

The Three-Minute Philosopher

Inspiration for Modern Life

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Contents

Cover

Title Page

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Introduction

“The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection.”

GEORGE ORWELL

“In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.”

ALBERT CAMUS

“It is time that the stone made an effort to flower.”

PAUL CELAN

“One must learn not by the example of wise men, but by that of children.”

EMIL CIORAN

“Water is taught by thirst.”

EMILY DICKINSON

“I don’t disguise myself like those who wish to appear wise, walking around like monkeys in royal robes or donkeys wearing the skin of a lion.”

ERASMUS

“I walk to find out where I am going.”

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

“War is the father of all.”

HERACLITUS

“There is undoubtedly little that is sacred about man, but his humanity should be sacred to him.”

IMMANUEL KANT

“Morality is the most daring act of narcissism.”

LOU ANDREAS-SALOMÉ

“Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses, who are waiting to see us act with beauty and courage.”

RAINER MARIA RILKE

“There is nothing on this earth that we should look down on with condescension.”

OLGA SEDAKOVA

“Color moves the depths of man’s sensuality.”

HENRI MATISSE

“If you want to be original, be human. Nobody is anymore.”

MAX JACOB

“Don’t rush to correct your flaws. What would you put in their place?”

HENRI MICHAUX

“Many things should remain serious, even if soul merchants want to make light of everything.”

NELLY SACHS

**“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again.
Fail again. Fail better.”**

SAMUEL BECKETT

**“Intelligence is characterized by a natural
inability to comprehend life.”**

HENRI BERGSON

**“Man should not try to dispel the ambiguity of
his being but, on the contrary, accept the task
of realizing it.”**

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

**“Coffee is a lot more than just a drink; it’s
something happening... It gives you time.”**

GERTRUDE STEIN

**“We cannot understand the past without the
present.”**

MARC BLOCH

**“Never despise a person’s sensitivity. His
sensitivity is his genius.”**

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

“I wonder at the existence of the world.”

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

“Poetry is the first millimeter of air above the earth’s surface.”

MARINA TSVETAeva

“Take care of yourself.”

SOCRATES

“The capacity to pay attention... is a miracle.”

SIMONE WEIL

“It began to dawn upon modern man that he had come to live in a world in which his mind and his tradition of thought were not even capable of asking adequate, meaningful questions.”

HANNAH ARENDT

“I dispatch a pot of jam in order to get rid of a bitter experience.”

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

“Language can be a true battlefield, a place of oppression, but also of resistance.”

TONI MORRISON

“It took many years of vomiting up all the filth I’d been taught about myself, and half-believed, before I was able to walk on the earth as though I had a right to be here.”

JAMES BALDWIN

“If you’re always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be.”

MAYA ANGELOU

“Charity is still wounding for him who has accepted it.”

MARCEL MAUSS

“To be in Spain is sufficient to be cured of the desire of building castles.”

MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ

“Foolishness is wanting to draw conclusions.”

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

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Introduction

Philosophy takes us by surprise. It challenges us, awakens us, and opens our minds. That's why we need it so badly.

Nowadays, philosophy is more important than ever because it's the antithesis of the rampant dogmatism that dominates so much public discussion, of the vehemently expressed opinions of those who think they know everything and who want you to agree with them.

Socrates, the father of Western philosophy, insisted that he was an expert in... nothing. He would stand in public and ask everyone questions—about their life, their profession, their tastes. He didn't try to sermonize. He explained that he himself knew nothing, that he wasn't even a “sage,” a term that only applied to the gods, if they existed. He explained that it is pointless to aspire to being wise. Instead, we should focus on what it is that makes us human. For, in so doing, we have everything to gain.

Philosophy does not counsel us to be “wise,” to be perfect or godlike, but instead to nurture our own humanity.

And this is why Socrates asked questions, why he dared challenge the seemingly obvious and indisputable. He wanted to open our eyes. To give us confidence in *our* capacity to feel, to think, and to love. As this is what philosophy teaches us: the value of exploring our own experiences in depth.

Self-proclaimed “experts” tell us to listen to and obey their injunctions, while philosophers encourage us to think for ourselves.

For several years, I have been trying to understand the new forms of daily aggression that weigh on us and distance us from

Simply being human

Orwell not only asks us to realize that there's no such thing as perfect, but that to seek perfection is to turn our backs on what it means to be human.

This is an unsettling statement. For centuries, all schools of thought had us seeking out perfection, a sort of detached state, or the victory of reason over everything else. And so, it's true, we'd all like to be a little more perfect! We think that we would be happier if we were. We are wrong.

You were a little too aggressive with your brother-in-law

You realize that you've said inappropriate, even hostile things to someone you care about. For example, during a family dinner, you laced into your amiable brother-in-law just because you were annoyed that he didn't agree with your politics. And now you regret it. This is a good sign! You are tapping into a deeper side of your existence.

Instead of blaming yourself again and again for not living up to your own idea of perfection—someone who is always fair and in control—you're facing the abyss of your own heart. This allows you to stop being so hard on yourself and to show yourself some compassion. Yes, sometimes you're clumsy, inept, and you can be a bit of an idiot.

Do you know what makes a great writer? It's the ability to reveal the part of us that is petty and mediocre. This is the genius of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Marcel Proust. They reveal all the twists and turns of our lies, our cowardice, and our jealousy. They don't do this out of cruelty or desperation but rather so that we may grasp what makes up the profound reality of our existence.

And it is calming to finally be able to recognize the complexity, but also the beauty of our lives. Bad writers only scratch at the surface of our feelings—their false promises of happiness are insufferable.

Good writers are moved by an infinite sense of tenderness that allows them to view human beings in all their dimensions. Bad writers don't do this because they are afraid. They are afraid of real life. They are afraid of their own hearts.

A meditation on a slightly cracked Japanese pot

How do we make peace with our imperfections? Think about someone you love. Think about their faults, their wounds. Consider these faults not as something that holds them back, but rather as what makes them beautiful.

Think about the works of the great Japanese master potters. Once they had finished making a bowl, they would add a flaw, not to defile or damage it, but as an expression of both the fragility and humility of creation. To know that we ourselves are imperfect makes us more tolerant and caring toward others.

“In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.”

—ALBERT CAMUS

Stop putting everything in perspective

We're used to thinking that summer follows winter, that joy follows pain, that sunshine follows rain. If you're feeling bad, don't worry because someday it'll be better. This is what conventional wisdom teaches us. Essentially, this forces us to put everything into perspective. However, I've found that this isn't enough.

Camus invites us to explore a whole new perspective: We should learn to realize that, even in the middle of winter, in the middle of a time that is icy and devoid of life, the teeming presence of summertime is there. Think about the following possibility: There are no happy or sad events per se, but with each event, in every moment of our lives, there's a deeper dimension.

You've just lost a loved one

I experienced this when my grandmother, whom I loved dearly, passed away. She was very old, and we had known for a while that the end was coming. One morning, my aunt called to warn me that Mamie was in her final hours. When I reached the hospital, my whole family was there, speaking with hushed voices in the hallway. It was an incredibly fraught moment. One by one, family members solemnly entered Mamie's room and left overwhelmed with emotion.

When it was my turn to go in, I was nervous. I took the time to sit down and be present with my grandmother. To my surprise, I could feel her kindness, the same kindness that had enveloped me throughout my childhood. I stayed all day long in that room and could feel a poignant and profound sense of peace. I knew that, somehow, I was helping her through her final moment of suffering.

Of course, I was terribly sad that she was dying, but I could feel

intensely, in the middle of this winter, the beauty of the love that she had never stopped giving me. It remains one of the most important moments of my life. It gave me a strength and confidence that I still carry with me today.

A meditation on finding your secret friend within

But how can we have this revelation every day? It's not enough just to find a ray of sunshine in the middle of winter; we must find an invincible summer that can never be vanquished. A summer that always lives within us, without having to replace or blot out winter.

It's there, like a dear friend, a friend we've forgotten, one we lost touch with a long time ago. This forgotten friend lives within your soul, inside your heart, in your chest, in your body's every cell. It's made up of your memories and of everything you've learned in life. It's the love that your grandmother, or someone else, gave you. You can offer this forgotten friend your hand and tell them: "My neglected friend, I turn to you as my first ally, to form a bond of friendship, peace, and trust. I confide in you and rely on you, for you are a part of me that is bigger than me."

For a long time, Paul Cézanne painted very heavy, clumsy works. He would later refer to it as his *période couillarde*, his crude or “ballsy” period. And then, one day, the stone flowered.

No one can know exactly why. Cézanne simply trusted completely in his painting.

It’s time for the stone to give in to the impossible, for life to return to where it had been shut out. It’s time to free that which is blocked. This process demands patience and trust.

A meditation on trust

Would you like to have a go at this? It’s very simple. Let yourself for a moment know nothing, decide nothing. Allow yourself to stay just where you are.

Letting go is something that’s long been overlooked—it means letting life take its course and come to you, like when you have a cut and all you can do is wait for it to form a scar and heal over. This is trust.

At first, this may seem a bit ridiculous. But you must start here to appreciate the great blessing of trusting something you cannot be absolutely certain about. If I trust in what you tell me, it’s precisely because I can’t be absolutely certain of it. And that’s the whole beauty of life.