

Thomas à Kempis
The Inner Life

A true understanding and humble estimate of oneself is the highest and most valuable of all lessons. To take no account of oneself, but always to think well and highly of others is the highest wisdom and perfection. Should you see another person openly doing evil, or carrying out a wicked purpose, do not on that account consider yourself better than him, for you cannot tell how long you will remain in a state of grace. We are all frail: consider none more frail than yourself.

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The Inner Life

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Throughout history, some books have changed the world. They have transformed the way we see ourselves - and each other. They have inspired debate, dissent, war and revolution. They have enlightened, outraged, provoked and comforted. They have enriched lives - and destroyed them. Now Penguin brings you the works of the great thinkers, pioneers, radicals and visionaries whose ideas shook civilization, and helped make us who we are.

The Inner Life Details

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From Reader Review The Inner Life for online ebook

Greg says

I don't know exactly why I choose to read this book. The design is wonderful, and I'm a sucker for the whole Penguin Great Idea series. Maybe I was hoping for something more in this book instead of what it ended up being. But a part of me still liked it, the writing was nice, and I'm sure much better than what is found in the modern day thriving Christian self-help market, of which I'm an unwitting guardian of at work so I see them all. While I was finishing up the book I realized that I'd read the whole book as bathroom reading, and maybe that added a little to my enjoyment. Maybe there is something about me that likes to read about Jesus while pooping.

This book is kind of like a blue-print to submission. Here it's submission to Christ, but it is easy to re-apply most of the chapters to any of the 'cult of personality' totalitarian leaders of the 20th century. A nice handbook for taking all of the shitty things that happen to you on to yourself, while attributing anything good to something way beyond your power. This is the kind of thinking that originally drove me towards atheism, now that I find atheism to be boring I just find the messages contained in this book to be part of the legacy that has left our world a festering shit hole. And that's just a little sad.

Maura says

This is a really good book...I'm only part of the way through it, but the chapters are succinct and to the point. Thomas a Kempis is pretty rad...lots of insight. Read this one. It's not a read-all-in-one-day kinda book, I'm using it as more of a devotional. Anyway, if you want a good read, go get it.

Abailart says

Yjis neat little print from Penguin is great for the pocket. A book to carry around. It's the sort of 'substrate neutral' spirituality I like, not specific religious background. The appeal is aesthetic, the sort that drives my loved Georges Bataille to the mystic attempts to render though language and thought what cannot be thought or written, namely the inner experience, the subjectivity, the unique individual. As I take cold showers in Wittgenstein and language as an object of scientific study, I hesitate to say I find such as Kempis inspiring, but inspiring it is.

Anna Ata santiago says

A constantly "tuned up" inner life isn't only for cloistered monks or nuns. It is for everyone. I can say that I've become a little less uptight because of this book...I'm definitely still a work in progress.

J. says

This is my daily devotional. It really challenges me. If you need a good devotional. This is it.

Emily says

The Inner Life (a name the people at Penguin invented for their excerpts from Thomas à Kempis's famous *The Imitation of Christ*) rounds out my first set of four Great Ideas volumes. I have to admit that, outside of the context of the series, this fourteenth-century Catholic devotional tract is not something I would normally pick up, find interesting, or recommend to anyone except those with a strong interest in the history of Christian theology. As an agnostic person in particular, trying to find anything in its pages to which I could personally relate was...well, let's just say that wasn't the approach that worked best for me. Within the curated Great Ideas experience, though, it takes part in a number of dialogues I find fascinating. And when I stop to situate Kempis in the context of the other three philosophers I've read in the series thus far, there are even a few points on which I would align myself more with him than with anyone else. More importantly, and beyond my personal reactions, Kempis represents an important phase of Western Christian thought, which I'm sure will prove a key touchstone as I move into the Renaissance writings of Machiavelli and Montaigne.

First, the basics: Thomas à Kempis espouses a characteristically hardcore medieval attitude toward God and faith. He's an absolutist, arguing that one should give up all emotional connection to the people and physical world around one, and put one's entire trust in God. You shouldn't trust other people, your own sensations, or yourself, Kempis writes: humans are changeable and easily tricked by the Devil, and are therefore much too weak and unworthy to make their own life decisions or attain any meaningful knowledge except through complete and utter submission to the will of God. Even the kind of ecstatic devotion espoused by Augustine should, says Kempis, be mistrusted:

CHRIST: ... Do not hold an exaggerated opinion of yourself, or believe that you are a favorite of God when you enjoy the grace of great devotion and sweetness; for it is not by these things that the true lover of holiness is known, or is a man's spiritual progress dependent on such things.

THE DISCIPLE: Lord, on what then does it depend?

CHRIST: On complete surrender of your heart to the will of God, not seeking to have your own way either in great matters or small, in time or in eternity. If you will make this surrender, you will thank God with equal gladness both in good times and in bad, and will accept everything, as from His hand, with an untroubled mind. Be courageous and of such unshakable faith that, when spiritual comfort is withdrawn, you may prepare your heart for even greater trials. Do not think it unjust that you should suffer so much, but confess that I am just in all My dealings, and praise My holy Name.

In other words, says Kempis, a truly devoted follower of Christ will completely subjugate his own desire, and be equally happy with whatever fate God decides is best for him, however uncomfortable or seemingly tragic it may be, because Christ is all-knowing, and is orchestrating the events of each person's life to best suit that person's spiritual growth.

Like Seneca, Kempis counsels his readers to find "a place apart," to spend time alone for the greater health of their souls. But whereas Seneca recommends spending that time reading philosophy, honing our logical

minds and reducing mental busy-ness, Kempis's main object for alone time is coming to a deeper appreciation of just how base and unworthy we are to receive the grace of God. He urges us to "enter deeply into inner things," yet also tells us never to trust ourselves or our own impressions. To Kempis this isn't a contradiction: to him, "entering deeply into inner things" means finding lower and ever lower levels of degradation within, which will in turn motivate us to submit more readily to God's will:

It is a great obstacle if we rely on external signs and the experience of the senses, and pay small regard to the perfecting of self-discipline. I hardly know what motives can inspire us, or what our purpose may be, when we who wish to be considered spiritual take so much trouble and are so concerned with trivial, daily affairs, and so seldom give our full and earnest attention to our interior life.

Alas, after a short meditation we break off and do not make a strict examination of our lives. We do not consider where our affections really lie, nor are we grieved at the sinfulness of our whole lives.

This emphasis on discounting the experience of the senses, of eschewing rationality, is one of Kempis's most interesting positions in terms of the Great Ideas dialogue. Let me briefly and perhaps cheekily paraphrase the conversation thus far as it relates to logic and the rational person:

- Seneca writes to a friend: hey, look at your situation logically. Today you're alive, and tomorrow you may be dead. Why not make the most of your remaining time by withdrawing from the hustle and bustle, and spending some time engaging with philosophy? You will hone your mind and prepare your soul for your inevitable death. After all, people complain about having to die, but we really have sufficient time if only we would use it to good advantage.

- Marcus Aurelius, more pessimistically, opines that the world is going to hell because people everywhere are acting against their true natures. The true nature of a man, says Aurelius, is that of a rational citizen, and the only rational way for a citizen to live is to devote himself to the service of his state, rather than becoming a prey to his irrational (carnal, selfish) desires. Rationality, says Aurelius, will save the day, or at least make life more bearable and death less alarming.

- Augustine of Hippo presents a failure of rationality: a moment (his conversion to Catholicism) when, in order to attain enlightenment, he must put aside his desire to know and learn things logically, and follow his emotions to God.

A thousand years later, Thomas à Kempis (and, I think, medieval Christianity in general) have taken Augustine's break with rationality to the proverbial next level, and then several levels beyond that. The temptation to acquire knowledge through the senses or reasoned logic, he argues, is a crafty ploy of the Devil, who is trying to distract us from the fact that praying and submitting our wills to God are the only ways to attain true enlightenment. The entire physical world, therefore, becomes a minefield of temptations for anyone who has incompletely quashed his curiosity or his impulse towards reason. The best plan for anyone wishing to get close to God, in Kempis's view, is to live the life of a hermit:

You should be so mortified in your affection towards loved ones that, for your part, you would forego all human companionship. Man draws the nearer to God as he withdraws further from the consolations of this world. And the deeper he descends into himself and the lower he

regards himself, the higher he ascends towards God.

Kempis's attitude is that a holy person should withdraw from nearly every aspect of life on earth, and focus his entire energy on anticipating the *next* life - the one in which he will be released from this prison of a body and be united with God in peace. "Be assured of this," he writes famously, "that you must live a dying life." If you are gaining pleasure or satisfaction from anything in life other than submitting yourself to God, Kempis argues, you're on the wrong track. And if you're attempting to reason something out logically, you're falling prey to the Devil. Aside from a few token comments about "helping one another," there's even surprisingly few mentions of charity, which I tend to consider a staple of Christian theology. Basically, Kempis's holy man withdraws farther and farther from all other people and objects, and spends his time meditating on what a despicable sinner he is. It's hard for me to imagine a God who would encourage such conduct, but there you go. (And *Kristin Lavransdatter* people: does this behavior pattern sound familiar?) I mean, this is certainly not how Jesus lived, which makes the title *Imitation of Christ* an interesting one.

I think what stood out most to me about Thomas à Kempis is the feeling that *something had to give*. His theology is just so extreme and so bleak. If it's at all representative of the life of the educated "establishment" in late medieval Europe, it impresses the reader with the inevitability of some kind of pressure release, some swing of the pendulum in the other direction - which did in fact take place with the advent of Renaissance Humanism and the return to a desire for proto-scientific inquiry.

On the other hand, I have to admit that I do appreciate Kempis's acknowledgment of the failures of rationality. Reading Marcus Aurelius, I often wanted to shake the man for his blind insistence that Human Beings Are Naturally Rational, even as he was cataloging all the myriad irrational behaviors around him. Falling, myself, somewhere in the middle of the two extremes (I think most people tend to act irrationally and construct rational explanations for our behavior after the fact), it's fascinating to watch the two philosophical strands develop over the centuries. And having already spent some quality time with Machiavelli and Montaigne, the next two stops on the Great Ideas train, I'm pretty confident that they will add some interesting perspectives to the rationality debate. On to Florence, and the demise of the Republic!

PS - Between Augustine, Kempis, and Undset, it's been VERY RELIGIOUS around here lately! I need to read some Emma Goldman or something, just to shake things up a bit. Seriously.

Peter says

Excerpts from 'The Imitation of Christ'.
Spiritual food; beautiful and simple.

Elise says

This book is decent, but I found that discernment is needed to wade through it all. It's formatted in short essays (kind of devotional thoughts). The best way to get a feel for the book, perhaps, is for me to share quotes.

Awesome quotes:

We could enjoy much peace if we did not busy ourselves with what other people say and do, for this is no concern of ours. (p. 11)

If truth set you free, you are truly free, and need care nothing for the vain words of men. (p. 44)

To remain silent about others makes for peace and goodwill, neither believing all that is said, nor repeating all that is heard. (p. 97)

Questionable quotes:

If your inner life were rightly ordered and your heart pure, things would turn to your good and advantage. (p. 25)

Those who are still new and untried in the way of the Lord can easily be deceived and lost. (p.52)

You should be so mortified in your affection towards loved ones that, for your part, you would forego all human companionship. (p. 92)

Heep says

I just wasn't able to finish this book. Frankly, I found it painful to read and thank fortune that I was born in the late 20th century. Life as a monk may have had its benefits, particularly in the Middle Ages, but I doubt I would have found much joy in it.

Liz Polding says

There are things about this book that I find comforting and beautiful, but the advocacy of, in effect, asceticism as the only possible course if life is one that grates, I'm afraid. If God created the world and it is therefore good, why demand its rejection in total, including our fellow 'creatures' as a condition of spiritual attainment? I am familiar with the fall of man arguments, but it seems odd to ask that we should actively seek out misery and pain and revel in them as a means of salvation. More social inequality has come from 'blessed are the poor' than just about any other statement in history. Why alleviate the wretchedness of poverty when writers like this advocate it as a higher spiritual state? So much of the church's consolidation of power has come from requiring utter obedience and telling people that, in the words of an old hymn 'the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, He made them high and lowly and ordered their estate'. Christianity is about joy and compassion and social justice. Above all, it's not about selfishly seeking your own spiritual advancement and cutting yourself off from the world and other people, but working to alleviate the suffering of others and striving for a better and more equal society.

Ledese says

This book is made up of excerpts from Thomas a Kempis' "The Imitation Of Christ". And it is INCREDIBLY depressing. As I was reading it, I often wanted to lock myself in a dark, secluded room and cry myself to sleep. And that's coming from a genuinely optimistic person :) It is nicely written, much more fluent than I expected. A bit repetitive though, but I guess that's how Catholic priests roll :) As much as I don't agree with his philosophy I was surprised to see myself *kinda* agreeing with some minor

details. That's what I like about reading these type of books, realizing how much we think alike even if we believe in completely in different beliefs.

Elise says

I enjoyed this small book and definitely gleaned some excellent quotes from it, so perhaps it deserves more like a 3.5. There was a powerful challenge to desire none but God alone and give up everything else for him. Overall, however, I think I'd say I "liked it" over "loved it."

Mike Gibbs says

This is a great book that is packed with deep thoughts. It would probably make a good devotional book since each section is very short, but contains a lot of stuff to think about regarding the nature of man, his relationship with God, and how to live the Christian life on the inside as well as on the outside.

Louise Mcdonagh says

A very moving and thought provoking book with excerpts from a book on Christianity originally written in 1400s. The book offers thoughts on true spiritual enlightenment, and a devoted Christian life. Sometimes I felt this book could only be truly followed by someone wholly dedicated and removed from everyday life such as a nun or monk, but it does make you realise, that is not the purpose of it, but understanding our own imperfections and frailty is. Well worth reading for anyone seeking spiritual guidance.

James C says

One of the most spiritually edifying books I've ever read. Made all the more powerful that it was written in the 15th century.

An incredibly challenging book and a must read for all born again christians who are truly seeking God. This book was an encouraging reminder that life this side of heaven is a war, but Kempis also reminds that if we seek God with all of our hearts and allow his grace to cultivate our lives, we can make it to the promised land and live lives truly glorifying our creator.

The book also covers many many other aspects of living for Christ. (51 Chapters focused on various aspects of Christian life!) Overall I found this book an extremely encouraging practical resource for my faith, one which has humbled and enriched me again and again in my journey with Christ.

God bless.
