

Advice

Cooperation vs. competition

Our current society is arranged around competition and I believe that this is what gives us all a dull feeling that something is not quite right – the way the world works leaves an unpleasant taste in our mouths. There is always something that lots of people want (be it money, jobs, popularity or success) and this means that people end up trying to outdo others. Furthermore, the world seems to be full of conflict of one sort or another, with people fighting each other. It may seem that this is what being a person is all about – competition and conflict. This can be quite a depressing thought. Some people embrace the competition and end up being hostile and greedy. Whilst it is true that it is human nature to compete, and there will often be competition for certain things, you should know that this is not the overriding aspect of human nature.

Conflict is the inevitable consequence of a world based on competition. By arranging the world around competition, we see others as competitors – as the enemy. We should see others as our brothers and sisters – as part of the same great race struggling together for survival and happiness.

The predominant feature of humanity is cooperation, and that is the key to the success of the human race. It is easier to fight than to cooperate, and often this will allow people to meet their immediate goals quicker than cooperation. Yet human society *requires* cooperation or it would not exist. Throughout history, people have acted together as a society to produce civilisation, rather than acting as selfish individuals alone. As humans are social animals, the desire to cooperate is part of what makes us human.

By each tiny act of kindness we take a step towards a cooperative world, and by each tiny act of selfishness we take a step towards a world of competition and conflict. Although a small sign of benevolence is forgotten in seconds, the echo of it remains. In seeing kindness in others, we are more likely to have a higher opinion of people in general, and so we are more likely to show kindness to others. This happens gradually and subconsciously. The converse is true of acts of selfishness. Although these acts may seem insignificant to us, they change how we perceive the entire human race, and they are an important part of moving away from competition and towards cooperation.

Courage, composure, compassion

You should try to live your life by this mantra; courage, composure, compassion. Courage, because life is difficult; you should face your challenges with strength and a brave heart, and not hide away from what is difficult, because it is a part of life. When you realise that something is necessary, you should do it without hesitation. Composure, because it is easy

to be overcome by emotion; to let anger and frustration dictate your actions, but this will lead you away from what you know is right. Compassion, because when we ignore the desires and feelings of others, we create injustice, distrust and suspicion. You should try not to see life as a struggle against others. This is not an easy path, but these three will help you in all things.

A sustainable cycle

Any system that does not form a sustainable cycle will inevitably end. This is true of the economy, the human race, life on Earth, and the universe. As human beings, death of the individual is inevitable. We should try to see ourselves as part of a greater cycle, and in this way our existence continues. This may be the cycle of life and death that forms the process of evolution, the continuous flow of energy and matter throughout the universe, or simply the passing of the seasons that constitutes the planet's continuous cycle of decay and renewal. It is through these cycles that we temporary beings may find a link to the eternal and a place in the universe.

Just as we must find our place in a cycle as individuals, the human race must endeavour to achieve a sustainable cycle within our environment if we wish it to continue. The use of non-renewable resources, for example, should be seen as buying us time to achieve a cyclical balance with our environment.

The loneliness of humanity

The state of humanity is a lonely one. You must accept this. Do not pretend that it is not the case; that you are not alone. A person must delight in their friends, family, and love ones, but they must realise that all problems within a person's experience must be addressed and dealt with by themselves. You and you alone make your decisions. No matter how much you think you may be able to open your heart to others, you are the only one who understands the entirety of yourself. It is easy to imagine another mind within oneself; this is only a self-deception. You must not run from this truth. You must learn to accept the solitude of humanity. Accept it, embrace it; learn to deal with it, and you will be a stronger person. Hide from this truth, and you are only avoiding your responsibilities. The companionship of others is the only comfort a person gets from the loneliness of themselves.

The failings of mankind

Be aware of the failings of mankind, but do not resent them, and try not to assume the worst of others. In assuming these failings, you reinforce them. If you have hatred in your eyes, you will see it wherever you look.

We should not expect others to share our own moral code. Those things we feel to be self-evident – the concepts of right and wrong – will be different for others, no matter how obvious and eternal they seem to us.

As human beings, our nature is to be fallible. We must accept failings in ourselves, just as we should in others. We must expect that circumstances will arise where we break our own moral code. This does not mean we do not have principles, neither does it mean that we are amoral; we are simply fallible. Some people will ignore their moral code more easily than others; this is a matter of self-control. Admitting that we are fallible is not an excuse; breaking one's own moral code is no small matter. We always have the choice to remain true to our moral code; it is simply a matter of will power and self-control that allows us to choose that path. Although we must hope that we will remain true to our moral codes, we should not be overly surprised when we or others break them.

Some people may choose to ignore contradictions in their moral codes because it makes their lives easier. This is also a matter of self-control. It is not easy to uphold a moral code. It would be easier to ignore the rights of others. However, in our society, no individual can live alone, so we must observe the rights of others.

You must accept that you believe things that are untrue. You cannot know everything, and you cannot be right in all things. Do not confuse this with indecision. Do not avoid belief. You must make the best decisions with the information you have. A person must be able to survive with ignorance. You must make assumptions, you must make guesses. You should not be afraid of abandoning beliefs in favour of new beliefs. Neither should you discard your beliefs for trivial reasons. You should be prepared to change your mind given new information. There is no shame in this; it is better to know that you were mistaken and now you know better. It is foolish to cling to old views in the face of better information. It is foolish to ignore your ignorance. Neither is it wrong to believe you are correct; this is the only way to make decisions. You must expect people to hold incorrect beliefs, and to be reluctant to change. You should not shout your views at them; rather you should use reason to show them the truth.

Life is complicated; we must live with lack of knowledge, and approximations we know to be contradictory. It is a matter of intellect how far we consider our opinions and morals, in order to resolve these contradictions the best we can. Contradiction in a belief system or a moral code is an indication of lack of intellect and lack of empathy.

Learning and teaching

You should not devote yourself to the teachings of another. Learn from what others have said, and take what is useful, but remember that you are a whole person, just as they are. No one person can understand everything. No one person can solve every problem. No one person has answers to all questions. You must teach as much as you learn; build on the knowledge of others. It is only in both learning and teaching that we progress.

The problems of the world

Human beings tend to think in a symbolic way – of objects and relationships. This leads us to attempt to understand the way the world works in terms of cause and effect – that things happen for a reason. A simple situation may be easy to understand in terms of cause and effect, but when it comes to world events, there are so many factors involved that we can only try to analyse the patterns and trends resulting from the chaotic nature of the world. It is difficult to understand the nature of events in their global context, and it can be frustrating when we see the problems of the world and feel powerless, as individuals, to change them.

I find it can be beneficial to look at the outside world (by which I mean the world at large, as well as human behaviour in general) as something akin to the weather. The weather is a vast, incalculably complex system; constantly changing, and in the medium to long term, unpredictable. We live with the changing patterns of weather all the time, and its impact on our lives varies from inconsequential to potentially fatal, yet we see no point in getting angry at it – it is simply the environment we live in. Human populations are similarly complex, wide-reaching, and often unpredictable. We live in and are part of this system, and it affects us constantly, and to a varying degree. It is a mistake to think that because we are part of this system, and because it is a system made of people just like us, that we can understand, predict, and change how it behaves – it is simply the environment we live in. By seeing human behaviour and global events as just another part of nature, it can be a lot easier to deal with appropriately, and without becoming angry or frustrated.

You should not be disheartened that you cannot cure the world of its problems. We see ourselves as part of the world; the entirety of humanity, and as such, we feel responsible for making that world better. So we should do that if we can, but always realise that our world, as individuals, is not the entirety of humanity and the globe. Our world is our friends, family, our homes, our jobs. Our immediate vicinity and things we have direct contact with. Our world, in essence, is ourselves. We should only be concerned with how we behave. Have we cured ourselves of our problems? Are we living our own lives as we should, as good people? The rest of the world goes on around us, and in the main, we cannot change it. Your life is about you, so live your own life correctly and you have saved your own world.

I think that if everyone followed their conscience, all mankind's problems would vanish. You cannot solve all of mankind's problems by yourself, but do your part by following your own conscience.

Balance in life

Every human being has many demands on their time and attention and many goals they want to fulfil; the key to life lies in a person finding a satisfactory balance between the various strands of their life. If a person concentrates too much on one strand, they will find that problems occur. A person should not think that they have one important thing in their life and that everything else about them works to support that, or is in fact a distraction from it. What a person does for a living is very important to them, but it should always be seen as only one part of an entire life, and that life only functions when all the parts work in concert.

Balance in opinions

Many questions we believe to have a 'yes' or 'no' answer are in fact on a continuous scale, and it is a mistake to take an extreme or absolute view. It is an important skill to recognise when the answer to a question is neither 'yes' nor 'no', and to realise that "somewhere in between" can fit the bill where 'yes' and 'no' fail completely. Furthermore, it is important to realise that even though it may be hard to find the right point on these continuous scales, this does not mean there is no right point.

On questions such as abortion (where a key issue is when life begins, or when consciousness begins) absolute positions fail to find a suitable solution. A point in between needs to be found, and just because this is a hard thing to do does not mean we should not try. 'Life' is a human concept, and we should not expect it always to be either present or not present in an organism.

It is often mistakenly thought that to hold a balanced view between two extremes is a lack of commitment, or uncertainty. Such a view can still be strongly held and it is important to recognise the difference between a strongly held belief and belief in an extreme. Do not confuse extremity of opinion with strength of belief.

The permanence of decisions

We start life with infinite possibilities. Throughout life, when we make choices, we shut off avenues of possibility. Our life crystallises into a path rather than a vast tree of untraveled options. In order to live our lives, we must embrace this process – the acceptance of a path and the abandonment of options. We must commit to our decisions, irrespective of the consequences. To avoid committing to decisions is to avoid life. Every decision, no matter how apparently inconsequential, is the permanent laying down of a path; the permanent abandonment of possibilities.