary way, they happen to meet with strange people of a character different indeed, but still exactly suited to their own. That is why men of rare or strange qualities are seldom happy.

All this pleasure is derived from the use and consciousness of power; and the greatest of pains that a man can feel is to perceive that his powers fail just when he wants to use them. Therefore it will be advantageous for every man to discover what powers he possesses, and what powers he lacks. Let him, then, develop the powers in which he is pre-eminent, and make a strong use of them; let him pursue the path where they will avail him; and even though he has to conquer his inclinations, let him avoid the path where such powers are requisite as he possesses only in a low degree. In this way he will often have a pleasant consciousness of strength, and seldom a painful consciousness of weakness; and it will go well with him. But if he lets himself be drawn into efforts demanding a kind of strength quite different from that in which he is pre-eminent, he will experience humiliation; and this is perhaps the most painful feeling with which a man can be afflicted.

Yet there are two sides to everything. The man who has insufficient self-confidence in a sphere where he has little power, and is never ready to make a venture, will on the one hand not even learn how to use the little power that he has; and on the other, in a sphere in which he would at least be able to achieve something, there will be a complete absence of effort, and consequently of pleasure. This is always hard to bear; for a man can never draw a complete blank in any department of human welfare without feeling some pain.

As a child, one has no conception of the inexorable character of the laws of nature, and of the stubborn way in which everything persists in remaining what it is. The child believes that even lifeless things are disposed to yield to it; perhaps because it feels itself one with nature, or, from mere unacquaintance with the world, believes that nature is disposed to be friendly. Thus it was that when I was a child, and had thrown my shoe into a large vessel full of milk, I was discovered entreating the shoe to jump out. Nor is a child on its guard against animals until it learns that they are ill-natured and spiteful. But not before we have gained mature experience do we recognise that human character is unalterable; that no entreaty, or representation, or example, or benefit, will bring a man to give up his ways; but that, on the contrary, every man is compelled to follow his own mode of acting and thinking, with the necessity of a law of nature; and that, however we take him, he always remains the same. It is only after we have obtained a clear and profound knowledge of this fact that we give up trying to persuade people, or to alter them and bring them round to our way of thinking. We try to accommodate ourselves to theirs instead, so far as they are indispensable to us, and to keep away from them so far as we cannot possibly agree.

Ultimately we come to perceive that even in matters of mere intellect — although its laws are the same for all, and the subject as opposed to the object of thought does not really enter into individuality — there is, nevertheless, no certainty that the whole truth of any matter can be communicated to any one, or that any one can be persuaded or compelled to

assent to it; because, as Bacon says, *intellectus humanus luminis sicci non est*: the light of the human intellect is coloured by interest and passion.

It is just because all happiness is of a negative character that, when we succeed in being perfectly at our ease, we are not properly conscious of it. Everything seems to pass us softly and gently, and hardly to touch us until the moment is over; and then it is the positive feeling of something lacking that tells us of the happiness which has vanished; it is then that we observe that we have failed to hold it fast, and we suffer the pangs of self-reproach as well as of privation.

Every happiness that a man enjoys, and almost every friendship that he cherishes, rest upon illusion; for, as a rule, with increase of knowledge they are bound to vanish. Nevertheless, here as elsewhere, a man should courageously pursue truth, and never weary of striving to settle accounts with himself and the world. No matter what happens to the right or to the left of him — be it a chimaera or fancy that makes him happy, let him take heart and go on, with no fear of the desert which widens to his view. Of one thing only must he be quite certain: that under no circumstances will he discover any lack of worth in himself when the veil is raised; the sight of it would be the Gorgon that would kill him. Therefore, if he wants to remain undeceived, let him in his inmost being feel his own worth. For to feel the lack of it is not merely the greatest, but also the only true affliction; all other sufferings of the mind may not only be healed, but may be immediately relieved, by the secure consciousness of worth. The man who is assured of it can sit down quietly under sufferings that would otherwise bring him to despair; and though he has no pleasures, no joys and no friends, he can rest in and on himself; so powerful is the comfort to be derived from a vivid consciousness of this advantage; a comfort to be preferred to every other earthly blessing. Contrarily, nothing in the world can relieve a man who knows his own worthlessness; all that he can do is to conceal it by deceiving people or deafening them with his noise; but neither expedient will serve him very long.

We must always try to preserve large views. If we are arrested by details we shall get confused, and see things awry. The success or the failure of the moment, and the impression that they make, should count for nothing.\*

*(\*) Translator's Note. — Schopenhauer, for some reason that is not apparent, wrote this remark in French.*

How difficult it is to learn to understand oneself, and clearly to recognise what it is that one wants before anything else; what it is, therefore, that is most immediately necessary to our happiness; then what comes next; and what takes the third and the fourth place, and so on.

Yet, without this knowledge, our life is planless, like a captain without a compass.

The sublime melancholy which leads us to cherish a lively conviction of the worthlessness of everything of all pleasures and of all mankind, and therefore to long for nothing, but to feel that life is merely a burden which must be borne to an end that cannot be very distant, is a much happier state of mind than any condition of desire, which, be it never so

cheerful, would have us place a value on the illusions of the world, and strive to attain them.

This is a fact which we learn from experience; and it is clear, à priori, that one of these is a condition of illusion, and the other of knowledge.

Whether it is better to marry or not to marry is a question which in very many cases amounts to this: Are the cares of love more endurable than the anxieties of a livelihood?

Marriage is a trap which nature sets for us. \*

*(\*) Translator's Note. — Also in French.*

Poets and philosophers who are married men incur by that very fact the suspicion that they are looking to their own welfare, and not to the interests of science and art.

Habit is everything. Hence to be calm and unruffled is merely to anticipate a habit; and it is a great advantage not to need to form it.

“Personality is the element of the greatest happiness.” Since pain and boredom are the two chief enemies of human happiness, nature has provided our personality with a protection against both. We can ward off pain, which is more often of the mind than of the body, by cheerfulness; and boredom by intelligence. But neither of these is akin to the other; nay, in any high degree they are perhaps incompatible. As Aristotle remarks, genius is allied to melancholy; and people of very cheerful disposition are only intelligent on the surface. The better, therefore, anyone is by nature armed against one of these evils, the worse, as a rule, is he armed against the other.

There is no human life that is free from pain and boredom; and it is a special favour on the part of fate if a man is chiefly exposed to the evil against which nature has armed him the better; if fate, that is, sends a great deal of pain where there is a very cheerful temper in which to bear it, and much leisure where there is much intelligence, but not vice versâ. For if a man is intelligent, he feels pain doubly or trebly; and a cheerful but unintellectual temper finds solitude and unoccupied leisure altogether unendurable.

In the sphere of thought, absurdity and perversity remain the masters of this world, and their dominion is suspended only for brief periods. Nor is it otherwise in art; for there genuine work, seldom found and still more seldom appreciated, is again and again driven out by dullness, insipidity, and affectation.

It is just the same in the sphere of action. Most men, says Bias, are bad. Virtue is a stranger in this world; and boundless egoism, cunning and malice, are always the order of the day. It is wrong to deceive the young on this point, for it will only make them feel later on that their teachers were the first to deceive them. If the object is to render the pupil a better man by telling him that others are excellent, it fails; and it would be more to the purpose to say: Most men are bad, it is for you to be better. In this way he would, at least, be sent out into the world armed with a shrewd foresight, instead of having to be convinced by bitter experience that his teachers were wrong.

All ignorance is dangerous, and most errors must be dearly paid. And good luck must he have that carries unchastised an error in his head unto his death.\*

*(\*) Translator's Note. — This, again, is Schopenhauer's own English.*

Every piece of success has a doubly beneficial effect upon us when, apart from the special and material advantage which it brings it is accompanied by the enlivening assurance that the world, fate, or the daemon within, does not mean so badly with us, nor is so opposed to our prosperity as we had fancied; when, in fine, it restores our courage to live.

Similarly, every misfortune or defeat has, in the contrary sense, an effect that is doubly depressing.

If we were not all of us exaggeratedly interested in ourselves, life would be so uninteresting that no one could endure it.

Everywhere in the world, and under all circumstances, it is only by force that anything can be done; but power is mostly in bad hands, because baseness is everywhere in a fearful majority.

Why should it be folly to be always intent on getting the greatest possible enjoyment out of the moment, which is our only sure possession? Our whole life is no more than a magnified present, and in itself as fleeting.

As a consequence of his individuality and the position in which he is placed, everyone without exception lives in a certain state of limitation, both as regards his ideas and the opinions which he forms. Another man is also limited, though not in the same way; but should he succeed in comprehending the other's limitation he can confuse and abash him, and put him to shame, by making him feel what his limitation is, even though the other be far and away his superior. Shrewd people often employ this circumstance to obtain a false and momentary advantage.

The only genuine superiority is that of the mind and character; all other kinds are fictitious, affected, false; and it is good to make them feel that it is so when they try to show off before the superiority that is true.\*

*(\*) Translator's Note. — In the original this also is in French.*

All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players.

Exactly! Independently of what a man really is in himself, he has a part to play, which fate has imposed upon him from without, by determining his rank, education, and circumstances. The most immediate application of this truth appears to me to be that in life, as on the stage, we must distinguish between the actor and his part; distinguish, that is, the man in himself from his position and reputation — from the part which rank and

circumstances have imposed upon him. How often it is that the worst actor plays the king, and the best the beggar! This may happen in life, too; and a man must be very crude to confuse the actor with his part.

Our life is so poor that none of the treasures of the world can make it rich; for the sources of enjoyment are soon found to be all very scanty, and it is in vain that we look for one that will always flow. Therefore, as regards our own welfare, there are only two ways in which we can use wealth. We can either spend it in ostentatious pomp, and feed on the cheap respect which our imaginary glory will bring us from the infatuated crowd; or, by avoiding all expenditure that will do us no good, we can let our wealth grow, so that we may have a bulwark against misfortune and want that shall be stronger and better every day; in view of the fact that life, though it has few delights, is rich in evils.

It is just because our real and inmost being is will that it is only by its exercise that we can attain a vivid consciousness of existence, although this is almost always attended by pain. Hence it is that existence is essentially painful, and that many persons for whose wants full provision is made arrange their day in accordance with extremely regular, monotonous, and definite habits. By this means they avoid all the pain which the movement of the will produces; but, on the other hand, their whole existence becomes a series of scenes and pictures that mean nothing. They are hardly aware that they exist. Nevertheless, it is the best way of settling accounts with life, so long as there is sufficient change to prevent an excessive feeling of boredom. It is much better still if the Muses give a man some worthy occupation, so that the pictures which fill his consciousness have some meaning, and yet not a meaning that can be brought into any relation with his will.

A man is wise only on condition of living in a world full of fools.