

# Excerpts from *Book of Thoughts and Sayings* by Arthur Schnitzler

*Should I believe something I never impute dogmatic meaning to this belief, not even for myself. What I call my belief is only the expression for what according to my predisposition, my experience, my mindset appears to me to be the most plausible explanation for a specific event; — by no means does it express my readiness to die for this belief called mine, in other words for the general probative force of my personal experience or the solipsistic validity of my own way of thinking. Martyrdom was only ever a proof of the intensity, never of the correctness of a belief. And we can never convince other people about what we believe but only in the best of cases of the belief in our readiness to sacrifice ourselves.*

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*That we have an inkling of God is an inadequate proof of His existence. A more potent one is that we are capable of doubting His existence.*

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*All speculation, perhaps all philosophising is only thinking in spirals; it manages to get us higher but not really any further. And all the while we remain equidistant from the centre of the world.*

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*It is a pity that most rationalists have so little reason and most mystics almost no sense of imagination. Were it otherwise, they might understand each other admirably and perhaps sometimes notice that they are of the same mind and only talk in different tongues.*

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*If there were only doubters in the world*

*and no pious people, then doubt would lose all meaning and there would be no other recourse for doubt but to call itself belief.*

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*Caesar had it easier in the world than Napoleon. Caesar was Caesar and Napoleon played Napoleon — admittedly of all people nobody could have played Napoleon but Napoleon himself.*

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*The effect character has on us is comparable to a dark cloud of possibilities amassing so powerfully around a brow it seems a lightening bolt of reality might emerge in the twinkling of an eye and shoot downwards — as illumination or obliteration.*

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*No action, whether it miscarry or succeed, is ever lost without trace. Even the hatchet which is swung and fails to hit continues to exert its inexorable effect, even if in another way and sometimes even in another direction from that intended by the wielder of the hatchet; — and it can be a worse murder weapon than if it had hit its target.*

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*There are all kinds of flights from responsibility: there is a flight into death, a flight into illness and finally a flight into stupidity. The last is the least dangerous and most comfortable, because even for clever people the way tends not to be as far removed as they might like to think it is.*

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*Often we believe we hate a person and*

*only hate the idea embodied by that person. And when we meet the actual incarnate individual who appeared unbearable or even dangerous to us at a distance, we actually catch sight of a poor creature who from his birth is condemned to transgression, suffering and death; and our hate transforms itself into emotion, sympathy and perhaps even love.*

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*For a hundred women who fall in love not with the man, but rather with his fame, his wealth or even his criminal leanings, there is not even one man who desires a woman because she is famous, rich or because she might happen to have criminal leanings. Any one of these qualities might count for him as an additional excitement, but never as the underlying reason for loving a woman. It is a property of women that even a concept is enough to inflame their senses.*

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*Not a surfeit of trust but a failure of imagination makes it so difficult for the man to believe in the infidelity of his lover.*

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*So-called impulsive people are usually not prodigal with their feelings but impatient with them.*

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*It is not an entirely rare event that theatre pieces are poorly performed in front of the public not because too few rehearsals have been held but too many. Similarly, there are overscripted connoisseurs of human nature who, because they have accumulated far too*

many experiences, ultimately end up staying fools.

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Should a person say he loves his fellow human beings he hardly ever says it without a tremor of emotion at the goodness of his heart; if another person confirms that he is a misanthrope it is seldom said without pride at his wisdom. Irrespective of the stance we adopt with regard to other humans, it is sometimes humanity but never our own vanity that gets short-changed.

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It's a miracle, you say, that the bullet just missed your ear.

But think: another person got hit by the same bullet right in the heart. Was that any less a miracle?

You bump into a friend three times in succession at the same street corner at the same time. For you this bespeaks a 'law of series'.

And what's the case with the white-bearded gentleman whom you met only once 2 years ago at the opera together with a thousand others whom you only saw once? Law of the individual case, perhaps?

You've misplaced the key to your trunk just before your trip, can't find it wherever you look and acrimoniously you complain about the spitefulness of objects.

Once more you attempt to open the trunk and all of a sudden the lock springs open with a single press of your hand. Why does it not occur to you now to remark on the amiability of things?

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The idea is such a divine thing that it is

able to accept voluntary victims and perhaps even demands them too. But how often in the course of history it has been reduced to an idol on whose altar innocent children have been slaughtered.

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Snobbism is a disease of the soul which is so widespread in our time that it can almost be said to have an epidemic or endemic character and compared not inappropriately with, for example, tuberculosis. In not a few people it manifests itself as downright fatal, even if the death of the soul understandably doesn't allow itself to be confirmed quite as easily as that of the human organism. In most cases the course of snobbism is insidious, sometimes almost unnoticed, and it is then — just like tuberculosis only at the time of autopsy — established only with the most exacting investigation of the soul. There are also inherited forms, mild and severe, remediable and irremediable, and the current generation should systematically take up the struggle against it for the sake of its children.

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The human being for whom the longing for freedom means something other than the desire for irresponsibility really must be of a higher type.

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To adhere to a political party a certain amount of simple-mindedness is indispensable. Reasonable people who attempt to represent the standpoint of their party to its logical conclusion always give the impression that they have become confused or dishonest.

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Scholasticism misconstrued philanthropy — the result is known as Marxism. Resentment misapprehended Marxism, and Bolshevism was born of the misunderstanding. The literati misread Bolshevism, and Bolshevism was acknowledged again as philanthropy — except that it even looked like it now.

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Whoever has a sense of humour almost has genius already. Whoever only has a sense of wit usually doesn't even have that.

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How vague people often are about themselves! One adores the scent of flowers and calls himself a botanist, another counts filaments and takes himself for a nature worshipper.

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A new thought — mostly a hoary old banality in the moment in which we experience its truth in ourselves.

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Shake an aphorism — a lie falls out and a banality remains.

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There are no new truths on earth; and precisely in this little phrase you thought to find them?

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From the *Book of Thoughts and Sayings*, (*Buch der Sprüche und Bedenken: Aphorismen und Fragmente*). Phaidon: Vienna, 1927.