

Anne Rigas
Professor Cherkasova
PHIL 235: The Meaning of Life

Collection of Quotes and Questions

Ecclesiastes

1. "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." (Eccl. 1.18)

What must we endure in order to be wise? Is ignorance truly bliss?

2. "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire: this is also vanity and vexation of spirit." (Eccl. 6.9)

Is it better to be fulfilled with less, than spend our time seeking what we don't have and chase the wind?

3. "Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, then that thou shouldest vow and not pay." (Eccl. 5.5)

Is it better to not make a promise, or make a promise that you cannot keep?

Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*

1. "And as in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for it is some of these that are victorious), so those who act win, and rightly win, the noble and good things in life." (Book 1, Chapter 8)

Is happiness found by what we achieve, or is it measured by the acts which we partake in?

2. "For the man who is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances, as a good general makes the best military use of the army at his command and a good shoemaker makes the best shoes out of the hides that are given him." (Book 1, Chapter 10)

Is a man considered wise if he takes all circumstances in front of him, whether good or bad, and makes the most of them?

Epicurus: *Letter to Menoeceus and Principal Doctrines*

1. “ We must remember that the future is neither wholly ours nor wholly not ours, so that neither must we count upon it as quite certain to come nor despair of it as quite certain not to come.”

How can we be happy in our present day when so much of our future, even the very near future, is unknown?

2. “Again, we regard independence of outward things as a great good, not so as in all cases to use little, but so as to be contented with little if we have not much, being honestly persuaded that they have the sweetest enjoyment of luxury who stand least in need of it, and that whatever is natural is easily procured, and only the vain and worthless hard to win.”

Is it more fulfilling to have little and know what is good than to have everything, and not know its worth or know what it is to appreciate all we have?

3. “To habituate one’s self therefore, to simple and inexpensive diet supplies all that is needful for health and enables a person to meet the necessary requirements of life without shrinking and it places us in a better condition when we approach at intervals a costly fair and renders us fearless of fortune.”

Is it better to appreciate in moderation than to live extravagantly and with excess?

Epictetus: *The Enchiridion*

1. “If a person gave your body to any stranger he met on his way, you would certainly be angry. And do you feel no shame in handing over your own mind to be confused and mystified by anyone who happens to verbally attack you? (Chapter 28)

Why do we let ourselves, both mentally and physically, be affected by other people’s insults?

2. “Everything has two handles, the one by which it may be carried, the other by which it cannot. If your brother acts unjustly, don’t lay hold on the action by the handle of his injustice, for by that it cannot be carried; but by the opposite, that he is your brother, that he was brought up with you; and thus you will lay hold on it, as it is to be carried” (Chapter 43)

Why do we tend to do things in ways that cause us more trouble than good?

Marcus Aurelius: *The Emperor’s Handbook*

1. "Never act without purpose and resolve, or without the means to finish the job"
(Book 4, #2)

How do you continue the task if you know the endeavor is hopeless?

2. "Time is a kind river, an irresistible flood sweeping up men and events and carrying them headlong, one after the other, to the great sea of being" (Book 4, #43)

How can we be content with the strains of time when we know it's limited?

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: *Oration on the Dignity of Man*

1. "Man's place in the universe is somewhere between the beasts and the angels, but, because of the divine image planted in him, there are no limits to what man can accomplish"

How can we be realistic with our goals in life when we know we may fail?

2. "Let some holy ambition invade our souls, so that, dissatisfied with mediocrity, we shall eagerly desire the highest things and shall toil with all our strength to obtain them, since we may if we wish"

How can we set priorities in fragmentations when we know what limited time we have?

Lao Tzu: *Tao Te Ching*

1. "Those who overly pride wealth is like the overflowing water which shall cause damages. It is better to restrain early.
Those who are not content with fame is like polishing the edge of a knife.
The sharper it gets, the easier it is to break.

Wealth and treasures are but illusions that one cannot possess.
Those who are arrogant of their wealth and fame shall invite blame upon oneself.
The nature Tao teaches one to retreat after one's success and not to hold on to the credit." (Chapter 9)

Why do we tend to try and go above and beyond, rather than stop graciously when we are finished? Why are we ignorant of when it is time to stop?

2. "There is nothing in this world that is softer and meeker than water. Even those that can conquer the strong and hard,

Are still not superior than water.
Nothing can substitute it.

Hence, what is soft can overcome the strong. What is gentle can overcome the strength. This is known by the world.
However, people cannot put it into practice. Therefore, the saint said as follow:

He who can take the disgrace of a nation,
Is said to be the master of the nation.
He who can bear the misfortune of a nation, Is said to be the ruler of the world.

Truthful words may seem to be the reverse of worldly practices." (Chapter 78)

Why do we pride ourselves on being stubborn and demanding of others?

Chuang Tzu: *The Way of Chuang Tzu*

1. "Contentment and well-being at once become possible the moment you cease to act with them in view, and if you practice non-doing (wu wei), you will have both happiness and well-being" (Excerpt from *Perfect Joy*)

Why does our culture stress that happiness can be obtained through obsessive desire and struggle for it?

2. "All that is limited by form, semblance, sound, color
Is called object.
Among them all, man alone
Is more than an object.
Though, like objects, he has form and semblance,
He is not limited to form. He is more.
He can attain to formlessness

When he is beyond form and semblance,
Beyond "this" and "that"
Where is the comparison
With another object?
Where is the conflict?
What can stand in his way?" (Excerpt from *Wholeness*)

Why do we insist upon categorizing things, thinking that we are doing ourselves a favor and getting ahead?

Anton Chekhov: *Ward No. Six*

1. "I reflected how many satisfied, happy people there really are! What a suffocating force it is! You look at life: the insolence and idleness of the strong, the ignorance and brutishness of the weak, incredible poverty all about us, overcrowding, degeneration, drunkenness, hypocrisy, lying... Yet all is calm and stillness in the houses and in the streets; of the fifty thousand living in a town, there is not one who would cry out, who would give vent to his indignation aloud. We see the people going to market for provisions, eating by day, sleeping by night, talking their silly nonsense, getting married, growing old, serenely escorting their dead to the cemetery; but we do not see and we do not hear those who suffer, and what is terrible in life goes on somewhere behind the scenes...Everything is so quiet and peaceful, and nothing protests but mute statistics: so many people gone out of their minds, so many gallons of vodka drunk, so many children dead from malnutrition... And this order of things is evidently necessary; evidently the happy man only feels at ease because the unhappy bear their burdens in silence, and without that silence happiness would be impossible."

Why do we choose to hide our unhappiness, creating a false sense of security and deceive ourselves that we are happy?

2. "The strong must hinder the weak from living -- such was the law of Nature; but only in a newspaper article or in a school book was that intelligible and easily accepted. In the hotchpotch which was everyday life, in the tangle of trivialities out of which human relations were woven, it was no longer a law, but a logical absurdity, when the strong and the weak were both equally victims of their mutual relations, unwillingly submitting to some directing force, unknown, standing outside life, apart from man"

Why do we think that the strong are superior to the weak; that they will not have the same inevitable fate? If we are all subject to the same destiny, why do we strive to get ahead?

Arthur Schopenhauer: *On the Suffering of the World*

1. "The best consolation in misfortune or affliction of any kind will be the thought of other people who are in a still worse plight than yourself; and this is a form of consolation open to every one. But what an awful fate this means for mankind as a whole! We are like lambs in a field, disporting themselves under the eye of the butcher, who chooses out first one and then another for his prey."

Why do we think that we are invincible and that the suffering of others would never happen to us?

2. "When you consider how great and immediate is the problem of existence, this ambiguous, tormented, fleeting, dream-like existence - so great and so immediate that

as soon as you are aware of it, it overshadows and obscures all other problems and aims; and when you then see how men, with a few rare exceptions, have no clear awareness of this problem, indeed seem not to be conscious of it at all, but concern themselves with anything rather than this problem, and live on taking thought only for the day and for the hardly longer span of their own individual future, either expressly refusing to consider this problem or contenting themselves with some system of popular metaphysics..”

Why are we afraid to face death, living in a constant state of denial? When we do, why are we consumed with fear of it, making ourselves immobile?

Albert Camus: *The Myth of Sisyphus*

1. “It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.” (pg. 53)

Is a life without meaning still worth living?

2. “One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness. “What! By such narrow ways-?” There is but one world, however. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable.” (pg. 54)

Can we be happy if we accept that there will be no true success or achievement in life?
Can we be happy with just living?

Tolstoy: *The Death of Ivan Ilych*

1. “Ivan Ilych had been a colleague of the gentlemen present and was liked by them all. He had been ill for some weeks with an illness said to be incurable. His post had been kept open for him, but there had been conjectures that in case of his death Alexeev might receive his appointment, and that either Vinnikov or Shtabel would succeed Alexeev. So on receiving the news of Ivan Ilych's death the first thought of each of the gentlemen in that private room was of the changes and promotions it might occasion among themselves or their acquaintances.” (Chapter 1)

Why is it that when something bad happens to someone else, our first thought is to deny the possibility of such suffering happening to ourselves? Why do we remain in denial of our own destiny for suffering?

2. "Morning or night, Friday or Sunday, made no difference, everything was the same: the gnawing, excruciating, incessant pain; that awareness of life irrevocably passing but not yet gone; that dreadful, loathsome death, the only reality, relentlessly closing in on him; and that same endless lie. What did days, weeks, or hours matter?" (Chapter 8)

When we are in extreme suffering, how do we force ourselves to see the meaning of life? How do we make ourselves accept our inevitable fate?

Walpola Rahula: *What the Buddha Taught*

1. "Man's position, according to Buddhism, is supreme. Man is his own master, and there is no higher being or power that sits in judgment over his destiny." (Chapter 1, pg. 1)

When we are in control of our own destiny, our own lives, how will adjust the way we live and what we hold as valuable?

2. " According to Buddhism for man to be perfect there are two qualities that he should develop equally: compassion on the one side, and wisdom on the other." (Chapter 5, pg. 46)

How are to make intelligent decision without experiencing compassion for others? On the other side, does intelligence make us capable of knowing what is good for others?

Viktor E. Frankl: *Man's Search for Meaning*

1. "When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden." (pg. 77-78)

Why do we choose to let our suffering conquer and immobilize us, instead of facing it head on?

2. "Man is not fully conditioned and determined but rather determines himself whether he gives in to conditions or stands up to them. In other words, man is ultimately self-determining. Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment. By the same token, every human being has the freedom to change at any instant. Therefore, we can predict his future only within the large framework of a statistical survey referring to a whole group; the individual personality, however, remains essentially unpredictable." (pg. 131)

Why does human nature often make us see ourselves as victims, rather than the victor?

Hermann Hesse: *Siddhartha*

1. "Now that all these utterly transitory things have slipped away from me, he thought, I am left under the sun just as I stood here once as a small child; I own nothing, know nothing, can do nothing, have learned nothing. How curious this is!" (Beside the River, pg. 80)

Why do we strive for wisdom and to define everything in our lives when the innocence of our youth provided much more clarity?

2. "Therefore, it seems to me that everything that exists is good - death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well as folly. Everything is necessary, everything needs only my agreement, my assent, my loving understanding; then all is well with me and nothing can harm me...I needed lust [and] to strive for property...to learn not to resist them." (Govinda, pg. 120)

Why do we only search for good things to happen and panic when things don't go our way? Why do we fail to learn from our downfalls and see them as useful?