

Essays

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Introduction

Hello friend,

Thanks for the opportunity to share these essays, which are the product of my life experience as I approach my eightieth birthday. They include thoughts on personal growth and character building, spiritual enlightenment and inspiration, mindful awareness of this amazing creation we inhabit, and more.

I've purposely left the pages unbounded. I intend for each essay to become a singular experience for the reader rather than reading through all of them in a sitting. This could be before a meditation session, a shared experience with a loved one followed by some meaningful dialog, or simply a solitary effort of thought and reflection.

Visit my blog at <https://findnewcontent.com> to find links to many fascinating podcasts, lectures, book reviews, and other media. If you have a particular source you would like to contribute; you can post a reference to share with others.

I've also had the good fortune of establishing a meaningful exchange with a number of pen pals through this effort. I welcome your thoughts at rich@findnewcontent.com.

Thanks again,

Rich

Solitude

The experience of solitude for different individuals can span the entire spectrum from terror to bliss. On the one end are those who can't tolerate being alone, even briefly. On the other end are those who can't wait to slip off to their special place where they can be alone with their ponderings. However, it's important to note that even those who fear solitude have the potential for personal growth and self-discovery. Securing solitude's value will bring a new richness to life.

The person who is uncomfortable being alone may be characterized as living a life that is little more than a series of distractions. They pursue excessive social activities and relationships, which can hinder their self-discovery. They lose their identity and assume the identity of where they fit in the social system, who they know, and how others perceive them. Even when they find themselves home alone, the distractions persist and fill every waking moment. All the social media sites, streaming services, video games, soap operas, game shows, and online gambling can easily fill the day. Even though our subject is alone, thinking this is alone time is delusional. The fear of being alone keeps them from ever finding themselves.



This fear results from some thoughts that will have to be confronted when they withdraw from the endless stream of distractions and start reflecting on who they are. These thoughts could begin with something as simple as 'I'm wasting my life. My days are routine and pointless, my conversations and interactions are superficial, I have no goals, and I'm doing little to develop who I am.'

Such thoughts can be overwhelming and lead to anxiety and depression. The capacity to be alone should be approached cautiously and developed slowly. If you are unfamiliar with the experience, you are entering a new frontier. Friedrich Nietzsche, whose entire life was defined by solitude, cautions, "Many should be dissuaded from solitude. Your bad love of yourselves makes solitude a prison to you." This caution should be heeded but also contains the seed for success.

Where he says, "Your bad love of yourselves" needs to be tempered in your self-assessment to read. I'm okay but have many opportunities to develop a more productive and meaningful life.

Solitude provides the opportunity to take inventory of our lives. Fyodor Dostoevsky shares, "Solitude for the mind is as essential as food is for the body." It allows us to forge our character away from the influence of others. In solitude, we can develop meaning by engaging in an activity that consumes our attention, encourages self-expression, and generates satisfaction.¹ Find an activity to focus on. Putting form and order in our creative endeavors reduces chaos in our minds.

The mind is sharper and keener in seclusion and uninterrupted solitude. Originality thrives in seclusion, free of outside influences beating upon us to cripple the creative mind. Be alone – that is the secret of invention. Be alone – that is when ideas are born. **Nikola Tesla**

Set aside some time in your routine to experience solitude. Approach it with confidence. There is much to be gained when you accept the reality of your life and formulate a pathway toward personal growth, improved self-esteem, and renewed meaning.

¹ Anthony Storr; Solitude, A Return to the Self

Writing

In the adjoining quote, Francis Bacon says that reading, gathering information to ponder and assimilate, equips a person with knowledge and ideas. Next, discussing with others helps broaden one's perspective on their thoughts and ideas. Finally, writing their ideas in coherent and well-organized prose produces clarity and precision.

Reading maketh a full man,
Conference a ready man,
Writing an exact man.

Francis Bacon

A complex labyrinth, a wilderness of unmarked paths, exists between perceived clear thinking and precise words on a page. Writing is an activity that is grossly underestimated until one begins. In days past, before the convenience of word processors, the floor around the writer's desk would be littered with crumpled pages; aside from the desktop would be broken pencil leads and the stuff erasers left, and on the page, a few round stains, could be sweat, could be tears. What exactly is the challenge facing the writer?



To begin, abstract thought and language are the two most prominent attributes that express what it is to be human. Curiously, the two don't always fit well together. Language is primarily linear. We string words together, using proper syntax, to communicate ideas. Ideas, perhaps the product of a recent solitary introspection session, are not linear. They are multi-dimensional. Also, they won't hold still so that you can describe them. They are dynamic, flowing, and changing when viewed

from different perspectives. They can contain qualia such as color, sound, aroma, and taste. When assimilated into your mind, they make friends with other ideas and become unbounded. So now you are challenged with describing them as they wiggle loose from your grasp and take on a life of their own. To begin is like the challenge of untangling the Gordian Knot, finding a single loose strand that can form the first sentence.

From this chaos, writing is the process that establishes order. It is a natural, life-giving procedure. Writing assists with your thinking. Start by writing down every thought. Thoughts are born pregnant, producing more relevant offspring as you go. Once everything you can think of is on the page(s), it should contain all you need for your first draft. It should include,

1. Identification of your readers.
2. Why they should want to read your work.
3. The value they will acquire from the experience.
4. All the elements for a comprehensive outline (yet to be constructed).
5. A properly defended and provocative conclusion.

With your readers in mind, begin with something that piques their interest in reading your work and follow with how they will profit from their investment in the effort. Respect your readers. You're not dictating your convictions but sharing your perspective for your reader's consideration.

Returning to your notes, scattered throughout, are all the key points you want to cover. Pick them out, arrange them logically, and you're ready to begin. The end of one paragraph and the beginning of the next pass the reader through a smooth transition. Writing stands shoulder to shoulder with all the other art forms. Savor the satisfaction of your creativity.

A Personal Philosophy

The foundation of a personal philosophy is the individual's beliefs. These beliefs dictate all the person's thoughts, decisions, and actions. Conversely, a person's behaviors reveal their underlying beliefs.

Building your character is a direct result of developing your beliefs. There are many ways to accomplish this. You might begin by studying any well-documented philosophies proposed by others before us, whose thoughtful and contemplative ponderings produced belief systems they found suitable and comforting. Existentialism establishes your responsibility for finding meaning in your life. Stoicism emphasizes rational control of your emotions to gain agency in your daily life. Buddhism shows the way to a peaceful and harmonious life. Rationalism can validate your analytic nature. Many pathways have been found that lead to a life of peace, gratitude, and meaning.



We begin by forming our beliefs from our families, teachers, communities, and culture. Our families teach us by words and deeds. Our teachers share our national heritage and the efforts and sacrifice of others that established our rights and freedoms. Our communities teach us cooperation and mutual respect. Our culture resonates with the traditional values of our ancestors. For those with the good fortune of being well-placed at birth, their acquired beliefs may be all they ever need. Hopefully, they find room for gratitude.

Other cultures, religions, individuals, and groups can influence and validate your beliefs. It can be beneficial to be open-minded towards the vast array of diversity we find worldwide and throughout time. You can find new ideas that complement your beliefs. You can find ideas that conflict with your beliefs and help to validate and reinforce what you've always known. Universal truths and ordinary virtues will be apparent and help form bonds worldwide. This can only lead to greater understanding, respect, and hope for peace, harmony, and cooperation. This is an unanticipated enhancement of your perspective and beliefs.



It remains a well-established fact that your words and deeds directly reflect your beliefs. There are times when you say or do something you later find regrettable. This implies some bias or prejudice hidden in your beliefs that need your attention and resolution. Try articulating and writing out your beliefs. Specify all the attributes that you hope define your character. Your efforts are incomplete if your description doesn't account for your behaviors.

Our beliefs help to define and facilitate our goals in life. We cast ourselves in some future role that reflects our best qualities. One where we can be content with who we are and at peace with ourselves. Well-founded beliefs can support and sustain us and those who depend on us in troubled times. Proper beliefs can make possible superior physical health and mental and emotional stability. Understand your personal philosophy. You can be your own best friend.

Ideas for Introspection

Legend tells us that an inscription on the Temple of Apollo in the Delphi region of ancient Greece read "Know Thyself." This has never been more important or difficult to achieve in today's fast-paced society.

The Roman statesman and orator Cicero provides us with his comprehensive vision. He writes,

"When this man shall have surveyed the heavens, the earth, and the seas, and studied the nature of all things, and informed himself from whence they have been generated, to what state they will return, and of the time and manner of their dissolution, and has learned to distinguish what parts of them are mortal and perishable, and what divine and eternal — when he shall have almost attained to a knowledge of that Being who superintends and governs these things and shall look on himself as not confined within the walls of one city, or as the member of any particular community, but as a citizen of the whole universe, considered as a single Commonwealth: amid such a grand magnificence of things as this, and such a prospect and knowledge of nature, what knowledge of himself, O ye immortal Gods, will a man arrive at! That is the warning of the Pythian Apollo. The self-knowing man will protect himself from falling into error by studying the art of reasoning and will learn to persuade others through the study of rhetoric."

The scope of this exercise could not be over-emphasized for Cicero. For him, it becomes the primary path toward character building and acquiring virtue. Likewise, it should be the same for us.

...why should we not calmly and patiently review our own thoughts, and thoroughly examine and see what these appearances in us really are.

Plato

First, introspection or self-discovery is a solitary experience. No one else can see into the depths of your mind, and their opinions can only add to the chaos.



Next, the setting for your efforts should be dedicated time and focus, as with meditation. The effort has an epistemic quality, and you must set the scene with a dedication to reality. Self-deception will be your most formidable obstacle.

Remember that emotions precede rationality. Facing certain aspects of our character and behavior can be disturbing. You will need to maintain emotional control and stability to be objective.

Our memories are the primary source of our beliefs and are now under evaluation. These memories arrive in our minds from empirical experience. Empirical evidence is always clouded by our biases, prejudices, and the filters through which we see the world. We need to compensate for this effect to remain impartial.

Form a clear definition of the beliefs and values you hope would relate to the character you aspire to. It will be enlightening to see if your thoughts and behaviors align with these characteristics.

Finally, introspection or self-reflection should be part of your routine. As your character evolves, it takes on a dynamic nature, and you gain greater insight into who you are and would like to become.

Virtues and the Golden Mean

The Ethics of Aristotle



The ethics of Aristotle begin with the cautious suggestion that it is an essential human quality to be predisposed to proper functioning. This predisposition is reinforced by acting by it until the proper behavior becomes a habit. We must control our passions by reason, cultivating mental discipline and self-control. Thus, we develop a favorable relationship or agreeable association between our inner essence or consciousness and our outward actions. We will flourish once this harmony is achieved, the ultimate goal of a peaceful and meaningful life.

Virtue extends to every aspect of a person's character for Aristotle². This includes moral, intellectual, and social. All must be perfected. The intellectual is comprised of knowledge, wisdom, and rationality. Carefully chosen and properly developed friendships and associations are the social aspects. Finally, the moral characteristics are those to which we are predisposed and nurtured, those which are learned, those that are practiced, and all finally become habitual. A virtuous life is comprehensive in all aspects.

Intellectual virtues help us understand the causes of things and events, and scientific and artistic knowledge enhances our agency. We learn these from others who have mastered them, and we are obligated to pass them on to future generations.

For Aristotle, reason rules and regulates everything else. We have in our power the ability to make proper and deliberate choices. A quality virtue has become a disposition or inclination to act correctly, with intention. We step up when called upon.

The contemplative life is not one of solitude and inactivity. It is lived in society and the world. To live well, we need a proper appreciation of how everything, such as friendship, honor, virtue, pleasure, and wealth, fits together as a whole, defining the essential individual.

One must focus on what Aristotle calls the "Golden Mean" to determine proper functioning in either thought or action. Each virtue needs to be evaluated independently within this context. The frequently used example to illustrate this process is courage. Courage as a virtue lies somewhere on a continuum between cowardice and recklessness. Locating that Mean is situation-dependent.

In a virtuous state, a deep, lasting cognitive and spiritual gratification is aroused in you by contemplative devotion to those things that matter most. Living a moral life renders us fit for the most meaningful friendships and associations. A fully developed and perfected friendship is possible if it draws upon the virtues of the participants. The purpose of our decisions and actions is ultimate happiness, but only after virtue becomes your habit.

Aristotle's Concept of the Golden Mean		
Deficiency (-)	BALANCE	Excess (+)
cowardice	COURAGE	rashness
stinginess/miserliness	GENEROSITY	extravagance
sloth	AMBITION	greed
humility	MODESTY	pride
secrecy	HONESTY	loquacity
moroseness	GOOD HUMOR	absurdity
quarrelsomeness	FRIENDSHIP	flattery
self-indulgence	TEMPERANCE	insensibility
apathy	COMPOSURE	irritability
indecisiveness	SELF CONTROL	impulsiveness

² A detailed analysis needs to be gender specific to draw attention to the special and unique qualities of each.

Illusive Reality

Anchoring our lives to reality necessitates discipline, self-control, emotional stability, and rational thought. This ongoing process, when upheld, forms the bedrock of good mental health and peak agency. Crucially, it also underscores the significance of self-awareness in this journey.

The barriers that separate us from reality and truth are formidable. Our senses, while invaluable, can also mislead us, leading to self-deception. We all possess our filters, prejudices, and biases; some may even venture into a realm of fantasy and the paranormal.



These preconceived images are constantly active as we attempt to interpret and interact with the world around us. They represent premature, often negative judgments about a person, place, or thing before we have all the relevant information. Usually, we are not even aware we are doing this.

Our subconscious mind forms generalities from experiences triggered by a new experience with similar characteristics. These generalities inform us what to expect from the new experience. A typical example is meeting a new person for the first time. Everything we notice contributes to the profile we generate. The images we form can often be based on an unrepresentative small sample or even rumors and gossip. Such thoughts and behaviors create a barrier between us and reality.

Next, consider self-deception. Clearly, from the term, self-deception can place considerable distance between us and reality. It can take many forms,

- Denying or hiding our shortcomings.
- Overrating our abilities and accomplishments.
- Not recognizing how others react to us.
- Believing we are moving toward our goals in the absence of progress.
- Professing virtue and acting contrary.

Regular periods of meditation and introspection can reveal these defects and facilitate remedial action. Solitude can take the individual either way. It can lead to enlightenment or more profound denial. One positive aspect of self-deception could be acting out the person you would like to become, knowing all along that you are not there yet.

Finally, the philosophical deliberations of Emanuel Kant and David Hume have oriented us to the truth that all we can ever know about the world around us comes to us through our senses. The world stimulates our senses, and our mind interprets that stimulation. We rely on a series of nerve impulses to present us with our understanding of the world.



Eliminate these obstructions, and reality will be in clear view.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky – “Above all, don’t lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his lies comes to the point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and others.”

Mindfulness and the Grocery Store

A useful definition,³ “Mindfulness is a mental state achieved by focusing one’s awareness on the present moment.” To be truly comprehensive, this would include both internal and external environments. Mastering the art of mindfulness adds richness to one’s ordinary life experience.

Your internal environment would include recognizing your feelings, emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations. Your external environment would be the contents of your surroundings. That is all the objects, conscious or not, their origin, composition, and utility. Drawing all these variables into a heightened awareness collectively would comprise ‘being in the moment.’

In most settings, this would be overwhelming. There are too many variables to consider, resulting in chaos and confusion. A preliminary step is required to determine where you will focus your attention. In other words, what are the most essential features of the scene? In cognitive science, this is called relevance realization.

People are good at this. We do it all the time. However, when learning to be mindful, it takes on much greater significance.

Let’s flesh this out with an example we all know well—something routine, mundane, and unpleasant for some. Let’s go grocery shopping.

When we get to the store, we have our list in our heads, scratched on paper, or in our cell phones. Knowing the facility’s layout, we grab a cart and map out the shortest route for an efficient escape. We notice the checkout lines are long, adding to the hassle. With enough patience, hopefully, this won’t set the mood for the rest of the day.



Perhaps there is a better way, a mindful way. Upon arrival, we pass through the automatic doors and get a cart. We smile at our good fortune that all four wheels roll straight and true.

To the right is the flower department, filled with a joyful array of brightly colored potted plants and cut bouquets. Perhaps just yesterday, these beauties were harvested by someone you will never meet and who doesn’t even speak your language. Hopefully, they were rewarded for their efforts with the truth that their crop will provide an excellent centerpiece on a grateful person’s dining room table.

The produce department tells a similar story. Everything you see was planted months ago in fields worldwide, some even tropical, in anticipation of your needs and desires today. A complex network of harvesting equipment, packaging, hardworking individuals, refrigerated trucks, transportation systems, and quality inspections is required from the fields to your shopping cart.

Likewise, everything in the store has a similar complex history. Stop and read the ingredients on a can of soup. See if you can even imagine what it took for that can to arrive in your hand.

So, you arrive home, are greeted by your mate with a surprised reaction to your joyful mood, and ask, “What took you so long?”. Grocery shopping will never be the same.

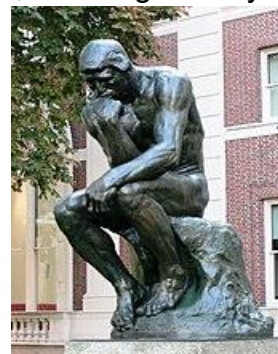
³ Oxford Languages

Epistemology

Nearly everyone is fascinated by a good detective story. We are captivated by the suspense and intrigue as the investigator examines the crime scene for evidence, follows up on witnesses' leads, studies the crime lab's findings, and assists the prosecutor in preparing their case. The case outcome is, as it should be, heavily dependent on the truth and validity of the argument for conviction. As we follow the story, we are emotionally engaged in developing our own opinions, listening intently to arguments from the defense, and waiting impatiently for the verdict.

The story's author cleverly adds to the suspense with examples of where evidence can be misleading, witnesses are often unreliable, and confirmation bias can influence the interpretation of lab results.

Our efforts to follow the plot, develop our case, formulate our conclusions, and anticipate our verdict can help properly orient us to the countless daily examples we encounter with 'information'. The study of these encounters and methods of evaluating and establishing their truth and validity is a branch of philosophy called Epistemology.



The study of Epistemology offers the valuable asset of being aware that a realistic level of caution is appropriate before believing all we see and hear. It is the study of knowledge's nature, origin, and scope and its justification. Knowledge includes an understanding of our environment, the development of valuable skills, and an orientation to commonly known and well-established facts.

The literature defines five ways of acquiring knowledge,

1. Perception, exposure to sources in our environment.
2. Introspection, utilizing our mental processes that lead to enlightenment.
3. Memory, drawing on the analogues of past experiences.
4. Testimony, subscribing to the instruction of reliable authorities.
5. Reason, expanding on known facts through applying scientific thinking.

There is always a sea of information attracting our attention that could be added to our knowledge base. Unfortunately, considerable pollution has been dumped into this sea, ranging from misleading to toxic. How we perceive this information will require a reasonable level of caution.

The first step in justifying a new belief is to consider the source. A well-established expert or institution serves as justification⁴. The new knowledge can now be classified as testimony.

Next, after cautious reflection and analysis, you decide to accept the new knowledge. Your brain has a valuable mechanism to signal its disagreement. It is called cognitive dissonance. "Cognitive dissonance is a psychological phenomenon occurring when a person simultaneously holds two contradictory beliefs. It is the discomfort a person feels when this occurs."⁵ Trust this feeling and reevaluate your decision.

The individual controls introspection, memory, and reason for accuracy. This is where the real work is done to ensure the quality of your knowledge and beliefs.

⁴ Discouragingly, sources have been known to be faked.

⁵ Google

Existentialism

Existence precedes essence. This is the primary focus of existentialism. Your early beginnings are arbitrary and are not anything you can influence. Martin Heidegger coined the term 'thrownness' to refer to the truth that beginning in the world lands you in a culture, locale, and family not of your choosing, and you start life subject to those influences and constraints. This is where the dictates of existentialism can offer a lifestyle that resides at the focal point of reality.

Existentialism is not a school of thought, nor is it reducible to a set of rules. Existentialists concern themselves with individual, actual human existence. You have no predefined nature. You create that nature through what you choose to do. You are whatever you decide to make of yourself at every moment. You are free, and you are responsible for your choices. Freedom lies at the heart of all human experience.

"My life and my
Philosophy are one and
the same".

Jean-Paul Sartre

"Your life presents itself to you as if
it has meaning, but it really doesn't".

Albert Camus

First, to assume the posture of an existentialist, acknowledge that there is much about you that wasn't your choice. Although influenced by your culture and background, you still make yourself up as you go along. You are a work in progress. You create yourself through your actions.

Creativity is strictly a human endeavor. Concentrate on action. Focus on what you do rather than what you say. Misery and suffering are fundamental to the human experience. Being confused about the meaning of life is referred to as an existential crisis. Refusing subscription to any formal school of thought or any body of belief is the heart of existentialism. Kierkegaard proposed, "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom." Your freedom provides the responsibility to choose the proper aspects of your character that afford the fortitude to withstand the trials of life without becoming corrupt.

You Must Inhabit Your
Philosophy

Iris Murdoch

The historical pathway leading to existentialism's conceptualization involved several actors. The principal authors of existentialism were Jean-Paul Sartre and his lifelong friend, lover, and collaborator Simone de Beauvoir. They became public figures in Paris during the chaotic times of the mid-twentieth century. Those of us who are old enough to recall the rebellious nature of our youth in the 50s and 60s know well the forces demanding a new world order that rose from the ashes of the Second World War.

Historical influences proved inadequate. The Stoic and Epicurean philosophers practiced their philosophy by living it. Nietzsche declared that "God is dead" and that nothing outside us grounded our virtues. On the contrary, Kierkegaard offered, "You don't understand God until you realize that He is our ground."

Sartre and Beauvoir refused to belong to any formal philosophy, established school of thought, or body of belief as being remote from life. We are condemned to be free. Bad faith is denying our freedom and responsibility.

By accepting this, we become more resilient, more able to rise above circumstances, and better equipped to manage grief, fear, anger, disappointment, and anxiety. Better equipped to face the trials of life. Your meaning in life is what you create out of nothing.

Free Will

The controversy over free will vs. determinism rages on. Buried in the dispute is a resolution that can change one's worldview and relationship with others.

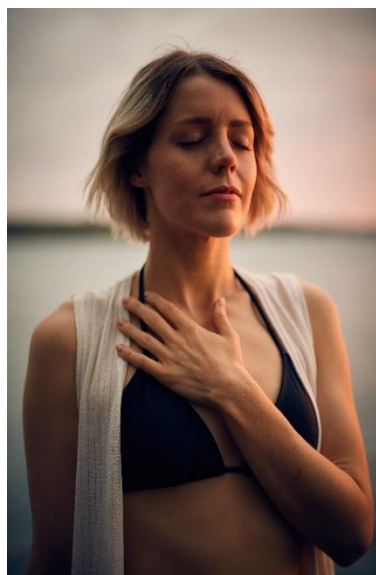
To begin any discussion, we must understand precisely what each side is defending. Those who oppose free will insist that all acts and decisions we make arise from the individual's knowledge, experience, and emotions from the past. This is called deterministic or determinism. It would probably look something like this. A decision is a function of a collection of relevant variables and how much to count each.

To elaborate, each decision is unique, but examples of relevant variables are consistency with your moral values, how others will be affected, the monetary cost, the effort required to achieve the desired results, and many more. Some variables carry more weight than others and influence the decision more. Just before the decision, your mind has collected the impinging variables, deliberated on how much to count each, and then produced the decision.

The other side of the discussion, by those who support free will, can only be a process that doesn't follow this deterministic outline. That one would be independent of all prior potential causes. That is impossible. You can't even get your head around that. People trip over the idea that a decision like this would be impossible, but to date, no one has produced an example to refute it.

All is not lost. What has been shown here now becomes one of your past experiences with considerable cash value. Those who accept that the decision-making process is deterministic can achieve two substantial benefits from it.

The first is a more realistic understanding of human behavior. When you witness someone doing something stupid, irrational, impulsive, or even criminal, you know that many cause-and-effect events and conditions have set them up to do precisely as you observe and could not be otherwise. The second benefit is when you are the actor, you think, "I shouldn't have done that." "I could have been more sensitive to how my actions would affect those around me." That's precisely wrong, and you could not have acted otherwise.



So, the lesson is to be more compassionate with those around you when you observe them behaving offensively or worse. All you see is the past conditioning in action driving their behavior. Also, when you regret things you've done in the past, go easy on yourself. You were set up to do just as you did.

The significant advantage of accepting determinism comes in the form of self-control. You can affect your future behavior. Now, when you find yourself behaving in a way inconsistent with your vision of the character you hope to become, you can consciously adjust the weightings of the relevant variables that determine that behavior. For example, you can train yourself to be more sensitive to how you affect others. Or you could develop more control over adverse emotional reactions. Diligent affirmation of the desirable variables and depreciation of the unfavorable variables will lead you forward under your control. Self-control, although still deterministic, will approach free will asymptotically.

Imagination



Imagination is where we go when our consciousness needs to escape the constraints of reality. That's when we have the most fun with it. When we get it out and let it take us where it will. But imagination is always at work, often playing a dominant role in our thinking. Without imagination, we would never have transitioned from animal to human.

We all love it when the little toddler in our family speaks their first words. It's awesome to hear the little voice say mama, dada, cookie, ball. It isn't long before you hear the sentence, "I want cookie". The sentences become more complex and original. The child has imagined syntax and is employing it to communicate. In this small child, we have a human's two most fundamental characteristics: imagination or abstract thought and language.⁶

Imagination plays many practical roles in our daily lives. It helps us make better choices. When considering different courses of action, imagining the various outcomes of each choice guides us to the best alternative when faced with a decision. We can experience abstract scenarios even in the absence of sensory stimuli. You can sit and plan a backyard birthday party for one of your children and 'see' the layout of the furniture, 'hear' the shouts and laughter, 'smell' the burgers and hot dogs on the grill, 'notice' the need for supervision around the pool and anticipate a successful outcome. Imagination helps us plan the future and where uncertainty looms, even formulate a backup plan. Just simple, ordinary living would be impossible without imagination.

Imagination can facilitate personal growth. You can reevaluate past experiences and imagine how they could have turned out more favorably, offering guidance for similar future events. You can imagine pathways that could lead to greater success in your career. You can imagine how modest changes in your approach to friends, family, and social encounters could lead to greater harmony and more meaningful associations.

The imagination has a dark side that can lead to dire consequences. Suppose suspicion and jealousy are the starting point for your imagination. In that case, the most likely outcome will be mistrust, false accusations, and the collapse of what could have been a meaningful relationship. Starting with delusional thoughts, your imagination can take you far from reality and lead you into thinking you are more significant than you are, the Dunning/Kruger effect. Or it takes you off in the other direction, leaving you with a severe case of low self-esteem. Some mental illnesses originate with inappropriate imaginings, such as paranoia, or others where you lose touch with reality. A wild imagination can lead to perversely inappropriate acts in the most severe cases. Only a well-trained forensic psychologist could speculate on the imagination of a school shooter or serial killer.

Finally, the wanderings and ponderings of imagination lead to creativity. Many of the great minds of our time define solitude and imagination as the birthplace of their best ideas and inventions. One common characteristic of great ideas is that they combine seemingly unrelated things in unique and unexpected ways, a product of intuition and imagination. Storytelling and writing fiction are other examples. Trust your imagination to be creative and resourceful.



⁶ You can't imagine that level of imagination.

Potential for Everything

Scientists report that 13.8 billion years ago, a massive explosion occurred, scattering all the matter and energy in what we know as the universe. Were you there? Your immediate response is, "Of course not! No one was there. If they were, they would have been immediately annihilated."

That's not quite right. You were there. Everyone was there. We were arranged differently, unrecognizable, but all our constituent materials were there. The potential for everything that exists, ever has existed, or ever will exist was there. It was not just the constituent materials but the intent and pathway to manifest intelligent life that was there.

However, this truth is hard to comprehend. Out of this early chaos will come an intelligence capable of looking back to explain its origins and journey to its current state, as we are doing here. Let's follow that remarkable journey from quarks to consciousness and see how we got here and where we may be headed.

Shortly after the Big Bang, atoms, primarily hydrogen, started to form from the quarks. The distribution of these atoms in the void was not uniform, denser in some areas and thinner elsewhere. That's when gravity took over, and even more atoms were drawn into the dense areas.

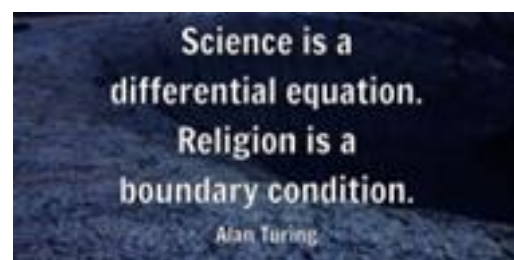
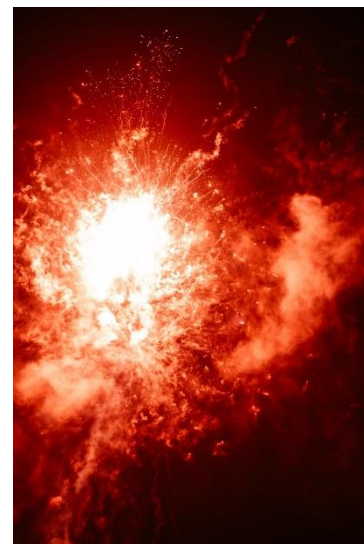
Then, as these dense areas grew, they compressed, generating immense heat. Enough heat to initiate a nuclear fusion reaction with hydrogen atoms fusing to create helium. This, in turn, generated even more significant amounts of heat, and a star was born. Within the interior of the star, heavier elements were fused into being. All the building blocks for all the matter in the universe came into existence.

We are beginning to see where the material to form solid objects came from. Stars throw off these larger atoms, and they coalesce into planets. Some of these atoms, perhaps billions of years old, reside within you. They could have formed halfway across the Milky Way.

The formation of our Earth and its transformation to a suitable home for life, complete with abundant water, an atmosphere rich in oxygen, and a comfortable temperature, took hundreds of millions of years. How life began is still a mystery. Scientists have found self-replicating molecules that they believe may hold the key. From there, the first eukaryotic cell was the next hurdle, but after that, life was off and running.

Next, Darwin picked up the story. His story of evolution is simple and well known, decent with modifications, propagation of favorable modifications, and, over time, distinct species form. Some crucial omissions in his theory are consciousness, abstract thought, our love to create and enjoy beauty, and respect and appreciation for others. The potential for all of this was also contained in the Big Bang. Or was there some outside superintelligent influence guiding it all?

For some, it keeps them up at night, while for others, it provides a peaceful night's sleep.



What Darwin Missed

The adventure of exploration, discovery, and research that led to the theory of evolution took place along two parallel lines by two different researchers of varying temperaments and personalities. Merging their perspectives completes a cohesive, fascinating, and enlightening story.

Alfred Russel Wallace was the lesser-known of the two. He was the eighth of nine children. Wallace had only six years of formal education and was then self-taught in a home containing a well-stocked library. He lived in a Christian home as a child but was never more than indifferent to such teachings.

Our story begins when one of Wallace's close friends had the opportunity to sail to the Amazon and collect samples of birds, insects, and plant life to be returned to natural history museums in Britain. He invited Wallace to join him. Wallace accepted this as a lucrative and exciting opportunity as a man of modest means. Regrettably, this excursion ended in tragedy. On the trip home, the ship caught fire, and all of Wallace's samples and notes were lost. Fortunately for history, Wallace later had another opportunity to explore the Malay Archipelago.



Turning to the second of the two explorers was the far more famous Charles Darwin. Darwin enjoyed the good fortune of being the offspring of an affluent family of prominent social standing. Beyond prep school, he was sent to the University of Edinburgh to study medicine. Darwin found many of the anatomical dissections and unanesthetized surgical procedures unpleasant and was known to fall ill on occasion. His father switched him to Christ's College, Cambridge.

As fortune would have it, one day, it came to Darwin's attention that the HMS Beagle, docked in the harbor, would be sailing to South America on a mapping and exploration expedition, and the position of Ship's Naturalist was available. This was a position to keep the captain company and free from boredom more than anything. Darwin found the opportunity intriguing and won the captain's approval.

Coincidentally, both Wallace and Darwin had nearly identical experiences that led them to the idea of evolution by natural selection. Darwin's discovery was twenty years earlier, but he kept his idea to himself for those twenty years, knowing it would cause quite a disturbance with the clergy because it conflicted with the biblical story. He had witnessed the social penalties of holding 'deviant' views back in college.

Wallace wrote his theory and sent it to Darwin for his opinion. Darwin still hadn't gone public with his theory, so Wallace had no idea that he was parroting Darwin's theory. Darwin arranged for both papers to be presented simultaneously so that each shared equally for the discovery.

While studying nature so closely, Wallace was content that his theory of evolution applied successfully to everything from insects to mammals but was reluctant to extrapolate it to humans. Over the years, Alfred Wallace regained a spiritual component in his thinking, perhaps from his early Christian upbringing. In his later writing, he enumerated various unique human attributes that couldn't be linked to adaptation. These included abstract thought, aesthetic appreciation, altruism, a teleological component driving evolution, unique talents in select individuals, and many more. For Wallace, these supported the idea of divine intervention. He was convinced that the creation story was true. It just needed to be fleshed out with the details of how a superintelligence does things.

Perfecting Your World View

Your worldview defines your relationship to the world around you. It is not too broad to say that it encompasses your active and passive consciousness. Thinking of your worldview as something you create and control is wise.

This may sound contradictory since all you have to work with are the outside influences of your life experience. It is best to think of all those life experiences as the building blocks of your worldview, but you are the designer, architect, bricklayer, carpenter, and maintenance manager. You are responsible for building a solid foundation, selecting quality materials, securing the proper cognitive tools, and proceeding with diligence and self-control. The product of the effort is you, and the construction is never complete until your last breath.



Your World View is a reciprocal arrangement. It is how you see the world and how the world sees you. It should have a certain aesthetic appeal as others become acquainted with you. Your worldview is dynamic, constantly evolving as the world around you changes.

Your worldview consists of lenses that help you view the world and understand your experiences. It guides your actions and decisions. Defining, evaluating, and developing it toward your vision of perfection deserves your attention.

The central building blocks of your worldview are listed below. Let's look at each one.

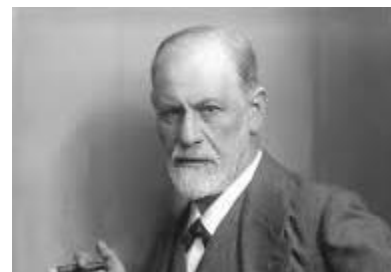
1. Religion, ethics, morality, beliefs, values	This is the most powerful lens through which we view the world. Through it, we try to comprehend and evaluate life's experiences.
2. Culture and family	This is the most nearly indelible influence beginning in infancy.
3. Vision of Reality	Reality can be elusive. Self-deception is easily overlooked. Fake news and conspiracies abound.
4. Filters, biases, prejudices, opinions	All of these are ways we misrepresent the truth of our experiences.
5. Psychological profile	Some valuable characteristics for managing our worldview are tolerance and openness to challenge.
6. Emotional composition	Emotions rule while rationality follows.
7. Knowledge and experience	Metaphors are helpful when trying to interpret all that we sense.

Your worldview's clarity, precision, and truth dramatically affect your agency. The pathways to your goals become more clearly evident. Major life-changing decisions can be made with greater wisdom. Mutually beneficial personal relationships can be established and nurtured. Your efforts in the purpose we share, creating the future, will become evident.

Dreams

Reference to dreams appears throughout recorded history. In earlier times, the speculation was that the origin of dreams was external to the dreamer. Visitations by spirits or ancestors with messages were a common understanding. These messages were thought to instruct the dreamer to take specific actions or to forecast foreboding future events. Today's understanding offers a unique opportunity to see inside your subconscious.

One of the early pioneers attempting to make some rational sense of dreams was the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Freud was the founder of psychoanalysis. Of the many contributions Freud made to Western thought, the interpretation of dreams is often considered his most significant. He believed dreaming is a unique mode of thought we don't fully understand. He defined it as wish fulfillment and extended his hallmark proposition that sex is the ultimate motivation, even in the meaning of dreams.



Freud conducted thousands of interviews to determine how people interpreted their dreams. He found that many believed dreams provide meaningful insight into unconscious beliefs and desires. Fewer believe that dreams offer memory organization, consolidation, and ongoing attempts to solve problems encountered during the day. It was also not uncommon to believe in dreams' predictive power. When an actual event reminded the subject of a past dream, they would revise their interpretation of the dream to fit the event.

The story continues with Carl Jung (1895-1961), a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst credited with founding analytical psychology. Freud and Jung collaborated for about six years. Freud continued to insist that sexuality was the primary influence in the development of the psyche, while Jung contended that spiritual and cultural experiences were primary. The two finally parted ways over Freud's insistence that the Oedipus complex was responsible for most neuroses.

Carl Jung interpreted dreams as an integral part of his therapeutic approach to his clients. He advised clients to take dreams as facts. Recall the dream images as accurately as possible. A series of related dreams should be handled like a conversation with your subconscious. Take dreams seriously. They provide important insights.

Neuroscience has made some exciting progress since Freud and Jung. We know two principal sleep modes: slow wave and rapid eye movement (REM).

Slow-wave sleep is characterized by sweeping waves of brain activity across the entire brain. There is a distortion of space and time and an absence of focus. During that time, we are not paralyzed. Little dream activity occurs during this phase.

Meaningful dream activity takes place during REM sleep. During REM sleep, we are paralyzed. The presence or absence of various chemicals creates a unique brain environment that is absent from emotions. This allows our subconscious to relive traumatic experiences objectively. It can have a profound therapeutic value. You can remember the experience without the burden of the emotional component associated with the original incident.

When appropriately interpreted, dreams can add depth and insight into understanding yourself.

In the Flow

A simple definition of being 'in the flow' would be total, complete involvement in your current pursuit. You strive towards your goal at an elevated pace with measurable achievements, free from distractions or interruptions.

In his book *Flow: Living at the Peak of Your Abilities*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, PhD, outlines a survey he conducted of individuals who had experienced flow and summarized their experiences below.



Eight Major Components of Flow

1. Having an explicit, well-defined activity with a specific goal.
2. You know momentarily if you are moving toward your goal. You receive immediate feedback, which is essential for enjoyment and focus.
3. The challenge of the activity is well matched with the actor's skill. In competitive activities, your skill is comparably matched with the opposition.
4. You must give the activity your full attention and focus. There must be no interruptions or distractions.
5. For success, one must abandon all other life concerns while in the flow. This creates a new reality and forms an escape.
6. The experience creates a feeling of control. You own your progress and your success.
7. You lose any feeling of self-consciousness. You feel more confident and content with your self-image.
8. You lose any sense of time. Time adapts to the experience.

Examples of people in the flow are common. Sports figures pursuing individual achievements are seeking to topple the previous records. Competitive sports where stand-offs between teams clash for better positioning in the rankings. First responders at the scenes of natural and man-made disasters know that time is of the essence when pulling survivors from the devastation. There are scientific researchers whose goals define products and services as having substantial benefits for humanity. Or it could be you planning, planting, nurturing, and harvesting your garden.

Dr. Csikszentmihalyi has another observation from his surveys and contacts concerning the type of individual most adept at achieving the flow state. These characteristics are summarized below. He refers to them as "the five elements of a complex personality."

1. Clarity and vision. Knowing what you intend to accomplish, both short-term and long-term.
2. The ability to focus and avoid distractions.
3. Choice is the ability to observe all the possibilities available and find the most motivating.
4. Commitment and caring for your activity.
5. Challenge, fearlessly facing greater difficulties.

When you are in the flow, you are experiencing complete engagement. Your environment will flow with you. You will encounter related elements that will contribute to your pursuit. You are flowing with something already in flow. You get in phase with it. It becomes self-organizing, grows, and takes on a life of its own.

Aesthetic Experience

A literature review of the wide variety of perspectives attempting to define the term 'aesthetics' reveals it to be fundamentally unbounded. Also, becoming overly analytic in developing a definition seems to violate the sanctity of any definition that tries to capture the emotional appeal of the experience. Finally, all true aesthetic experiences are personal. Any inquiry seeking a common denominator among the reactions of various individuals to the same experience will prove fruitless. These differences can lead to criticism from the pretentious, that many are insensitive and poorly equipped to appreciate the 'correct' interpretation fully. No 'correct' interpretation exists!

Perhaps North America's most impressive mountain chain is the Grand Tetons, just north of Jackson Hole in Wyoming, as viewed from the east. Let's speculate on how several individuals might view this awesome encounter.

A young woman arrives with her easel and pallet in time to capture the setting sun beyond the snow-covered peaks. This scene captures no less than the miracle of creation. She pauses to catch her breath occasionally and calm her trembling hand.



A man fond of hiking the trails in the foothills comes by in all his gear and pauses to rest on a nearby rock. The fascination that draws him to this area is that he has always had a childhood curiosity in geology and still has many of the samples he collected as a boy. Those memories still resonate whenever he returns here. This time, his imagination produces an experience he will never forget. In his mind, in virtual time-lapse photography, he sees two tectonic plates crashing into each other, the ground swelling before him, and the magnificent peaks rising toward the sky.

An elderly man pulls off the highway at the scenic overlook graciously provided by the highway department. Thanks to someone who had the foresight to share the awesome beauty of their unique state. In his youth, this old man's favorite sports were rock climbing and mountaineering. He stood leaning on the guardrail, recalling his triumphs and near tragedies. These are an integral part of his life experiences. They still invoke the joy, excitement, and fear of times long past.



One commonly held idea is that the satisfaction we receive from an aesthetic experience is the delight we take from our mental faculties. For a time, we are liberated to allow our imagination to draw on fond memories, construct scenarios where we could participate in the scene, or simply have the freedom of being in another place and time.

Those who have nurtured our spiritual nature will remember the familiar feeling of unity with all of nature and humanity. Remain mindful. These are the experiences that enrich our lives and facilitate our gratitude.

The God Instinct

Seek a definition of 'awareness' in the various reference guides. You will find a variety of situational scenarios where awareness becomes directly correlated with your agency in those scenarios. Rarely will you find a definition of awareness as something drawing your attention but, at the same time, leaving you uncertain what it is. This kind of experience of awareness has repeatedly proved to be the most enlightening and productive kind.

It leads scientists on the brink of discovery to say, "I know I'm on to something, a major breakthrough; I just need to work out the details." Perhaps you meet someone for the first time, and early in the encounter, you become aware that it has the potential for a meaningful relationship.

There is the awareness that leads to awe and wonder but defies definition. Ever since we began walking upright, we have suspected the existence of a power greater than ourselves. Associating worldly experience with divine influence formed the beginning of early philosophy and theology.

The success of the hunt, abundance of crops, favorable weather patterns, fertility, and good health were all derived from the favor of the divine for our early ancestors. Likewise, adversity and suffering such as plague, poor harvests, violent storms, stillbirth, and lack of plentiful game were clearly the wrath of the gods and in need of appeasement.



In the complete absence of any empirical evidence, any explanation of the divine was purely speculation. These descriptions of the divine grew through prophecies, revelations, and miraculous and supernatural stories. Written scriptures emerged, forming the formal doctrine and rituals of the world's major religions. For centuries the leaders of these various religions dictated the beliefs and behavior of the subjects residing in their domains.

Advances in science, the average education levels of the general population, and heightened degrees of social interaction in both the personal and cultural environments all contributed to increased skepticism toward religious doctrines and resistance to the stifling dictates of church authorities. The inertia of the church towards these advances proved to be stubborn. The possibility of a greater understanding of nature serving as revealing how a superintelligent divinity performed the creation never seemed to occur to the populace. Instead, it was generally agreed that new knowledge diminished the need for a divinity to explain these wonders.



Many are moving away from the established religions and becoming agnostic or referring to themselves as spiritual rather than religious.

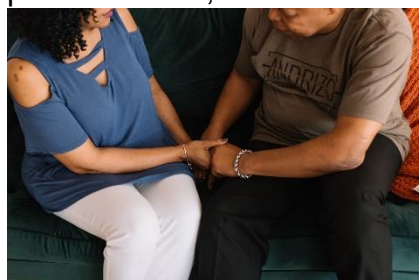
Those who define themselves as spiritual remain sensitive to those original feelings of awe and wonder. They again encounter the ineffable nature of human experience and find peace and comfort in that inevitable truth.

Could this eventually be the fundamental reality that ultimately unites all of humanity and leads to peace?

Epigenetics and Faith Healing

A gentle and sincere Christian man has a medical practice in Cleveland. He has a compassionate heart and an empathic connection with his patients. Occasionally, some of his patients have to endure the truth of severely adverse diagnoses.

Early in his career, because of his faith, compassion, and empathy, he would find himself immersed in his patients' suffering. Once, when he was so consumed with grief, he reached out and took his patient's hand, held it close to his chest, and whispered a prayer of hope and healing. He could feel the warmth returning in her hands that had been cold and stiff. She sighed heavily and stumbled back into a chair close by. Neither spoke. The mood slowly returned to normal. The patient left, and the good doctor returned to his desk to contemplate what had happened.



On her next visit, the patient arrived wearing a pleasant smile and an erect posture. Her worried expression and slumped shoulders of previous visits had morphed into hope and optimism. The obvious first order of business was to debrief their last encounter.

They began by just sitting and smiling at each other. They both recognized that they had shared something quite profound. Drawing on his Christian beliefs, the doctor was certain it was the presence of the Holy Spirit. The patient was convinced that it was some special power possessed by the doctor. Derived from their mutual respect, they found each other's theory at least somewhat credible.

The patient's diagnosis was an inoperable malignant tumor in her abdomen. She had elected to refuse chemotherapy based on discouraging statistics related to

God, our Creator, has stored within our minds and personalities, great potential strength, and ability. Prayer helps us tap and develop these powers.

A.P.J. Abdul Kalam

success in similar cases. She also didn't want to face the nauseous and debilitating side effects. On subsequent visits, the patient's tumor was found to be shrinking, and with time, she experienced complete remission.

In the following weeks, the doctor considered other patients he felt would be receptive to the story and shared it with them. He found mutual agreement with some and repeated the earlier process. This resulted in varying degrees of success, however infrequent, with others, and the word spread. Needless to say, skepticism and calls against his very character and integrity were common. Over time, the beneficial effects began to outweigh the balance and our doctor was widely appreciated for his special gift.

During this time, a new science emerged: the science of Epigenetics. Most are familiar with genetics. That is, the genes in your DNA which produce the vital characteristics that define 'you'. Also within the DNA is the epigenome. The simple way of thinking of this is as a series of switches that activate or suppress gene expression. Many things can cause these switches to react, including an intense emotional experience like the one experienced by our doctor and patient above. In some cases, this reaction has been shown to initiate an immune response sufficient to cause the body to shrink and eliminate a tumor threatening the patient's life. We now have scientific proof that what our good doctor has been doing works! Hopefully, this will silence the critics.

Grounding Our Moral Values

Let's begin by discussing the nature of the individual and his/her orientation to virtuous behavior. Our uniqueness as a species resides in the fact that we are agents of inquiry and creativity. This was called the 'Logos' or divine intelligence within us in the ancient world. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis makes an interesting case for the fact that everyone 'knows' the right thoughts and behavior, but not everyone 'behaves'. What is the nature of this spirit within us to emulate, orienting us to the highest good?

We see the world through a system of values. We not only see what is but what could be. It is best to consider this spirit a hierarchical system of values called an ethic. This ethic or moral law has an absolute nature. That is, it is the same for everyone. This can be observed when comparing cultural differences in interpreting and implementing this moral law. If it is found that one is better than another, there must be an absolute standard to facilitate the comparison. The only way to interpret the world is through a system of values. This provides a model for our thoughts and behavior. We need to comprehend this spirit or logos or exist in confusion.

Evidence of a moral code is completely absent in the events and occurrences of nature. Witnessing the ghastliest crimes or savage behaviors contains no moral lesson. The moral response originates entirely in the observer. This is the best support for the idea of an a priori moral nature for humans.

Consider this example. You are sitting on a bench along a sidewalk. Across the street stands a man near the curb with a couple of suitcases. Another man approaches from behind with a short length of pipe and proceeds to split the man's head open. He falls to the ground and his blood pours into the gutter. The other man grabs the two suitcases and walks away. What is the moral lesson to be learned from this example?



There isn't one. Witnessing this outrageous experience teaches us nothing about how to behave. Our moral code and standards for behavior are part of our inherent nature. Watching a cheetah run down a fawn, ripping it to pieces, and devouring it has the same moral implications as the first example, none.

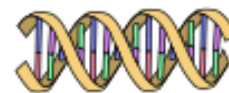
Within us resides a moral sense that seems to be encoded in our essential nature. As C.S. Lewis describes, even the most ruthless criminals can argue over what's 'fair' when dividing up the loot.

Our essential nature stands aside from the rest of nature in one distinct and defining characteristic. We possess an instinctive moral hierarchy of values to guide our lives. No empirical evidence for this can be found anywhere in our natural environment. This hierarchy of the greatest good begins with the divine. The image of the divine is a personal thing. So many other things depend on it for their definition and existence. Determine the nature of the spirit that inhabits you when you are oriented towards the highest good. The divine within you lays out this hierarchy of the greatest good to emulate and calls you on it when you don't follow. A successful culture shares a common hierarchy of the greatest good. Without it, things become chaotic.

Our world today lacks a common hierarchy of good. We see the infiltration of those lusting for power and control. Fortunately, we can also see the pushback struggling to maintain some semblance of order and salvation of the spirit. The vital role of the ineffable deserves clear expression. It will be the unifying force that will lead to harmony and peace.

Deoxyribonucleic Acid

DNA is the blueprint for life. That's easy to say, but let's try comprehending the information it must contain to perform its fundamental functions.



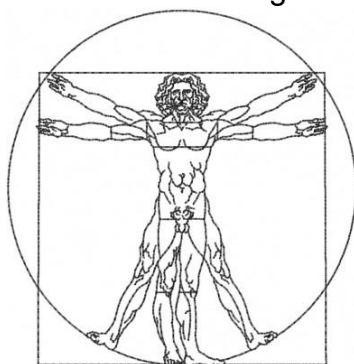
So, let's begin by talking about vacuum cleaners. You just bought a new one. In the box with the machine is a manual. You open it and quickly flip past the customary safety precautions. Next comes the parts list. It shows a schematic of how the machine goes together with many arrows and numbers. The following are the instructions for changing bags, brushes, and belts. You note that you'll probably have to know this someday. You plug in your new machine, and you're off.

Back at Vacuum Cleaner Headquarters, probably some small town in Ohio, there's a room with designers and engineers. These are the C - students stuck with making vacuum cleaners. All the engineering drawings, parts designs with material requirements and machining tolerances, assembly instructions, and quality control procedures are on their computers. In the back is the factory where the machines are constructed and the loading dock for shipping and receiving. It takes quite an effort to provide the consuming public with a smooth flow of vacuum cleaners.

Let's take a step up in complexity and consider the automobile. If you're like most people, you're reluctant even to open the hood. Nowadays, there's a lot more under there than a bunch of spark plugs and a distributor.

Likewise, there's also a headquarters for the auto company, maybe in Detroit or Palo Alto. It consists of a large complex of buildings. Their computers contain thousands of times as many drawings and specifications as the vacuum cleaner company. Their considerations extend to automation, robotics, artificial intelligence, complex assembly plant layouts, vast networks of suppliers coupled by transportation systems with critical timing requirements, and many other factors unseen by the customer behind the steering wheel. It all works!

Let's take another step up in complexity. This time we're increasing by some incalculable factor. We want to build an organism. We want the instructions to be compact and portable. We want to be able to make modest modifications in the instructions and produce the entire array of organisms on the planet. We may want a rose bush, a tree, a cat for our lap, a chimpanzee, or a human being.



Further, we want these instructions, when encountering a similar set of instructions, such as the sperm joining with the ovum, to begin assembling the organism spontaneously. Also, to avoid boredom, let's have every offspring be unique. They can resemble the source of the sperm and ovum but also have their own characteristics and abilities. We want the organism, when finally exposed to its environment, to respond by developing attributes and abilities suitable for functioning in that environment. It should mature to a form independent of its host. It should also be capable of propagating this cycle indefinitely.

What these instructions would look like if they had to take the form of drawings and specifications is unimaginable.

Everything the human species has produced since we learned to walk upright is just trivial junk compared to the biological knowledge and its products on our planet.

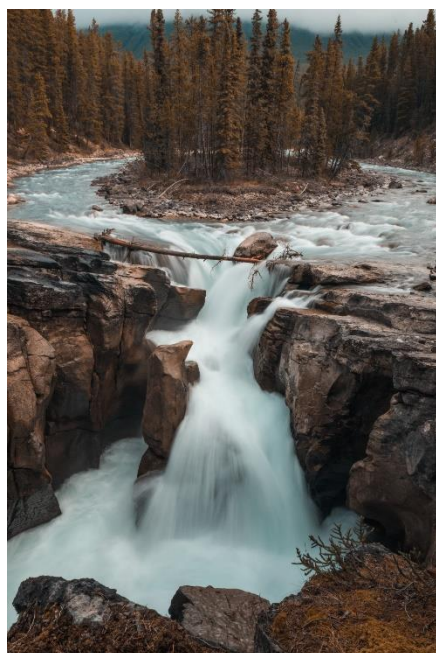
Water, Water, Everywhere

It's fascinating to think about how well-configured our universe is to welcome life and allow it to evolve and flourish. Mindful reflection can generate a sense of awe, beauty, and appreciation for our very existence.

The story begins when inquiring minds before we realize that certain values describing the universe's behavior are precisely what they need to be, or we wouldn't be here.⁷

Here's a common example to demonstrate what this means. Let's consider the strength of the gravitational attraction of material objects. If this constant were even slightly stronger, everything in the universe, all the galaxies and their contents, would collapse together. Further, if that constant were even slightly weaker, everything would fly apart. Also, in addition to gravity, there are a few other constants whose slight variations would lead to comparable catastrophic destruction.

When this configuration was first realized, the reaction was, "Wow, a universe designed just for us. It's a miracle!!". Slowly, we came to the obvious conclusion that a universe with the appropriate constant values for life is the **only** universe we could ever observe. We would never find ourselves in a universe that couldn't support us, and here we are. It wasn't such a miracle after all.



But wait, many other things on our planet make it habitable and worthy of our appreciation. These include an oxygen atmosphere, an ozone layer, oil deposits, a wide variety of metabolizable, often tasty, life forms, and lots of water. Water deserves a second look.

Water exists in three states: solid or ice, liquid, and vapor or humidity. This is exactly what we need.

Water is essential for life and is needed everywhere on the planet to provide its life-giving nourishment. Water accommodates this need to be essentially everywhere through its fundamental characteristics.

Where it exists in large quantities in liquid form, and the air is dry, it turns into vapor. As a side benefit, it then decorates our bright blue skies with fluffy white clouds on its journey to everywhere it is needed.

Finally, in its travels, it encounters just the right conditions for it to return to the liquid state, and gravity brings it to us as rain or snow. All life forms receiving it are nourished and thrive. Lakes and streams form to support aquatic life. These also provide recreational and sporting opportunities for us. In higher elevations, snow collects to form a storehouse of water to provide the valleys below with an abundant spring beginning.

When your routine is interrupted by a storm, celebrate it!

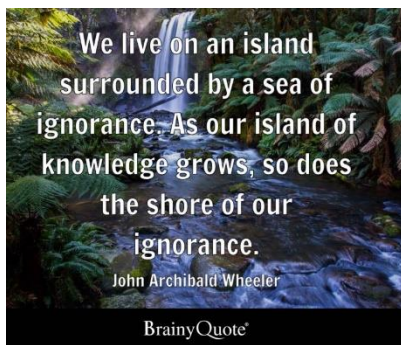


⁷ The Anthropic Principle

Atheists

We have all had those special moments where our thoughts and senses are overwhelmed with awe at some encounter in our life experience. It could be a unique view of our beautiful home planet's varied features. It could be the intricacies of a new scientific discovery that challenges random evolution. And some defy description such as the realization that 'I am alive' or 'I sense the presence of a powerful love abiding with me'.

These awesome moments have captivated our ancestors since we began to walk upright. That began our natural tendency to try and explain them. Devoid of any empirical clues, such events still produced a rich history of stories, myths, and legends. Those were the beginnings of the long journey to what William James called our present-day 'Varieties of Religious Experience.'



Let's see if we can find our way back to what our earliest ancestors experienced when encountering these precious instances of awe and wonder. We will hike to Wheeler's 'shore of ignorance' (left). Our trek will take us past the epistemically questionable 'knowledge' of all the stories, myths, legends, scriptures, doctrines, and rituals accumulated over time.



When we arrive, we will be free of all the filters and preconceptions that could cloud our vision. When we look out on the sea of unknowing, it is not all dark and gloom. There is a captivating warmth that forms a lasting connection with our very heart and soul, a spiritual baptism of sorts. We now know that a reality exists beyond our own that includes the answers to all our metaphysical ponderings. Answers we can never know. They will always remain inaccessible, not to diminish or extinguish the awe and wonder.

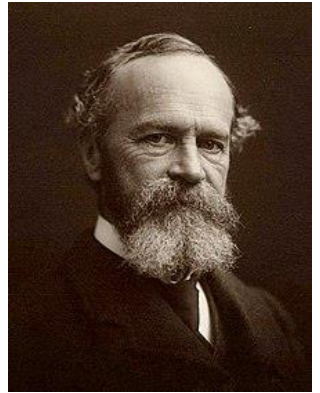
Modern-day atheists campaign to discredit the religious beliefs and convictions of people and cultures as irrational, unfounded, and even destructive. Indeed, peace, tolerance, and coexistence have not always been the hallmarks of the intersections of our religious variations. Further, explanations grounded in the unknown and unknowable can be difficult to defend. Often revelation is given as the source of our understanding, but this is considered epistemically dubious.

As a result, the atheists have won some ground. Migration away from established religious institutions has persisted. Many who have left the flock searching for greener pastures define themselves as 'spiritual but not religious.' There is little consensus concerning what that means. Let's try to put a proper definition of the meaning of spiritual.

Canceling your subscription to a formal religion also revokes the accompanying insurance policy that your moral values and virtues are grounded in an established affiliation with God. Grounding is an absolute necessity. Without it we feel lost and confused. What defines a moral life? What compels us to think and behave in a virtuous way? A spiritual person shares the ever-present feeling of reaching into the abyss and feeling the transcendent divine reaching back. This provides and sustains the ground for a moral life.

Pragmatism

The basic premises of Pragmatism had been around a long time, when at the beginning of the 20th century William James dusted them off and fleshed them out. He introduced his conceptualization in a series of eight clear, precise lectures at Columbia University in 1907 and generated considerable interest and enthusiasm. It would be difficult to improve James' organization and articulation, so this essay will parallel those lectures with commentary.



In its most basic form, Pragmatism is an analytic method for finding truth. In this regard, it serves a similar purpose to its opposing methods of empiricism and rationalism.

Empiricism established a firm foothold with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. The basis of their philosophy states that all knowledge is derived from sense experience. Before any sense experience, the mind is a blank slate. All of our perceptions originate in the five senses. Aquinas declared, "There is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses. The intellect liberates the essence of the particulars. This is called abstraction and leads to knowledge".

Individual sense experiences are the building blocks of reasoning. Repeated experiences lead to induction, generalization, and universal principles. James comments, "Empiricists love facts in all their crude variety while rationalists love abstract thoughts and eternal principles".

Early proponents of Rationalism were Descartes, Leibnitz, Spinoza, and Rousseau. These gentlemen postulated that knowledge is derived from reason rather than experience. Our intuition or rational insight, followed by deductive reasoning rather than sense perception, produces knowledge. Reality has an intrinsically logical structure and can be accessed and comprehended by the mind. The intersection of Empiricism and Rationalism is where experience conforms to our cognitive constructs and the organizing principles of our mind.

When deciding between two or more competing alternatives, William James defines Pragmatism as "It tries to interpret each alternative by tracking its practical consequences. You must be able to show some practical results that must follow from one side or the other being right".

A similar concept was proposed some years earlier by Charles Sanders Peirce. His perspective was, "Our beliefs are rules for action. We need to determine what conduct is suitable to produce. That conduct, for us, is its sole significance. Conduct is the only reason for a belief. To think clearly of an object, we need to consider what characteristics of a practical nature the object may involve".

These are the foundations of Pragmatism as a philosophical movement; what difference would it make in our lives if this world formula or that world formula were the true one? James continues, "Pragmatism turns away from abstraction, insufficiency, verbal solutions, bad a priori reasons, fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes. It turns to concreteness, facts, actions, and power."

"You must bring out of a situation its practical cash value. Turn away from first principles, categories, and supposed necessities and towards lastings, fruits, consequences, and facts. Pragmatism clings to facts, while Rationalism adheres to abstractions. Pragmatism connects the vast collections of facts and the rich truths of the Universe".

The Gaia Hypothesis

The GAIA Hypothesis theorizes that all living organisms on the planet, from microorganisms to mammals and humans, interact with the planet's inorganic components to form a self-regulating, interdependent environment. This symbiotic relationship assists in maintaining and perpetuating conditions suitable for life.

This hypothesis was proposed by the chemist James Lovelock in the mid-60s when Darwinian evolution was well entrenched in the scientific community. According to Darwin, species adapt to changes in their environment through evolution. Failing to adapt, the species would go extinct. Nothing in the Darwinian model suggested that living organisms could somehow influence or control the inorganic nature and structure of the planet.

The GAIA Hypothesis goes on to posit that the Earth, including the atmosphere, oceans, land, and all living things, composes a self-regulating, tightly coupled, evolving system. This integrated system aims to maintain an environment optimal for life.



Lovelock demonstrates by example how the action of certain microorganisms can influence the composition of the atmosphere, the salinity of ocean water, and the Earth's surface temperature. These examples are valid. However, his hypothesis does not clearly explain how these equilibrium values of planetary homeostasis define the optimum values for life.

Homeostasis describes a process where a variable needs to be controlled within a well-established range. A common example used frequently is a home thermostat. This device is connected to two appliances: the furnace and the central air conditioner. This system is sufficient to regulate the temperature of the home. It has two essential characteristics. It can signal distress, hot or cold, and be connected to an agent that can respond effectively.

No reasonable mechanism has been proposed for how these characteristics exist on a planetary scale. It is unlikely that the community of life could cause the inorganic environment to respond to its survival needs.

James Lovelock was an avid environmentalist. He learned this at an early age from his father. He describes his father as such. "He was an excellent and enthusiastic gardener and a very gentle man. He instinctively felt his kinship with all living things, and I remember how greatly it distressed him even to see a tree cut down. I owe much of my feeling for natural things to walking with him down country lanes and along ancient drives which had or appeared to have a sweet seemliness and tranquility".



Despite its shortcomings, the GAIA Hypothesis of James Lovelock, Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring*, and others opened our eyes to the pressing need to value, treasure, and revere our precious symbiotic relationship with our unique planet.

Eudaimonia

Eudaimonia began with considerable ambiguity in Aristotle's works but has since been enhanced by many others' interpretations. This term took on a life of its own, has a rich history, and holds significance for all of us.

To begin, Aristotle used the term to describe the “highest human good”. He suggests that it is related to virtue, excellence, and ethical wisdom. It appears that Aristotle was trying to get his audience to have a personal experience of eudaimonia rather than come away with a precise meaning.

If that was his objective, it proved to be quite effective. Subsequently, there are countless examples in the literature where others have taken the term to heart and related stories of their pathways to the “highest human good”. Both the journey and the destination, in each case, add to the depth and expression of the term.



A dictionary of Greek philosophical terms attributed to Plato defines eudaimonia: “The good composed of all goods; an ability which suffices for living well; perfection in respect of virtue; resources sufficient for a living creature.” Ambiguity remains. We still have more room for enhancement and embellishment.

Returning to Aristotle, he acknowledges in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that not everyone agrees on what constitutes a life of doing and living well. He says, “...for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement... identify living well and faring well with being happy; but concerning what eudaimonia is, they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former, it is some plain and obvious things like pleasure, wealth, or honor...” Aristotle goes on to confess that defining a eudemonic life as one that is desirable and includes living well is vague. Rather than end abruptly, he throws out a few terms, such as a life of pleasure, political activity, and a philosophical life. In later work, Aristotle contributes expanded attributes for our term, but he presents them in a way that doesn't restrict the definition but increases the relevance for a greater audience. It is a term that justifies its existence by insisting that it be defined.

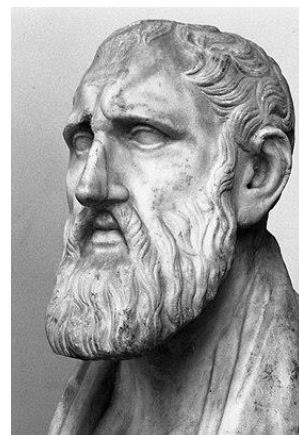
Turning to the Stoics, they believed that eudaimonia was “a good flow of life” and “living in agreement with nature”. For them, the true source of happiness was wisdom, knowledge, and reason. The path to true happiness is to accept one's natural situation and not be driven by the desire for pleasure. Morals and virtues are customary practices and have an absolute reality and force. This force has a natural affinity to act on us, and we can respond naturally. This is the order of nature. This natural order defines what is correct. The cardinal virtues of Stoicism are courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom.

Accepting all of the above as a firm foundation for understanding eudaimonia, we can now feel comfortable adding our contribution. To achieve the ‘highest human good,’ the definition should include a component that facilitates the growth and expression of the individual. A person's agency peaks when she/he is properly positioned in the social and intellectual hierarchy. One should seek friends and associates with achievements, abilities, interests, and goals comparable to one's own. Your thoughts, ponderings, and deliberations will be elevated above the mundane. Your conversations will be more stimulating. You will be well-connected to cultural and educational events. You will be living on an elevated plane. You will be experiencing eudaimonia.

Stoicism

Stoicism is a basic philosophy of how we ought to live. It encompasses the elements of virtue, the formation of our character, and the discipline and structure of our daily lives. Understanding the basic premises of stoicism can favorably enrich our engagement with the world.

Stoic philosophy observes that the universe is a rationally governed assembly of material entities each ordered by its natural controlling essence. This observation extends to the individual. Therefore, nature implied to the Stoics that it represented a model for human life. The laws governing the physical universe must have a corresponding set of laws governing human affairs. They thought the principles of lawfulness that govern and regulate human life could be secured by reason.



Aristotelian influence had the Stoics define the goal of our actions as 'eudaimonia' or happiness. The source of true happiness is wisdom, knowledge, and reason. These are things that can't be taken away; all else can. The path to happiness is to accept one's natural situation and not be driven by the desire for pleasure.

At first, Stoicism appears to be a life of rigid discipline, suppression of emotions, and the exclusion of desire. Few would find that very appealing. However, morals and virtues are not just customary practices but have an absolute reality and force. This force has a natural affinity to act on us, and we can respond naturally. This is the order of nature. This natural order defines what is correct. Aligning our thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors with our natural essence will facilitate joy and happiness.

Our emotions and passions form the opposition to a virtuous life. Accepting this truth and submitting our efforts to their control is the path to a virtuous life. The four pillars or Cardinal virtues are:

- Courage
- Temperance
- Justice
- Wisdom

Become virtuous so that you can bear the sufferings of life without becoming corrupt.

Jordan Peterson

Stoicism doesn't come right out and commit to an a priori moral sense of the individual but takes the posture that we 'know it when we see it'. We have an affinity for the natural law that defines virtue. Virtue is the only true good. All material things can pass away. Virtue prepares us to face the trials of life, to survive and perhaps to flourish. Pleasure, wealth, and even health are not necessarily bad, but they provide no real foundation for life.⁸



The Stoics professed a will and behavior that followed nature, promoting an emotional and psychological state resistant to misfortune and, if necessary, capable of resilient recovery.

Today we refer to an individual with a calm nature and deliberate attitude toward the affairs of life as a 'Stoic' personality.

⁸ The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius offer further insight.

Authenticity

Here, we will consider authenticity as an individual's comprehensive, defining characteristic. The most obvious clue to revealing an authentic person is their transparency. You can witness their beliefs and values in their speech and actions. For others to find authenticity agreeable, it should arise in a person, as Aristotle puts it, in pursuit of the 'highest good'. Let's develop a profile for this person as a primary prerequisite to warrant they're assuming the posture of an open, authentic individual.

The obvious first step in being and acting as your true self is understanding who you are. This involves a broad complement of characteristics, including,

- Beliefs, values, and virtues
- Personal philosophy and worldview
- Emotional profile
- Clarity and accuracy in self-assessment
- Rationality and cognitive acuity
- Interpersonal skills



To thoroughly understand each of these attributes, one must frequently dedicate introspection, meditation, and reflection. No one can expect to achieve perfection in any of these categories, so another primary part of this process is honestly recognizing and acknowledging one's deficiencies and formulating remedies. Let's consider each one of these factors.

Your beliefs, values, and virtues motivate your thoughts, decisions, and actions. This ethic will be the most evident to the people around you in your personal choice to be transparent and authentic. Any discrepancy between your ethics and your actions demands your effort for resolution.

Your philosophy and worldview define the basis for your ethics. It's how you obtained and implemented these formative ideas, whether from family, community, culture, or self-study of other domains. It includes a vision of how you would like the world to be and perhaps helps set your personal goals to contribute to that end.

Your emotional profile can be an asset or a detriment in how you are viewed by others. This could be the least of your concerns if you've mastered the other points on this list. This mastery would lead to a persona of peacefulness, contentment, confidence, and sincerity.

Clarity and accuracy in self-assessment can be a formidable objective. The difficulty arises in the ease at which we can deceive ourselves into believing our favorable traits are more prominent than they are. Our undesirable ones are not worth consideration. This imbalance can harm our authenticity.

The ability to exercise rationality and cognitive acuity in a comprehensive analysis of the interrelationship of the collective points we are considering is a valuable asset. It is the ability to step back and view the complete picture of you.

Finally, your interpersonal skills will clearly declare your intent to be truthful, transparent, and authentic.

Authenticity is the
daily practice of
letting go of who we
think we're supposed
to be and embracing
who we are.

Brené Brown

Gratitude

Gratitude is recognizing, extending, and receiving appreciation for all the amazing gifts the human experience offers. Making the habit of gratitude an integral part of your daily life supports the journey to your full potential.

Wikipedia cites studies showing strong correlations between individuals who express and receive gratitude regularly and will also frequently display many of the attributes in the table below. Gratitude is the umbrella attribute that facilitates and encourages a peaceful personal existence.

Positive Emotions	Subjective Well-being	Meaningful Social Relationships	Absence of Depression
Control of their Environments	Positive Experiences	Personal Growth	Self-Acceptance
Constructive Coping Strategies	Confidently Seek Support from Others	Avoid Self Criticism	No Substance Abuse
Positive Thoughts on Waking and Falling Asleep.	Happiness and Joy	More Satisfying and Lasting Relationships	Eating Healthy
Exercise	Optimistic Future Outlook	Better Sleep and Pleasant Dreams	Better Nutrition
More Charitable and Generous	Empathic	Always Ready to Help	

In the literature, there are suggestions about how to make gratitude a daily practice, perhaps by starting a Gratitude Journal or setting aside a specific time each day or evening to reflect on those things in your life worthy of gratification. Activities such as these are planned events in your life rather than frequent and spontaneous reactions in the flow of your life. It is worthy to recall the wisdom of Aristotle and his discussion on virtue, and our application of it to our virtue of gratitude.

Aristotle was impatient with someone pondering a virtue, recognizing its value, and then losing it in their stream of consciousness. He would settle for nothing less than making the diligent pursuit of the virtue in question the focal point of your efforts until the virtue is fully integrated into your very nature. It has become one of the fundamental attributes that define you. He calls it one of your 'habits'.

So, if we are going to make something a habit, we need to identify pathways in our mind that let us construct a habit. The first would be practice. That's a sensible place to start, but it would be a lengthy effort before expressing gratitude became engrained as part of our nature. Our efforts could fade. Let's take a look at the discussion around 'free will'.

It has been shown that our beliefs, decisions, and actions are dictated by our knowledge, past experiences, emotional and cognitive functioning, and all relevant variables that should be considered in the decision. Each variable exerts its influence based on how important we consider it to be, some greater than others. Our brain does this for us, out of our control. This is supported by the fact that we occasionally regret our actions and wish we had acted differently.

If we set aside time each day to review our behavior, looking for examples of where the things most important to us, such as gratitude, failed to exert their influence adequately, a conscious effort to reinforce those variables' influence will show up in future decisions. This is simply building our character through self-control.



How to Be a Good Friend

The current literature contains numerous articles and guides such as 'Rid Your Life of Toxic People' and 'Seven Types of People You Should Avoid'. If you read many of these articles while thinking about your friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, and associates there will be few survivors as you weed them out one by one for their described neuroses and afflictions. In your solitude, you may realize that your judgment may have been too harsh.

Here, we are going to view the situation from exactly the reverse perspective. What characteristics and behaviors should you employ to escape the gauntlet of the critics and be the person everyone wants as a friend?

One consideration that represents an excellent starting strategy is always considering the other person as an 'end' instead of a 'means'. Thinking of someone as a means implies that you view them as an opportunity to use them for your gains. You evaluate them as what they can do to advance your life position or acquire the desired things. Thinking of them as an 'end' means you want what is best for them and are willing to help them achieve it. Having the proper perspective towards your friendship results in a cooperative effort for the common good.



Another reciprocal arrangement is emotional support. No one should have to face unexpected trauma and hardship alone. You must be there for your friend in need with compassion, understanding, and empathy. Here, however, you need to place some limits. A friend constantly plagued by negativity and perpetually needing support can drain your spirit. Emotions can spread, leaving you carrying some of their burden. When this happens, they need to see your visibility backing off, expecting more resilience and perseverance on their part. When you're the troubled one, appreciate the comfort but respond to the encouragement.



People admire someone who takes responsibility for their misfortunes and the unanticipated difficulties in their lives. They develop a plan of action and pursue it diligently. They may ask for advice and appreciate support but rarely complain. It is easy to come to their aid because they exhibit power, strength, and resolve. Others employ their troubles to satisfy their need for attention and validation. They promptly assume the victim's status. They are powerless in the face of adversity. It serves as a means to avoid responsibility and get your sympathy. This type of person is a constant burden. Be that person who meets hardship with fortitude. Your friends will appreciate you, and you will serve as a model when they have troubles to bear.

Always speak the truth. It's an old cliché, but forever true if you can't say something nice about someone, don't say anything at all. Gossiping is an ugly word for most, but there are some who relish it. They enjoy spreading rumors after embellishing them, containing only enough truth to make them believable. It serves as a source of social bonding for them. Cultivating an environment of openness and honesty can expose and discourage the evil of gossip.

In summary, hope for the best for your friends. Be there for them in times of need. Deal with your problems effectively and never assume the posture of the victim. Speak the truth.

People will appreciate you, their good friend.

Our Dark Side

As children, we developed an external character, one observable by others, composed primarily of aspects that had passed inspection and were generally approved by parents and family. We tried to get away with many things that didn't work out well. Those we collected up and kept to ourselves to avoid the adverse reactions they generated in others. This process caught the attention of Carl Jung, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst and founder of analytic psychology. His insights and suggestions warrant our careful attention.



These repressed thoughts and behaviors become more dire, sinister, and destructive as we age. Everyone's fundamental nature contains contempt, disgust, cruelty, aggression, jealousy, and countless other negative traits that are all easier to repress than to learn to control. We even deny our weaknesses that become part of this collection of hidden aspects of ourselves. What we set out to hide from others, we have even hidden from ourselves. This all sinks into the subconscious and becomes what Carl Jung calls 'The Shadow'.

Jung refers to the 'persona' as the mask we wear in social settings. This is left after we strip out all the undesirable and weak traits we've dumped into the subconscious shadow. It is this collection of traits we hope others will believe that define us.



Here, objectively looking at this process should produce uneasiness and discomfort. You get the image of yourself walking around wearing a mask or perhaps a complete costume pretending to represent only a part of your true, total self. You might be found out. An occasional curious glance from someone might suggest they have noticed something insincere. You lack authenticity.

Jung, in his writing, shares stories of patients who deny that they have a dark side. These same patients demonstrate hysterical moods, nervous stomachs, irritability, and a variety of unusual outcroppings. Further counseling reveals that these abnormalities are related to the tension that occurs when the individual is attempting to manage the two opposing personalities. The elements of the shadow affect our moods and behavior and even our mental and physical health.

Jung insists that we must confront and integrate all the repressed elements of the shadow. Until we do, our persona doesn't represent us in total. The key to this process is to proceed so that our dark traits become part of our persona under our management and control. A simple example might be someone who has suppressed their anger and aggression to the point that they fail to defend their rights and privileges and are often taken advantage of in competitive situations. Bringing these traits to the surface and under proper control can make the person more assertive, improve self-esteem, and command greater respect and agency.

Introspection allows you access to the contents of your shadow. By ignoring or denying your shadow, you are leaving out a vital part of your personality. This means that you are becoming increasingly unaware of who you are.

Integrating the shadow produces wholeness. The whole person is more attractive and authentic to others.

Special Qualities of Women

Our planet today is wrestling with several existential problems that threaten our very survival. At the very least, it is doubtful that the quality of life we enjoy today will endure much longer. One potential change we could all help to implement could deflect our course from inevitable disaster.

History reports that central to the philosophy of Plato was his theory of Forms. Here, he proposed that in some transcendent realm, there existed an ideal or perfect version of things Plato calls its Form. If we could visit Plato's virtual museum of ideal Forms, we would surely find one for 'Woman'. What might we learn?



To support our quest, present-day social scientists have conducted a sizeable number of gender studies that provide us with a comprehensive view of a woman's unique qualities. These studies usually focus on the 'Big Five' personality types. Below are attributes where women score higher than men.

Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Extraversion	Openness
Altruism	Order	Social ability	Imagination
Empathy	Self-discipline	Positive Emotionality	Creativity
Kindness	Self-respect	Warmth	Feelings
Cooperation		Interpersonal Interaction	Appreciation of aesthetic experiences
Social Harmony			Spirituality
Consideration of others' concerns			
Tender mindedness			
Compassion			
Politeness			

It is not difficult to recognize that these are all features that evolution would favor. Darwin proposed that the main purpose of evolution was survival. In our modern world, that purpose needs to be expanded to include a greater quality of life than just survival, a more meaningful and pleasant life.

History relates many stories that show a man's nature is to hop on his horse and ride off to rape and pillage the neighboring encampment. It was the wives, mothers, and sisters who made every effort to hold them back. Cultures today that fail to respect and appreciate the special qualities of the female half of their population are doomed to collapse.

The very definition of civilization draws on all the characteristics listed above to comprehensively understand what it means to be civilized.

So, Darwin was right after all, the main purpose of evolution was survival. Women have evolved to have the qualities needed to ensure we and our planet survive and flourish. Women are more highly evolved than men. Ensuring women share the leadership roles that define and deliver our future is imperative.

Wisdom

Wisdom is a quality lacking a clear, singular definition but becomes readily apparent when we see it. A common image of a wise person is someone calm and peaceful. He/she welcomes a Socratic style of dialog in conversation, and they also extend and expect mutual respect in discussing ideas.

In their solitude, a wise person will make every effort to stay in touch with reality. We all, on occasion, need to resist our tendency toward self-deception. We have filters and prejudices that stand between us and a clear understanding of the subject at hand. Recognizing this allows for minimizing their adverse effects.

You Must Inhabit Your Philosophy.

Iris Murdoch

A wise person will view a proposition from multiple perspectives. They realize that interpretations vary with the frame of observation. When seeking an understanding of a difficult philosophical work, studying commentaries by reputable sources provides unique insights. You can expect a wise person to consider your point of view and discuss it with an open mind.



A wise person knows what he/she knows and doesn't know. All knowledge has a quality associated with it. All inductive knowledge is falsifiable. All empirical knowledge coming to us through our senses is unreliable because of our filters and prejudices. For

example, a heliocentric solar system is a good bet, but psychic revelations should be approached cautiously.

A mandatory requirement of a young person on the journey towards wisdom is to learn how to think. That is, they must pick up all the tools of proper reasoning. Steven Pinker has done an impressive job of defining the contents of this toolbox in his book "Rationality". Rational thinking and analysis must be studied. Somehow, rationality escaped evolution. This is testified by all you meet daily who are completely uninitiated.

A wise person remains open to challenge. One excellent way of strengthening our beliefs and convictions is to expose them to the scrutiny of others and be compelled to defend them. A wise person maintains quality relationships so that his/her discussions and debates produce fruitful synthesizes.

A wise person is adept at what cognitive scientists call 'relevance realization'. This means finding the important aspects of the discussion and focusing on them, framing or properly bounding the topic.

Finally, we have the immortal words of the oracle,

Know Thyself

The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.

William James

Wisdom doesn't necessarily come with age. Sometimes age just shows up all by itself.

Distributed Cognition and Collective Intelligence

Today we're all connected in ways unimaginable just a few decades ago. Access to the collective knowledge of the entire human experience can be secured through our keyboards. The whole world has been thrown open to each of us to gather information, view from various perspectives, extend our ideas for critical review, and actively participate in creating the future.



The Internet contains and facilitates distributed thought and deliberation through continuous exchange and debate. Intelligence is commonly defined as the ability to solve various problems in various domains. What are the possibilities when we network intelligence sources, information libraries, and virtual conference rooms over vast distances? This is today's reality.

There is a push to standardize research methods as much as possible to facilitate greater collaboration. Self-deception and confirmation bias resolve more effectively in a dialog or group discussion. Neurons exhibit collective intelligence emerging from the network; a single neuron can't do much of anything. Similarly, consider the collective achievements of ants and termites. No person can see evolution or other natural phenomena that occur over long periods. No single individual can see global warming. It takes a world effort. Distributed cognition and collective intelligence allow us to see evolution, plate tectonics, erosion, and global warming.

There are other, far more subtle, examples of our topic. First of all, we have the authority to demand respect from others. Conversely, we have the responsibility to extend respect to all others. This reciprocal agreement defines individual agency in a group setting. Balancing this agency among the group's individuals is fundamental if distributed cognition is to function properly.



In a heavy traffic situation, each participant subconsciously picks up the subtle moves of the relevant drivers in his/her area, making their moves within the bounds of their compromised agency and collectively producing the next differential progression in an ongoing equitable resolution of the traffic situation. This is not telepathy or extrasensory communication. It is just another amazing capability of your subconscious, an everyday example of distributed cognition.

The implications for the success of the current Full Self Driving (FSD) project are discouraging. The obvious problem with the FSD vehicle is that it lacks any ability to participate in the human network. There are no exchanges of intentions on a cognitive level. The FSD vehicle is not extended any agency. It becomes a foreign object to be avoided.

To continue this amazing story of distributed cognition and collective intelligence, turn to the work of Michael Levin, PhD, at Tufts University and listen to him discuss cell intelligence, regenerative medicine, bioelectricity, the goals of biological systems, and morphogenesis. All of these topics are presented in ways we can all understand.

Or you could watch them with friends and profit from the collective experience.

Arete

In the ancient Greek world, Arete meant excellence in all things. It was a concept that was central to all philosophical thought. Reference to Arete appears in the writings of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and many more. When fully developed, the concept frequently reminds us that the pursuit of excellence provides motivation and fulfillment in our daily lives.

The scope of Arete is totally comprehensive for the individual. It begins with excellence in moral virtues, starting with a clear understanding of the virtues recognized by the Greek culture of the time, followed by constant practice until they can be seen as habitual in the thoughts and actions of our individual.

One must pay careful attention to the knowledge acquired to be epistemically solid to avoid being misled into error. One must reflect clear articulation, truth, elevated vocabulary, and relevance in speech, writing, and rhetoric. The best expression of an idea has both cognitive and aesthetic appeal. This gains respect for the quality of her/his testimony.



Arete

Goddess of
Excellence and
Virtue

In relationships, the other is considered an end rather than a means. Our subject will always want what is best for the other rather than how the relationship can benefit them. The relationship is based on loyalty, deep and meaningful conversations, and attentive and empathic listening.

Arete extends to the physical attributes of the individual. Regular effort is expended to ensure a sound mind and healthy body. All of your faculties are required, including strength and bravery. Bravery here is usually interpreted as effectiveness or agency.

Excellence in the arts possesses the essence of Arete. All of the arts, including painting, sculpture, music, performance, poetry, prose, and choreography, celebrate Arete through the talents and dedication of the artist. Further, Arete appears again when the patron fully experiences the presentation's beauty and aesthetic allure.

The process of incorporating Arete in one's life is to focus on the quality of everything you do. The long-term pursuit of your dreams utilizes Arete by taking the best actions to get you there. All your activities are performed by the habitual virtues incorporated in your very nature. And everywhere you go, always expressing the best version of yourself.

Homer, in his writing, shares with us some examples of Arete. These examples are derivatives of his mindset while writing the *Odyssey*. He suggests that Arete is demonstrated in mobility, dexterity, strength, courage, prosperity, and cooperation. All individual aspects must be developed together, mind, body, and soul. A sense of justice and leadership ability are skills and aptitudes that require Arete. Women radiate Arete through their beauty, purity of manners, economic management, guardians of every good custom, and teaching tradition.

Women with Arete have a
moderating influence on the
ways of men.

Homer

A life guided by Arete will serve to achieve your highest potential and inherent function. It will activate your highest sense of self for the highest good. Arete will fulfill your life purpose. Arete may be the answer to the very meaning of life.

Your Full Potential

The first step to reaching your full potential is owning yourself. Looking back on our early lives we can see clearly that the influence of family, schooling, church, and neighbors did a pretty good job of molding us into someone who fit in well. Many of us just plodded on following the routine of our culture. Do well in school, off to college, choose a major with parental approval, follow the prescribed curriculum, find a mate, have some kids, and perpetuate the routine. Just reading this should generate an existential crisis in you. There must be a better way. It is possible to begin a well-managed, respectable transition back to the path that leads to a meaningful and satisfying life.

Very few people sharing these thoughts are teenagers, so we can't begin our story there. Most of us have passed some steps in the common routine outlined above. You can't just jump up, change your name, run away from your past, and start over.

*Life is what happens to you while you're
busy making other plans.*

John Lennon

You will need an accurate assessment of who you are and your current life situation. A far more accurate assessment can be obtained if you take the time to write it out. Start with your strengths and weaknesses. These will set the boundaries for your aspirations. Be realistic; the goals you set can be difficult but not impossible. Next, identify your interests. Think back; you may remember some things that piqued your curiosity but just wouldn't fit your active lifestyle then. They could play a prominent role in your plans.

Your current life situation contains many elements that you value and treasure and others that cause you trouble and anxiety. These include family, friends, hobbies, recreational activities, voluntary events, exercise, church, and meditation. You will need a plan for how these elements will participate in the transition and remain viable in your future life.

Let your imagination run free and develop a vision of your life if you achieve your full potential. Be realistic; what would be the source of your basic needs? Abraham Maslow developed his well-known "Hierarchy of Needs" and placed self-actualization at the pinnacle. His theory states that self-actualization has little or no priority until all the lower needs in the hierarchy are satisfied. Next, how have you addressed and accommodated the various elements of your current life in the image of your new life? You want to nourish and treasure all those things that bring joy, meaning, and fulfillment in your current life and make them an integral part of your enhanced life. Time for another reality check. Review your strengths and weaknesses. Can they facilitate the accomplishments you hope to achieve in your new life, or are your plans unrealistic? You now have a vision of your dream life. The precision, clarity, and realism of this vision define its viability.

The literature contains countless guidelines for achieving their full potential in life. They begin with individuation, the process of owning yourself and being free of the opinions of others, undeterred by social or political correctness. They continue with character building, acquiring beliefs and virtues that form the basis of your philosophy. Encouraging the nurturing of a spiritual component and a sense of the aesthetic. All these articles start with a blank slate. Building a person from the ground up with raw materials. Our task is one of remodeling, not new construction. That is a quest considerably more formidable.