

TEACH YOURSELF

# TO LIVE



The classic  
guide to  
finding  
happiness

C G L DU CANN

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# PREFACE

For the present year in which I write, England's national bill for formal education, central and local, is no less than £392,000,000.

But it is safe to say that not a single pound of that vast sum of money will be spent in teaching anyone the fundamental art of how to live to the best advantage. Almost every other conceivable branch of knowledge will be taught. Yet not the one subject which concerns us all more than any other and which should cover and include everything that it is really necessary and desirable for us to know.

A curious fact, truly! Nothing in the curriculum of schools and universities is of more importance than the art, science, and business of life. Everything else in the whole field of human knowledge is, after all, merely subsidiary and ancillary to living itself.

Perhaps it is because we are all conscious, teachers no less than others, of the profound, and indeed abysmal, ignorance of all of us on that great subject, that we shrink from trying to teach what we probably believe in our hearts to be incommunicable. Where Philosophy and Religion tread with doubt and fear, mere Worldly Wisdom may justly fear to rush in. Some of course will say that Life itself teaches us how to live. This is quite true. But through what processes of trial and error, what pain and suffering, and how often too late for our peace and our good! From much of this a helping hand and a warning voice might have saved us, for Experience, though the best of teachers, is often an expensive and cruel one.

Indeed, formal education does not get us very far. No University turns out a Shakespeare, a Dickens, a Bernard Shaw, a Newton, or an Einstein, a Beethoven or a Mozart. It is their own lives and their own natures that give such men the extra and original something which we call genius, and which raises them above their fellows to the enrichment of us all.

Progress in science and mechanics, owing to formal education it is true, has been stupendous. In the immediate past of my own lifetime, I have seen such miracles of new invention as the motor-car, the ever-faster aircraft, the radio, television, the atom and hydrogen bombs, supersonic speed, and the hope of interplanetary travel. But what progress have I seen in spirituality, morality, intellectuality, or in the art of great and gracious living to the best advantage in my lifetime?

It is devastating to have to answer: None.

People are not wiser or better to-day than they were in the days of ancient Greece or Rome. (Indeed, it might be argued quite plausibly that they are less wise and less good.) For one cannot imagine Marcus Aurelius or Jesus Christ accepting as inevitable such horrors as Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or the morality of nations which are preparing for the lunatic and diabolic Atom Warfare of the future which is to spare none. This is not human progress. It is human regression indeed—that we should sink below the spiritual and intellectual state of the ancients.

And if people are not better or wiser than of old, they are certainly no more effective or efficient in the art of living to the best advantage. Classical literature shows that plainly enough.

All this is the more reason for individual striving to be wiser and better. To live to the best advantage, whether at work or play, whether at home or abroad, whether in solitude or in multitude, from infancy to old age, at all times and in all circumstances, is surely no ignoble ideal. To live the fullest life, to develop one's self to one's full capacity, is surely what we should aspire to and strive to do. So imperfect is the human machine of body, mind, and spirit under the long and varied stress and strain of daily living, that this is not always attainable. None the less, we may reach our highest and best at times and at all times not fall too far below it.

In this great enterprise, one can only attain fullness of life by living and not by reading about it. Still, a book can help to a varying degree, dependent upon what a reader brings to it. It may stimulate or suggest. It may inspire or inspirit. It may gain assent or provoke dissent. It may be valuable in other ways. I hope this present book may help those who study it, especially youthful questioners of life, and that, at least, it may interest all

who pay its author the compliment of reading its lessons in the great art of effective living.

—*C. du C.*

## CHAPTER I

# TENURE AND CONDITIONS OF EXISTENCE

### 1. Yourself

**F**ACE the facts of life. Few do. Few dare. This is the first and most important thing in order to make the best of yourself and your life and in order to live to the best advantage in this terrestrial world.

When people talk of knowing the facts of life they usually mean nothing more than knowing about sex. It is true that sex is a fact of life, a fundamental fact, for many human beings the fundamental fact in one form or another for most of their life. But sex is, in spite of common misinterpretations of Freudian doctrine, far from being the whole of the facts of life. It is but one. And only for a period is it even the over-riding one in any human life.

What are life-facts? The first is Yourself. The second is Existence. The third is the limited nature of Yourself and your Existence. That is to say YOU EXIST ON TERMS. Those three things are inexorable, desperate facts unwilled by you and which you are completely powerless to alter.

Realise the limitations which these three facts of life impose on you. Otherwise you do not get a clear perspective of the problem of living in this world.

Take the first fact—Yourself. The current cant of our day and generation—this being the era of the common man—talks and writes as though You, Mr Everyman, have illimitable powers which by education and will-power in a properly organised State and other magical and miraculous nostrums can achieve the height of imaginable well-being and happiness. But you are not illimitable. By heredity and the mere fact of being a man or

woman, you are severely, and even perhaps cruelly, limited. The sins and virtues of your fathers are visited upon you, unjust though that be. You are as truly imprisoned within your physical and mental self as if you were captive and held in Dartmoor or Sing-Sing.

At the same time it is perfectly true that by education (using that word in its widest, and including its extra-scholastic, sense), by courage, energy, and determination; by pursuing unflinchingly some aim and purpose in life, you can perform miracles with Yourself. Yet there is a limit which says, "Thus far and no farther", like Canute to the sea-waves, and with more certainty.

For instance, your physical self may be capable—your body being the inherited thing it is—of growing to a maximum of (say) five feet ten inches. Lead a healthy well-nourished existence under the most favourable conditions during the years of growth, and you may attain that maximum. Live in an unhealthy slum and be ill-nourished under unfavourable conditions during that crucial period, and you may end by being five feet seven, or less.

But do what you will, you and your particular body cannot attain a height of over five feet ten inches. Others can. You cannot. Though you take thought for ever, your body will not do more than it can—by birth.

So much for your body. What of your mind? Alas! it is subject to the same iron law. If you are not a Beethoven, a Michel Angelo, a Shakespeare, a Newton, or an Einstein, all the Universities and studying in the world will not make you one.

Formal education, still better the informal education that is self-achieved; experience; exercise; and other facts, can immeasurably improve your mind as healthy eating and drinking and adequate care and exercise can improve your body. But there are limits to this mental-improvement process. If you are born tone-deaf (and many are) nothing will make you a musician. You cannot make literary minds into mathematical ones or engineering ones. Some minds are born incurably specialist. Others can manage a bit of everything. The tortoise-mind can never become a hare-mind—but it may outdistance the hare for all that.

This truth is so obviously true that even in popular parlance, the differing calibre of human minds is recognised by the word "gifted". There are minds with a distinct "gift" for words, or form,



or music, or mathematics, engineering and the rest. Mozart was an accomplished musician, John Stuart Mill an accomplished literary student even in infancy.

Recognise, then, that both in body and mind You are You, and not a better or worse Anybody Else. You are limited by Yourself. You can make the Best of Yourself—or fall short of that very desirable consummation so devoutly to be wished and pursued. But you cannot go beyond that.

How wise is the Greek axiom of Socrates: “Know Thyself.” This has been called the beginning of wisdom. It is so, indeed. And the first step in knowing oneself is to know one’s own limitations as well as one’s powers.

Depressing? Not a bit of it. No more depressing than a cold shower-bath is depressing. At first it may shock. But in a while it is exhilarating. You know where you are—exactly. You are no longer befogged and bewildered by false and misleading Illusion about yourself and life—like most people.

In Matthew Arnold’s phrase you “see life steadily and see it whole”. And yourself, too.

What are you to do with this limited Self of yours? You are of course to make the most of it, in its own interests as well as the world’s. (If you are religious, you will say this is your duty to God, your Neighbour, and your Self.)

As this Self is a body and a mind, not merely one or the other, you have a twofold task. You must take care, great care, of both. For they are all you have and are. Sacrifice neither one to the other, as athletes and students often do. Cultivate them both to the height of their powers so that each functions to your best advantage. That, and that only, is the whole problem of life.

So much for the You.

## **2. Existence**

Do you ever think about existence in general? Probably not. Yet you had better. After all, you do exist and can no other, as Martin Luther once said.

Existence is a mysterious thing. You come into it not of your own volition. You will certainly go from it when your time comes, not of your own volition. And there you are.

You share the gift of life with plants, animals, and your fellow human beings. And all of these things that have life are subject to the same laws. You think yourself highly superior to the grass

of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the beasts of the forest. But science teaches you that in many ways you are not superior, being bound as you are by the same iron band of existence in this physical material world.

Of course in some ways, man is definitely superior. At any rate, he has established dominion over the others, and success is always held, by human standards, to imply superiority.

There is a well-known saying: "A man must live". Precisely. In that saying everything about existence is summed up and said. Willy-nilly you must live. For no better reason—which is the best of reasons—than that you are alive. Like a clock wound-up, you must go on until you run down.

Your existence, too, is a fact that has to be faced by others no less than yourself. As long as you live, you count. When you are dead, you don't. Unless you are an exceptional being, that is; when, being an exceptional being, you may live in the hearts and minds and lives of others.

You may wish to attain that second existence (often exaggeratedly spoken of as "immortality"). If you are so avidly ambitious as to desire Fame, which Milton called "the last infirmity of noble mind", you are not debarred from it and may even be helped towards it, by living to the best advantage.

Your present existence, however, may well be as much as you wish to manage.

Though you could not begin life by your own volition, you can end it if you will. (Far be it from me, however, to suggest that you should.) The Ancients, and in particular the Ancient Romans, prided themselves on both the ability and the will to commit suicide. They thought it a noble thing that a man should, if life were intolerable, or dishonourable, or if he had had enough of it, deliberately end his existence by that man's own act. In more modern times, some Japanese have thought the same thing.

But modern Western folk in general do not think along those lines. They believe that life is to be lived to its end. This is also the teaching of the Christian faith, as well as the law of England, which regards suicide, and even attempted suicide, as a criminal act.

Existence, then, is to be continued. Your existence anyhow is constantly, too constantly, threatened. War, disease, accident, nay even Time itself, the very stuff of which life is made, and even you, yourself, by your appetites, over-indulged, threaten it.

To preserve it you may well realise the necessity of taking pains to do so.

To probe the mystery of existence *qua* existence, is fascinating. This, however, is the work of poets, philosophers, mystics, metaphysicians, theologians, and similar seers. The business of ordinary practical persons, doing the everyday work of the world, is less to speculate upon existence than to exist and make their existence fruitful. This is not beyond the lowest, or above the highest, of us.

And in order to exist fruitfully, grasp the trite truth that the stuff of existence is Time. That is to say, seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years.

“I know all that” you perhaps exclaim impatiently. Well, then, act as if you know it, not as if you merely know about it. Time consists of seconds. When you catch a train by a second then you do really know it! But generally you do not—none of us do—realise imaginatively and usefully, the stuff of Time. If we did, we should use time more wisely. Time is to be used like money; to be spent, in general, to advantage, and sometimes a little is to be wasted. But, like one’s money, one’s time should never be habitually frittered away, nor should it be lost in large and fruitless expenditures, bringing no harvest.

Look at this stuff of existence as it really is. A small ephemeral period of little, if any, importance, to all others, even of your own day and generation, but of terrible and utter importance to yourself. This tiny fragment of your life is sandwiched between aeons of Time Past and aeons of Time Future. That is all you possess, little in itself but greater than Eternity to you. Just as a pound in your pocket is worth more to you than millions in the Government’s—a remark stemming from one first uttered by Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote*.

Now once you grip the reality of existence—that it is time and so little time at that—you will avoid many pitfalls and errors. Also you will realise that existence is a gift to be used, and to continue to be used, until it is suddenly withdrawn as it is from all sentient things by death. The paths of virtue and wisdom, like Gray’s path of glory and indeed all other human paths, lead but to the grave. That fact makes it more important to live, work and hope.

### **3. Terms and Conditions**

The gift of life is not absolute. Far from it. We have already seen it is subject to terms and conditions not of your choice, nor even of your agreement. These are, perforce, imposed upon you. You cannot, as the lawyers say, contract out of them.

Like the laws of the Medes and Persians, these laws of life “altereth not”. And, first, there are such terms and conditions as are imposed on all mankind, which you must abide by whether you will or not. One comfort you have in this tyrannic state of affairs: the closer you abide by them the more to your advantage.

These terms and conditions are plain enough. In physical life they are such as the law of periodic sleep, the law of eating and drinking, the law of breathing, the law of bodily and mental exercise, to name a few of the most obviously important.

Most people take these physical necessities for granted and “manage somehow”. They leave it to outraged Nature to redress the balance. This is a grievous mistake.

For while it is quite true that if you keep awake for a couple or more days and nights, Nature will force you to sleep, even perhaps standing, this is not good for you. Or if you eat or drink to excess, Nature will take charge and make you sick, so that you cannot continue. But for such redress Nature makes you pay.

Better keep the law. For there is this difference between Nature’s laws and the laws of man: Nature always finds out your infraction of her laws in its very committal and always automatically punishes without even waiting for the completion of the crime against her ordinances.

Let us look at these stringent—or rather inexorable—terms. Everyone knows them: they are the common-places of all life. But few look at them beyond the extent that their imposition forces people to look at them. Yet your lease of life is held subject to them.

First: you have no freehold in perpetuity of your life. It lasts some 70 years, more or less, as the Psalmist noted. You can shorten it by foolish living: you may lengthen it by wise living. But not greatly. It is a mere leasehold.

Second: a great part of it is deducted from your conscious ruling of it. You may sleep away as much as a third of it (or even more) if you are foolish enough to do so. Also, there is the semi-consciousness of helpless infancy. There may even be a second

childhood in old age. There is also an inevitable wastage in trifling and the like.

It may be reckoned that you do well if you actually enjoy in grand total 35 to 40 years of conscious, purposeful, self-ruled existence. To the young that sounds a great deal. Older people realise that it is pitifully little. But if you are to make the most of it you had better imaginatively realise these truly terrible limitations of your conscious being.

About infancy you can do nothing. Nor need you. Others provide for that, from the necessity of the case. Reflecting upon that strange circumstance may lead you to see that you start your working-life in debt to others. That is a fair statement of the case, is it not?

But old age you can, should, and must, provide for. True, these are days of Old-Age Pensions. But this does not detract from the plain duty of each of us to recognise that old-age may, and probably will, come with all the disability that age entails, and to realise the paramount necessity of providing for that possibly evil day. Nor is it desirable to work to the very end of life, “to die in harness” as many men boast. Nature intends a rest towards the end, as after the beginning, of life.

Every young man and young woman “knows” that he or she will grow old. In a way they do know it. But old age—for them—seems so faint and far off and incredible that they do not really know that at all. They feel that the aged are a different race, nay, a different order of being, from themselves—even while they “know” they are not. Besides, they secretly think there is plenty of time.

There is not plenty of time. There is very little time. The aged realise that. Sometimes they feel and say that “life has gone like a flash”. Before they realised its potentialities!

Disraeli once cynically said: “Youth is a blunder, Manhood a struggle; Old Age a regret.” That is not mere cynicism. There is a lot of truth in it. And one of the blunders of youth is non-preparation for old age.

Old age requires comfort, even luxury. It requires a sufficiency of hard cash. It needs an interest in life—something to live for, something to do, be, and think. It is too late to think about providing these things once old-age has come. They are the harvest from youth and maturity.

Third: Infancy and old age are not the only certain disabilities. Unless you are extremely lucky (you may be) you will meet with such misfortunes as illness or accident. These possibilities also need prevision and provision. Do not rule them out altogether. Or rely entirely on State-aid. State-aid is never enough.

Finally, Solon, the wisest man of Greece, uttered the immortal advice: "Look to the End." There is no need to dwell upon death, for most of life death is best forgotten. Nevertheless, it should be realised as this puts the events of life into proper perspective.

Such are some obvious inexorable terms and conditions imposed by Nature on your life as a member of the human race.

These, however, are not all. There are terms imposed on you as an individual. And it is of the highest importance to your welfare that you find out what these are. This truth is little recognised.

Each of us is highly idiosyncratic. We have what doctors call a constitution. Learn what you can do and what you cannot, what you like and what you dislike, what is meat and drink for your body and your mind and what is poison or useless to them. Never—whatever you do—struggle against the laws of your own being. It is as foolish as a violet trying to be a rose, or a frog trying to be a bull. And it is done by human beings, to their detriment and sorrow, more often than you would dream.

Live within the limits of yourself is a good living rule.

Above all, do not wrest yourself from your own being to copy others or to conform unnecessarily to their conventions or opinions. Champagne has a high reputation, but why drink champagne if you really prefer ginger-beer? In that case it is not champagne to you. Do not struggle to like it, you will probably be defeated anyway, and there is nothing but extra expense in attaining a liking for champagne.

How rigid are the terms imposed by Nature on you as an individual you will understand if you look at yourself in a full-length mirror! The colour of your eyes, the shape of your nose, the texture of your skin, your physique and so on—there they are, predestined and beyond your control.

Do you really think that it is not the same with your mind? That it has not its own cast of temper, its own strengths and weaknesses, its capacities and non-capacities? Of course it has.

You may improve the body and improve the mind, and rightly you will strive to those ends. But get it well into your head: there

are limits which all your striving cannot transcend. There is no need to worry about that. You are you to make the best of yourself, and your best, by the fact of its being that, will be very good indeed.

Now, besides these limitations, there are others imposed not by Nature, not by your individuality, but by convention. You live amongst your fellows. And there is a communal standard to which you must conform if you are to live tolerably.

For instance; take clothing. You must clothe yourself willy-nilly. And if you are a man you must dress as a man and if you are a woman you must dress as a woman (even in these days when women's dress often apes men's). These laws of mere convention are, in general, as binding upon you as the laws of Nature or yourself. They are not to be broken with impunity at all times and in all places, as you very well know.

But these laws of mere convention are, of course, not absolute. You can be even a nudist or a sea-bather at the proper times and places, for example. Conventions have not the inexorable rigidity of the other terms and conditions upon which you exist.

Such are the terms and conditions upon which you hold your frail but tenacious tenure of life.

Whether or not they are good enough is a moot point. But whether or not, you cannot alter them. Eternal life may be better than temporary life. Invulnerability to disease, accident, and all the ills that flesh is heir to, may be better than any present human vulnerability. Not to need sleep or sustenance or defecation would be very convenient. Self-reproduction without a partner might save a lot of complications. And so on. One can easily imagine a host of simplifications and improvements in the human machine.

But you cannot make them. The pattern for well or ill is fixed. You can only ignore that fact at your peril or recognise it to your advantage.

All this is so obvious that you would think that everyone, for his or her own sake, would recognise this state of human affairs.

The exact contrary is the case, however. People live, or rather boggle the business of living, by ignoring, forgetting, or only half-apprehending, the fundamental facts of human life and their own being.

## CHAPTER II

# PERSONALITY: OR, WHAT YOU ARE

### 1. Personal Capital

LET US now look a little more closely at the much-misunderstood mystery of Personality or What you are.

“This is an age of cant,” as Stendhal, the great French author, reported as being one of Lord Byron’s great sayings. And about few things is more current cant talked than about “personalities”. Take Dr Johnson’s advice and clear your mind of cant—on this subject as on others.

In popular talk, personality is a special something, a something to be found only amongst the *elite*, amongst geniuses, tycoons, film-stars, and the like. Not amongst the humble and obscure. If such folk are distinctive they are merely “characters” or oddities, or eccentrics. Or at best, they are ordinary, commonplace persons.

Now the truth is that everyone, however self-effacing, however lowly, however negative, possesses a personality. It may be unpronounced. It may be modest, retiring, or almost negligible. It may be self-effacing or self-sacrificing. It may be of little value or interest to the world. But still it exists and it exists in its own right of existence. Whether others recognise it or not, whether they appreciate or not, it is still there.

A thing indeed to be reckoned with by its possessor and the rest of the world. This is true, whether the personality be a strong and formidable one like that (say) of Milton’s Satan, or such a reality as Hitler or Stalin, or an almost negligible one like Mrs Charles Dickens or the very humblest of human creatures inhabiting London.

For personality is not what you seem to others—a vulgar error. It is not even what you seem to yourself. It is what you, in fact, are.



To use another word, less debased by popular use, it is your individuality. The sum total of it. Or, put another way: what you have in yourself.

And what is this? What have you? Do you really know? Have you even tried to find out—exactly and truthfully?

Let us make the effort to find out, here and now. That effort may be valuable. Indeed, self-knowledge is always valuable. Certainly it will be interesting. For nothing is more interesting than oneself—to oneself!

Goethe, the famous German, asked that question “What have we?” And answered it. “What have we in life but our courage and energy and will-power?” he demanded of his friend, Eckermann.

At first sight this is a pregnant saying. But it is incomplete, a half-truth. As far as it goes it is magnificent as a summary of the mind and its governor, the will. But it takes no account of the other partner, the body, which for good or ill, we equally have in life. Even as a statement of mental possessions, too, Goethe’s answer is incomplete, for even the youngest child has acquired (by the exercise of those qualities) a body of mental wealth, a great treasure.

Look at yourself keenly. Calculate your personal capital. It may be divided into three distinct divisions conveniently, though you are, like the Trinity in theology, three-in-one and essentially a Unity.

There is the body, mind, and—something more important than either. Religious people call it the soul, or the spirit; some philosophers call it the Ego or governing part, others call it simply The Will. This last term will do for us. For its name does not matter: what does matter is that you should recognise its reality and its separate existence.

## **2. The Will**

Your body’s importance is plain enough—every ache, pain, or illness or physical discomfort, however trifling, reminds you of that. Your mind’s importance is also clear—every need to remember, to learn, to understand, reminds you that it counts. The importance—I almost wrote super-importance—of your Will is probably much less clear, for often it functions subconsciously and if it fails to work or works badly, you instantly tend to excuse, rather than to accuse it, because you call it not your “will” but yourself or “I”.