

## Philosophical quotes

Philosophical questions:  
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### **1. "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That is his."**

**Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. Is it true to say that no man becomes like his mother? If so, does this mean that all men become like their fathers? Or, if it is not true, why do you think Wilde said this?
2. According to Wilde it was a tragedy that no man became like his mother. What do you think he meant by this? Did he perhaps mean that if men did become like their mothers, they would be more caring and loving?
3. Is it true that all women become like their mothers? Do you know girls/women who seem very different from their mothers? If so, does this prove that Wilde is *wrong*? On the other hand, do you know girls/women who seem to be very much like their mothers? If so, does this prove that Wilde is *right*?
4. If a child grows up *without* parents, would this child still become like its biological mother or father? If a child grows up with both parents, is it possible for him or her to grow up to be very different from both his or her mother *and* father?

### **2. "The only thing to do with good advice is to pass it on. It is never of any use to oneself."**

**Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. What is "good advice"?
  - Useful information (useful for doing *what*)?
  - Something that sounds like a jolly good idea?
  - Directions on how to avoid pain and achieve happiness?
  - Words that make you stop and think?
  - Information that tells you *what* to do, and *why* and *when* to do it?
  - Other?
2. Which of the following sentences would you say offer good advice:
  - Always tell the truth to everyone.
  - Whatever you do, do not criticise people.
  - Do your homework as soon as you can.
  - Always do as your mother and father say.
  - Never kiss a boy/girl if you are not in love with him/her.
  - If you take this pill, you will have a great night.
  - If you want to be accepted at school, you should make friends with...

3. How do you react when people tell you what to do? Are you glad, because then you do not have to make any decisions yourself, or are you a bit angry, because you want to decide for yourself?
4. Which is most important: to *know* what is right, or to *do* what is right? Socrates said: "He who knows what is right, will also do the right thing". Do you agree? Can you *act* right even if you do not know what *is* right? Does anyone really *know* what is right?

### **3. "One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art."**

#### **Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. What does it mean to *be* a work of art?
  - To be different or unique?
  - To look like a sculpture or painting?
  - To talk like a book?
  - To not talk at all?
  - To be seen and admired by many people?
  - To be totally *artificial* in your manners?
  - To live as if your life was eternal?

Think about pop stars like Robbie Williams or Britney Spears. Are they greater works of art than you are? Why, or why not? What about your teacher, is he/she a work of art?

2. When Wilde said that one should "wear a work of art", what did he mean? What kind of clothes are works of art? Only ones that are expensive or exclusive? Do you think Wilde believed that more traditional works of art such as paintings, sculptures, literature or music, were worthless because you cannot *wear* them?

### **4. "Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught."**

#### **Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. What is really worth knowing? Try to grade the following types of knowledge from the least to the most important, then discuss the outcome:
  - Knowing how to repair a bicycle?
  - Knowing how to respond when someone praises you so much that you become embarrassed?
  - Knowing what happened in France in 1789?
  - Knowing the names of every capital city in the world?
  - Knowing the sum of  $2636 + 456 + 3999 + 123$ ?
  - Knowing how to be a good and fair person?
  - Knowing how to locate exciting pages on the Internet?
  - Knowing how to make people laugh?
  - Knowing how to swim?
  - Knowing how to play a musical instrument?

Would you say that some of the above types of knowledge and skills are worth knowing? If so, which ones? Can they also be taught? If they can, what do you think Wilde meant by "Nothing that is worth knowing can be taught"?

**5. "Few parents nowadays pay any regard to what their children say to them. The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out."**

**Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. A popular phrase in Victorian England was: "Children should be seen and not heard". Knowing this, it was more likely that a typical Victorian person would have said: "Few *children* nowadays pay any regard to what their *parents* say to them. The old-fashioned respect for the *old* is fast dying out." Why do you think Wilde turned this sentence on its head?
2. Most people find this statement amusing. Why do you think that is? Do you think that adults are better at listening and respecting young people today than in Victorian times? Or is Oscar Wilde's observation just as humorous today as it was over one hundred years ago?
3. Do you think adults should always listen to children? Why, or why not? Do you think adults should always respect the young? Why? What do you think Wilde thought about this? How do you think a typical Victorian adult would have reacted to Wilde's observation? After reading about what kind of person Oscar Wilde was, how do you think he *wanted* people to react?

**6. "One's real life is so often the life that one does not lead."**

**Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. Can you describe the life you lead? Do you for instance have certain principles or standards guiding all your actions? Or do you take life just as it comes, from one situation to the next, or from day to day? If you have no principles or standards in life, does this make your life less real or less meaningful? Or does it make it *more* real and meaningful?
2. What kind of "real life" that we "do not lead" is Wilde talking about? Is he referring to a kind of life that we only think, speak or dream about, a life that *we would like to* lead, but do not dare to realise? Why is it often so hard to act the way we feel? Why do we so often do things that we do not really want to do? Is our sense of duty towards other people stronger than our wish to do whatever we like?

**7. "The public is wonderfully tolerant. It forgives everything except genius."**

**Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. Does the public forgive more easily than individuals (that make up the public)? Suppose you are attacked by a man who hits you in the face and runs away with your

wallet. Can you easily forgive him? Now suppose you read about an incident like this in the newspaper. Can you then easily forgive the man? Or is there nothing to forgive when you are not personally injured?

2. The public forgives everything except genius. But what is genius? Is it something that everyone possesses, or is it something that only a few people are endowed with? What are the qualities of genius? Can you think of some actions or events that could only originate from a genius?

## **8. "(On mistakes): Life would be dull without them."**

### **Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. What is a mistake? Sometimes we do wrong things without realising it, sometimes we do wrong things knowing exactly what we are doing, sometimes we do the right thing, but not at the right time, sometimes we mean to do the right thing, but end up doing the wrong thing, sometimes we want to do something that we know is wrong, but cannot go through with it etc. So, what is a mistake and what is not? Maybe the examples below can help you decide:
  - In your luggage you carry drugs that some criminal planted there without your knowledge; a mistake?
  - You pour a glass of milk over someone you do not like and get away with it; a mistake?
  - You pour a glass of milk over someone you do not like, and then you get beaten up; is it a mistake now?
  - The moment after your friend discovers that he has failed his exams, you tell him that some people he trusted have been talking about him behind his back for a long time; a mistake?
  - You want to tell your friend that you are sorry for what you said, but when you speak, it sounds as if you are blaming him for what happened; a mistake?
  - You have done something that you know is wrong, and feel you should "punish" yourself in some way. Instead, you treat yourself to something you like (a cake, some sweets, a new CD); a mistake?
2. Try to explain the difference in meaning between a "mistake", a "crime" and an "act of evil". What are the *positive* opposites to these three notions? (Suggestion for discussion: a "white lie", a "mandatory act", an "act of mercy"?)
3. If life is dull *without* mistakes, does it follow that life would be exciting or interesting *with* them?

## **9. "In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it."**

### **Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. Most of us have experienced not getting what we want. Such is life. We cannot have it our way all the time; we have to adapt to the people around us and to the society we live in. But is this necessarily tragic? Why? Is it tragic because we have to let go of our

desires, or because we have to put up with the fact that this is how life is?

2. The second "tragedy", according to Wilde, occurs when one actually gets what one wants. Suppose you really want something, perhaps an expensive piece of clothing. Yet, when you finally get it, you are disappointed. It was not as exhilarating as you thought it would be. Why do you think this was so? Perhaps we enjoy something more if we have to wait a long time for it, or if we have to work hard for it?
3. Is it possible to eliminate both of these so-called "tragedies" from our lives? How?

### ***10. "Never speak disrespectfully of Society. Only people who can't get into it do that."***

#### **Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. Read the following statements and try to determine whether some of them "speak disrespectfully of Society":
  - Those who succeed in society are invariably vulgar and dishonest people.
  - Society means violence.
  - Whenever a person experiences suffering, society is to blame.
  - Society is a device for making the rich richer and the poor poorer.
  - Those who adapt to the rules of society are fools.
  - Greek society 2500 years ago was a corrupt society based on slavery and a strict hierarchy.
  - The rulers of any given society are people who find a sick pleasure in tormenting and oppressing ordinary people.

Is it possible to say something about a society without mentioning its members, i.e. the people who live in that society?

2. Why does Wilde claim that only people who can't get into society, speak disrespectfully of it? What does it mean to "get into" a society? And precisely what "society" do you think he is talking about: a society of freemasons, or of politicians, or poets and musicians, or university professors, or the poor and oppressed, English society at large, European society, the society of mankind?
3. People who are on the "outside" of society usually want to "get into it". Now, Oscar Wilde was very much an outsider. But can you really imagine that he wanted to "get inside", i.e. that he wished to become a respected member of the society of his day? If not, then why does he warn us never to speak disrespectfully of society? Could it be because those who do so, reveal that they have a desire to get inside; whereas those who do not speak disrespectfully, indirectly indicate that they have no such wish?

### ***11. "My experience is that as soon as people are old enough to know better, they don't know anything at all."***

#### **Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. When are people old enough to "know better"? Better than what or whom? Imagine that

you did something stupid, and someone said to you: "For goodness sake! You know better than that!" What does this person actually mean? That he/she expected you to know that what you did was stupid? That despite knowing that what you did was stupid, you still did it? Or can you think of other possible meanings?

2. Yet again, Wilde takes us by surprise by saying that the older we get the less we actually know! In other words: when we reach a certain age we *should* know better, yet we do not. Instead, we know even *less* than we did before. How come? Do we lose knowledge as we grow older? Or is it the other way round? What kind of knowledge do we have as children that we, according to Wilde's experience, seem to lose when we become adults (i.e. "old enough")?

**12. "To speak frankly, I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable."**

**Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. Wilde says that it is "never advisable" to know everything about the person you want to marry *before* you actually marry him/her. What do you think he meant by this? Did he mean that if we did know everything about that person, we might find out that we didn't want to marry him/her after all? Or did he perhaps mean that if you *did* know everything, your marriage would be boring, because there would be nothing more to discover about that person?
2. Do you think it is important to know *everything* about someone before you marry him/her? If yes, then at what point can you be sure that you know all there is to know about your girlfriend/boyfriend?
3. In Victorian times it was much more usual to marry for other reasons than simply love: social class, financial status, religious beliefs all played an important role in deciding which partner you could choose. Is this the case today?
4. Marriage was one of the most important social institutions in Victorian society. If you chose to live together with someone without getting married, you would be considered a social outcast. Is this the case in modern society?
5. What do you think are the most important reasons for marrying someone? Are there any good reasons at all? Is there any difference between marriage and co-habiting? Do you see yourself getting married when you become an adult?

**13. "God's great earth is better than we think."**

**Suggested topics for philosophical discussion:**

1. Another ironic statement from Wilde. If it is true that God's earth is "great" (i.e. wonderful, magnificent, splendid etc.), then why do we so seldomly praise it? Why do we complain so much? Why are we not more satisfied with our lives? Is it possible that the world is a great place, and yet at the same time full of misery and suffering? Do you think it is great to be alive, despite all the sadness and pain that life can bring?

2. In an indirect way, Wilde seems to be suggesting that there is a difference between what people *say* and what they actually *mean*. What is more important: to *say* what you *mean*, or to *mean* what you *say*? Is it possible, or even desirable, to always *say* what you *mean*? Is it possible to *mean* everything that you *say*?