



The Browser Book of Quotations



Preface

The quotations in this volume appeared on The Browser between 2009 and 2012. Most of them were taken from current writing and interviews; a few came from older sources, usually prompted by a new citation.

I salute our contributors, and I hope this collection brings pleasure to our readers.

Robert Cottrell,
Editor, The Browser

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Art & Artists

We have our Arts so we won't die of Truth

Ray Bradbury

Imagination is the shortest route between any two conceivable points

J.G. Ballard

All poetry can be seen as a conversation between poets over time

Adam Kirsch

The non-artists among us are always terribly busy, but finally disappear without
a trace

Helen Vendler

What makes innovative work exciting is that you're never sure it's any good

John Ashbery

To admire an artist for his own sake, although certainly a compliment, can also be a way of suggesting that he has no place in the larger scheme of things

Jed Perl

A painting isn't finished when you put down your brush. That's when it starts.
The public reaction is what supplies meaning and value

Banksy

Whatever happens next, it won't be what you expected. If it is what you expected, it isn't what's happening next

Brian Eno

Suspense consists of letting an audience know precisely what is about to happen, and then making them wait for it

Alfred Hitchcock

An actor is someone who has been trained to pretend he is not being watched

Peter Greenaway

Entertainment provides relief. Art provokes engagement

David Foster Wallace

In every work of genius we recognise our own rejected thoughts

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Taste is not stable and peaceful, but a means of strategy and competition.

Those superior in wealth use it to pretend they are superior in spirit

Mark Greif

If you watch 'Jaws' backwards, it's a movie about a shark that keeps throwing
up people until they have to open a beach

Anonymous

A director only makes one movie in his life. Then he breaks into pieces and makes it again

Jean Renoir

From our artists and entertainers we expect originality, and resent it when we get it

Charles Rosen

You confuse two things: solving a problem, and stating a problem correctly. It is only the second that is obligatory for the artist

Anton Chekhov



Belief

What distinguishes sacred values from secular ones is how people behave when asked to compromise them

Adam Waytz

We know too little to commit to atheism, and too much to commit to religion

David Eagleman

Liars add extra irrelevant detail to make their lies seem more believable. Religions do the same

Robin Hanson

We have to respect everyone's right to hold irrational beliefs, but we do not have to respect the irrational beliefs themselves

Ophelia Benson

We have convictions only if we have studied nothing thoroughly

E.M. Cioran

If the divine creator is unfindable through the methods of science, we will have an equally hard time finding the individual human person, at least in the way we ordinarily think about them

Martin Mills

So far as I can remember, there is not one word in the Gospels in praise of intelligence

Bertrand Russell

Societies become truly secular, not when they dispense with religion, but when they are no longer greatly agitated by it

Terry Eagleton

Whatever is forbidden is what's actually going on

Andrew Brown

His breakthrough was the aestheticization of weakness

John Jeremiah Sullivan, on Jesus Christ

No one comes to believe in God because they have been convinced by the arguments for God's existence

Kenan Malik

Given the strangeness of what one has to believe to be faithful even to the most mainstream creeds, it's odd that so many people think Mormonism especially peculiar

Martin Peretz

The error of modern atheism has been to overlook how many aspects of faiths remain relevant even after their central tenets have been dismissed

Alain de Botton

The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty

Richard Holloway

Easter is a mixed-up affair. Fluffy bunnies and confectionery compete for attention with the tale of a young man being tortured to death

Stephen Cave

One of the central religious yearnings is for platitudes to be true

Andrew Brown

I don't know if God exists. But it would be better for his reputation if he didn't

Jules Renard

Anyone who says we are a society lacking belief is not paying attention. If anything, we are lacking doubt

Alexander Nazaryan



Books & Critics

There are three secrets to writing a novel. Unfortunately nobody knows what they are

Somerset Maugham

It is as absurd to talk about progress in literature as it is to talk about progress in electricity. Both are natural resources awaiting different forms of activation

James Wood

There is comedy, and then there is something called the Comic Novel, and these are related to each other rather as the year is related to a pocket diary

James Wood

Crime fiction is one of our culture's main ways of discussing morality

Andrew Brown

Most books are old. This is not a disadvantage: this is precisely what makes them valuable. Even if they merely reflect the conventional wisdom of their own day, they say something different from what you hear all the time

William Deresiewicz

Reading is a protest against the insufficiencies of life

Mario Vargas Llosa

Life is always going to be stranger than fiction, because fiction has to be convincing and life doesn't

Neil Gaiman

Any book, no matter how worthy and somber, becomes pleasingly ludicrous when compressed into 90 seconds

James Kennedy

To want to meet an author because you like his books is as ridiculous as wanting to meet the goose because you like paté de foie gras

Arthur Koestler

One has to care rather a lot about one's reviews, to go to the trouble of not
reading them

Alain de Botton

This is a short book that pulls you in and spits you back out before you have
time to tire of it

Dwight Garner, on Bill Clegg

This book's bleak assessment of the selfishness and materialism that have taken
root in Western societies will stick to your feet and muddy your floors

Dwight Garner, on Tony Judt

It's customary at about this point in a review to tell the reader what's in the
book under investigation and how it proceeds. In this case, sadly, I wouldn't know
where to stop

Pico Iyer, on William Vollmann

You want to hurl the book across the room at times, but with an awareness that
you would then need to go over and pick it up to continue reading

Scott McLemee, on Christopher Hitchens

A village explainer. Excellent if you were a village, but if you were not, not

Gertrude Stein, on Ezra Pound

I can't help but feel that something must have been lost in publication

Karl Smith, on a paper by Ken Rogoff

Writing cannot be taught, though it can be learned

Joseph Epstein

There's no test of how well you've read a book, and that's why merely reading
books doesn't quite feel like work

Paul Graham

The effort the writer does not put into writing, the reader has to put into read-
ing

Stephen Toulmin

Writers are people who find writing more difficult than other people

Thomas Mann

Seeing your book turned into a film is like seeing your oxen turned into bouillon cubes

John Le Carré

When we say that we love a writer's work, we are always stretching the truth: what we really mean is that we love about half of it

Martin Amis

Everybody does have a book in them, but in most cases that's where it should stay

Christopher Hitchens

Two writers alone in a room will talk about royalties, not art

Robert McCrum

It is not expected of critics, as it is of poets, that they should help us make sense of our lives. They are bound only to attempt the lesser feat of making sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives

Frank Kermode

Nobody reads a great novel to find out how it finishes

Jay Rayner

It's more comfortable to think you could write a novel, than to discover that you can't

Hugh Grant

Fiction and poetry are medicines. They heal the rupture that reality makes on the imagination

Jeanette Winterson

The human race is no longer sufficiently bored with life to be distracted by an art form as boring as the novel

Toby Litt

All writers overrate the impact of writing, or else they would choose another
line of work

Adam Mars-Jones

Anyone who doesn't believe that books have the power to harm is not taking
them seriously enough

Ruth Franklin

The short story is an exposition; the novel is an inquisition

Malcolm Cowley

Criticism can be instructive, in that it gives some information about the critic's
intelligence

Vladimir Nabokov

Whatever style you have is dictated by what you learn to leave out

Zadie Smith

The secret of biography resides in finding the link between talent and achievement

Leon Edel

A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say

Italo Calvino



Business & Economics

The truly big investment idea can usually be explained in a short paragraph

Warren Buffett

Most people are surprised to hear that the world economy doubles roughly every fifteen years; when they think back fifteen years, the world doesn't seem that different

Robin Hanson

Apparently Steve Jobs had a lifelong battle with reality, and won

Scott Adams

A good first step towards selling your company is declaring that you'll never sell it

Peter Thiel

Neo-liberalism is a system for converting private sector financial crises into public sector ones

Will Davies

The best we can say about economics is that we know what not to do

Philip Coggan

If you put your clothes in a clothes dryer, the energy you spend is part of the measured economy. Hang them on the clothesline and they disappear from our economy

Tim O'Reilly

Banks don't accidentally hold too much capital. Oil companies don't accidentally take too many safety precautions. The mistakes only go one way

James Kwak

For every goal you put in front of someone, you should also put in place a counter-goal to restrict gaming of the first goal.

Andy Grove

This is the natural path of industrialization: invention, propagation, adoption,
control

Chris Anderson

The foundations of standard microeconomic models envisage people as hedonistic sociopaths, and theorists prevent mayhem from breaking out in their models by the simple expedient of ignoring the possibility

Cosma Shalizi

The reason work is so important is that it structures social relations without depending on pleasure

Will Davies

The chance of being exploited in a long-term job is now experienced as a privilege

Slavoj Žižek

A footballer, artwork or body organ can be “priceless”, but only until the price is high enough. Rationalisation can be resisted, just not always or not forever

Will Davies

I struggle to understand how creating more claims on wealth adds to wealth itself; as if slicing a pizza into eight, not four, pieces creates more food

Philip Coggan

Partial equilibrium is shorthand for coming to a conclusion based on assumptions that could not survive the circumstances under which the conclusion would obtain

Steven Randy Waldman

Credit markets tomorrow won't behave like credit markets last year, because we know what happened last year

Emanuel Derman

Financial markets have a very safe way of predicting the future. They cause it

George Soros

Success in the last round is not a good predictor of success this time

Richard Feynman, on Russian roulette

Self-sufficiency is another word for poverty

Matt Ridley

Paying taxes is a sign of low status. You allowed the government to get your
money

Karl Smith

The right price for a product is the highest price you can ask for, but with one
condition: that your customers remain happy after they buy it

Oliver Reichenstein

You've found the market price when buyers complain but still pay

Paul Graham

If you don't know what you really want from a negotiation, don't be surprised
if you don't get it

Charles Crawford

If failure doesn't make you a loser, then success doesn't really make you a winner

Michael Arrington

Success is dangerous because often you don't understand why you succeeded.
You almost always know why you've failed

Marc Pincus

The bigger your ambition, the longer it's going to take, and the further you project into the future, the more likely you'll get it wrong

Paul Ford

Keynes advocated reducing unemployment by employing people to dig holes and fill them in again. Today it would be enough to employ them to fill the potholes that are already there

John Kay

Give a man a gun and he can rob a bank. Give a man a bank and he can rob the world

Anonymous



Happiness & Other Emotions

One way to be more satisfied with life is to lower your standards

Katja Grace

There has been a boom in work on the economics of happiness. I've always wondered why we don't study the economics of unhappiness instead: after all, there's so much more data

John Quiggin

The pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of perfection are mutually exclusive

Bob Mankoff

Gratitude isn't an emotion. But the expectation of gratitude is a very lively one

Vernon Royce

Humour is the politeness of despair

Boris Vian

Chronic pain is common, whereas there is no such thing as chronic pleasure

David Benatar

Generally speaking, pain is what makes the body a particularly important concern for the individual

A.J. Vetlesen

Personal enjoyment has become a greater obligation than self-discipline, and brings an even greater sense of failure when it is not achieved

Slavoj Žižek

A new house or a new spouse will make you happier, but not much and not for long. Very few experiences affect us for more than three months

Daniel Gilbert

Being bored is a kind of diagnostic for the gap between what you might be interested in and your current environment

Clay Shirky

If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish

David Foster Wallace

Joy is a fleeting emotion, like a very long sneeze

Augusten Burroughs



History

Santayana remarked that those who forget history are condemned to repeat it. But if you have forgotten history, you won't know you're repeating it, so it won't matter

Charlie Brooker

Everything that needs to be said has already been said. But since no one was listening, everything must be said again

André Gide

History is a solvent of illusions

John Gray

History is the enemy of reverence

Simon Schama

History cannot be shaped, only enacted

Henry Kissinger

Historians like bureaucracy because it feeds their hunger for written sources

Robert Bartlett

Peace comes when people plant vines, and ends when they dig for oil

Roger Scruton

Afghanistan is the place where theories of warfare go to die

Robert Dreyfuss

Civilisation is a process of extending tradition by argument

Andrew Brown

Civilisation is the process of turning the incomprehensible into the arbitrary

Venkatesh Rao

An autopsy of history would show that all great nations commit suicide

Arnold Toynbee

If futurism is visionary, history is revisionary

Bruce Sterling



Human Nature

Human beings are quite simple. The apparent complexity of our behaviour is largely a reflection of the complexity of the environment in which we find ourselves

Herbert Simon

The desire for immortality explains all extraordinary achievements, both good and bad

Martin Amis

To become disillusioned you must earlier have been illusioned

Paul Fussell

Our desire for praise can be truly satisfied only if we deserve it. No one is satisfied merely to look praiseworthy

Robert Shiller

It is a great compliment for an honest person to be mistaken for a crook by a
crook

Nassim Nicholas Taleb

Once you have ordinary intelligence, what you need is the temperament to control the urges that get other people into trouble

Warren Buffett

Ideals may tell us something important about what we would like to be. But compromises tell us who we are

Avishai Margalit

If I am made to walk the plank by a pirate, it is vain for me to offer, as a common-sense compromise, to walk along the plank for a reasonable distance

G.K. Chesterton

For trust to be relevant, there must be a possibility of betrayal

Diego Gambetta

Men, when they know they can blame nature, will behave badly

Douglas Allen

When people speak of their low self-esteem, they imply that they have a right
to more of it

Theodore Dalrymple

It is by no means certain that people would be happier if they knew their condi-
tion in life to correspond to their true capacities

Irving Kristol

Most of us view the world as more benign than it really is, our own attributes
as more favorable than they truly are, and the goals we adopt as more achievable
than they are likely to be

Daniel Kahneman

The hypocrite may serve, among other things, as a deformed ambassador of
the truth

James Wood

An incentive is not an objective fact but a subjective interpretation

Alex Tabarrok

It is not that our social bonds are precarious, but that the precariousness is the
bond

Adam Phillips, on society

Everyone needs someone to look down on, and the psychological need is the
more urgent the more meritocratic a society becomes. This is because, in a meri-
tocracy, a person's failure is his own

Theodore Dalrymple

Tennis, a sport for people who don't like sport. Golf, a sport for people who
don't like people

Kanishk Tharoor

Anyone claiming to be an expert is selling something

Aaron Bady

Prosperity doesn't trickle down, but greed does

John Naughton

I don't think of it as procrastination. I think of it as allowing my work to accumulate urgency

Maud Newton



Language

When confronted by a well-intentioned fund-raiser in the street who tells you that she is raising money "for breast cancer", does a little part of you not wish to reply: "Sorry, no, I'm against breast cancer?"

Justin Smith

Good ideas formulated in bad English either die or get repackaged

Frans de Waal

Foreign languages are unsettling. They remind us how arbitrary the mental world is

Tim Parks

As a general rule, conversations about people are interesting, and conversations about objects are dull

Scott Adams

A Freudian slip is when we say one thing and we mean a mother

Rob Long

Psychoanalysis is about what two people can say to each other if they agree not to have sex

Adam Philips

A good maxim allows you to have the last word without even starting a conversation

Nassim Nicholas Taleb

By defining people as residents of war zones, we have, so to speak, zoned them for war

Judith Butler

There is a negative relationship between precision and accuracy

Richard Feynman

The long sentence opens doors that the short sentence slams shut

Pico Iyer

An apostrophe is the difference between a business that knows its shit and a
business that knows it's shit

Kathryn Williams

The poet's ultimate reward is to enter the language

Jonathan Galassi

A pretty gift for quotation is a serviceable substitute for wit

Somerset Maugham

She's like an intransitive verb. She can't take compliments

Gabriel Olsen

Brevity, like clarity, has its limitations. It is not good to feed horses on nothing
but oats

F.V. Lucas

The only people who say lightning never strikes twice are people who have
never been struck once

Russell Banks

Aphorisms are rogue ideas

Susan Sontag

He could write vivid lines filled with possibility without knowing exactly what
those possibilities were

Jonah Lehrer, on Bob Dylan

It is better to be quotable than to be honest

Tom Stoppard

Seminal, a word used chiefly by academics to overpraise one another, tends
vastly to underrate the power of semen

Joseph Epstein



Love & Marriage

It is necessary to fall in love, if only to provide an alibi for all the random despair you are going to feel anyway

Albert Camus

Love is selective. Hatred is collective

Umberto Eco

Marriage has taken on the form of divorce: a prolonged and impassioned negotiation as to how things shall be divided

Wendell Berry

Our grandparents' marriages were largely about shared production, but contemporary marriage is largely about shared consumption

Will Wilkinson

Monogamy is probably the earliest and most successful human experiment in taming the power of markets and harnessing them to social use

Andrew Brown

Never marry a man you wouldn't want to be divorced from

Nora Ephron

When a man and woman kiss in Grand Central and then head for different trains I can tell you one thing: they are both cheating on their spouses

James Altucher

Children are inferior goods. That is, the richer we get the fewer we want

Karl Smith

In marriage, every desire becomes a decision

Susan Sontag

The only marriage that should be banned is between people who don't really
love each other

Susan Orlean

If being married was roughly what one thought it would be like, every couple
would stay married until death parted them

Michelle Mirsky

In my experience, a man having great fun is probably about to get divorced

Leonard Michaels

Well, I bought a ticket to the circus. I don't know why I was surprised to see ele-
phants

Mrs Norman Mailer



Media, Old & New

The basic currency of the Internet is human ignorance, and, frankly, our database holds a strong cash position

Christian Rudder

That's not a job any more. That's a button

Clay Shirky, on publishing

If you're never wrong, you're never interesting

Felix Salmon

Email is frozen conversation

Virginia Postrel

Twitter is like having a little part of you that's always down the pub

Tom Stafford

If Google can't predict what you're about to say, what you're saying is truly
novel

Matt Webb, on autocomplete

Today's journalists are much too well-bred to stand in the crowd shouting "The emperor has no clothes!" They've worked with the tailors, they have had long background interviews with the tailors, they've been present for some of the fittings

Walter Russell Mead

The main thing one learns is that long-term trends continue

Robin Hanson, on news

Designating something as classified information does not keep it secret. On the contrary, it specifies a class of people with whom it can be shared

George Dyson

The threat of massive leaks will persist so long as there are massive secrets

Max Frankel

The art of letter writing is like the art of acting. It is the impression of spontaneity that makes a performance convincing

John Stokes

When information is cheap, attention becomes expensive

James Gleick

People are information-rich and theory-poor. If you can give them a way of organizing their experience, then their minds are wide open

Malcolm Gladwell

My God! This scandal goes all the way to the bottom!

Jon Stewart, on Rupert Murdoch

We've come to confuse communication with the exchange of explicit information. What can't be turned into data loses its perceived value

Nicholas Carr

The real problem of our day is how to escape being well informed

Dwight Macdonald

Once a thing is known it can never be unknown. It can only be forgotten

Anita Brookner

Whatever was true before is true now. We just have more information

Karl Smith



Philosophy & Logic

Should a cow behind a haystack of ignorance choose the world with the highest expectation of utility? In which case, a world of many cows each destined for slaughter could well be preferable to one with many fewer but happier cows

Alex Tabarrok

The confined animal lives a life of brutality and is dispatched; the free-range animal lives a life of relative freedom and is dispatched. From the perspective of happiness lost, the latter scenario is more tragic

James McWilliams

Let's get something straight. A vegetarian is someone who doesn't eat meat. It's not someone who loves vegetables

Ezra Klein

One of the quickest ways to find out if you are wrong is to state what you believe

Penn Jillette

Questions are places in your mind where answers fit. If you haven't asked the question, the answer has nowhere to go

Clay Christensen

The law is agnostic about truth. It's very skeptical of ultimate truth. That's why freedom of speech permits lies to be told

Alan Dershowitz

Integrity is a neutral value. Hyenas have integrity. They are pure hyena

Jonathan Franzen

Moral systems can best be characterised, not by what their adherents believe, but by what emotions they rely on

Drake Bennett

All intellectual movements start with trenchant ways of understanding the world. But as these ideas gain currency they are used to explain more and more disparate phenomena, until the explanation loses its predictive power

Dan Drezner

The trouble with simplification is that things are complicated. The trouble with things being complicated is that we need to simplify them

Charles Crawford

When someone tells you something is too complex for you to understand, the usual reason is that they do not really understand it themselves

John Kay

Such is the nature of the inexplicable that, as long as it does not involve money, it can be ignored

Glen David Gold

What if free will exists, but not everyone has it?

Scott Adams

The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off

Gloria Steinem

People who behave morally don't generally do it because they have greater knowledge; they do it because they have a greater sensitivity to other people's points of view

David Brooks

Morality is inversely proportional to the number of observers

James Thompson

Behaving morally has little to do with sympathy, and a lot to do with one's immoral options simply not coming to mind

Will Wilkinson

Try giving a good argument for why logic is reliable, that doesn't use logic

Michael Lynch

A cause is not a fact. It's a fiction that helps us make sense of facts

Jonah Lehrer

Explanations bind facts together. They help them make more sense. Where this propensity can go wrong is when it increases our impression of understanding

Nassim Nicholas Taleb

I can understand a random distribution, but is there such a thing as a random event?

Emmanuel Derman

When we hear that a raging forest fire has consumed millions of acres of forest, we don't assume that there was anything special about the initial spark

Duncan Watts

Fairness is a concept invented so dumb people could participate in arguments

Scott Adams

I have the habit of seeing two opposing sides of a question, both of them
wrong

George Kennan

The point of seeing both sides isn't to hover between them but to be able to
come down on the right side with the right degree of conviction

Julian Baggini

A tortoise resembles orthopaedic surgery in that neither can ride a bicycle

Terry Eagleton

We can study cars and all their physical relationships and know exactly how
they work. It in no way prepares us to understand traffic

Michael Gazzaniga

If we do not understand what an escalator is, we might get on it intending to
go a few meters, only to find that once we are on, it is difficult to avoid going all
the way to the end. Similarly, once reasoning has got started it is hard to tell where
it will stop

Peter Singer

It is like reading an explanation of global warming and mounting an indignant
defense of greenhouses

Steven Pinker, on category error

The most terrifying fact about the universe is not that it is hostile, but that it is
indifferent

Stanley Kubrick

It is the profession of philosophers to question platitudes that others accept
without thinking twice. A dangerous profession, since philosophers are more easily
discredited than platitudes

David Lewis

All dichotomies are false, but some are more of a bitch to transcend than oth-
ers

Venkatesh Rao

There is no a priori reason for supposing that the truth, when it is discovered,
will necessarily prove interesting

Clarence Lewis

As for the meaning of life, I do not believe that it has any, and this is a source
of great comfort to me

Isaiah Berlin



Politics & Diplomacy

Nothing is more dangerous than an idea, when it is the only one we have

Emil Chartier

Each political culture, like each culinary culture, creates its own cuisine, using elements that lack immediate appeal on their own, such as bitterness

Jonathan Haidt

Politics is the systematic organisation of hatreds

Henry Adams

There is no longer any dignity in loss. If you lose a fight for a just cause, you are merely a loser

Leon Wieseltier

The achievement of the great statesman is not to reach the best decision fastest, but to mediate effectively among competing views and values

John Kay

There is a subtext of male violence that runs through all politics, and only a fool would ignore it

Jonathan Freedland

Apparently it is a great idea to elect a president who is calm in a crisis. Except when there's a crisis. Then what you need is somebody to lead the nation in panic

Clive Crook

At the core of all successful societies are procedures for blocking the advancement of bad men

Paul Collier

Effective political ideas are those that can still do good in half-baked form

Tyler Cowen

Politicians know the lies a lot of people live, and they pitch to you accordingly

Eric Joyce

Politicians are in charge of the modern economy in much the same way as a sailor is in charge of a small boat in a storm

Paul Seabright

Politicians who complain about the press are like sailors complaining about the sea

Enoch Powell

There are few ironclad rules of diplomacy, but to one there is no exception. When an official reports that talks were useful, it can safely be concluded that nothing was accomplished

J.K. Galbraith

American diplomacy is transactional. Chinese diplomacy is psychological

Andrew Nathan

I sat next to her once. Thought she was beautiful. She's very happy in Alaska.
And I hope she'll stay there

Barbara Bush, on Sarah Palin

Description is prescription. If you can get people to see the world as you do,
you have unwittingly framed every subsequent choice

David Brooks

Order is difficult, mayhem is easy. Specifically, you can contribute significantly
to mayhem by putting in an hour here or there

Alex Harrowell

The deepest puzzle is not occasional protest, but pervasive tranquility

Donald Kinder

Sometimes the art of diplomacy is to keep the obvious obscured

Henry Kissinger

Scandals often lead to reforms, but the reforms work to protect the agents of scandal rather than its victims

Nicholas Dirk

In politics, the angry person is generally understood to be the loser

Peggy Noonan

The ultimate show of power on the part of the ruling ideology is to allow what appears to be powerful criticism

Slavoj Žižek

Many of our leaders think there is a secret cabal running the world—and that they are in it

David Brooks

Before you study public opinion, you wonder why policy isn't far better. After you study public opinion, you wonder why policy isn't far worse

Bryan Caplan

Institutions will try to preserve the problem to which they are the solution

Clay Shirky

Politics is inherently controversial because human beings are passionately attached to their opinions by interests that have nothing to do with the truth

Harry Jaffa

Power expands through the distribution of secrecy

John Le Carré

We all know what to do, but we don't know how to get re-elected once we have done it

Jean-Claude Juncker, on the euro crisis

Conservatism is not a philosophy but a disposition

Julian Baggini

When the conservative looks upon a democratic movement, he sees a terrible disturbance in the private life of power

Corey Robin

In a crisis democracies can experiment with autocracy, but autocracies can't experiment with democracy

David Runciman

The point of lobbyists is not so much to change the votes, as to change the legislative agenda

Ezra Klein

If your policy is one of retrenchment and austerity, it is advisable to come up with something other than economic growth as a measure of your success

Dominic Lawson

The very power that makes government an effective enforcer of the commitments of other people renders it incapable of enforcing its own promises

John Kay

Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes genius to move in the opposite direction

E.F. Schumacher

You begin at your most popular and least capable, and end at your least popular and most capable

Tony Blair, on governing

In the United States, everyone may enjoy freedom of speech so long as it doesn't matter

Curtis White

I may not agree with you, but I'll defend to the death my right to tell you to shut up

Andy Borowitz

Communism is not some ideal that might exist at some point in the future. It's the way most of us act with people we really care about all the time

David Graeber

We appeal to legitimacy when we need to explain the persistence of political arrangements that defy our materialist predictions

Jay Ulfeder

Every politician wants you to believe he was born in a log cabin he built himself

Bob Strauss



Science & Technology

In physics you're playing against God, and He doesn't change his laws very often. When you've checkmated Him, He'll concede

Emanuel Derman

There are 10 types of people in the world. Those who understand binary numbers, and those who don't

John Rentoul

Technology is only expensive when it doesn't work well. By the time it does, it's cheap enough to afford

Ray Kurzweil

Biology is a kind of reverse engineering. You start off with a machine—namely, the human being—and you figure out what purpose it was designed for

Steven Pinker

Science is an unending argument between a great multitude of voices. It resembles Wikipedia much more than it resembles the Encyclopaedia Britannica

Freeman Dyson

An occupational hazard of the medical profession is a tendency to overestimate the prevalence of illness

Alison Lurie

Humans are the reproductive organs of technology

Kevin Kelly

If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the precipitate

Henry Tillman

Science is not about certainty. Science is about finding the most reliable way of thinking, at the present level of knowledge

Carlo Rovelli

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from nature

Venkatesh Rao

Our knowledge advances not when we have the best theory, or the best data, or the best lab, but when we have really good problems

Jay Rosen

Human beings cannot comprehend very large or very small numbers. It would be useful for us to acknowledge that fact

Daniel Kahneman

Tools extend the human; machines replace it

William Deresiewicz



Youth & Age

Humans start their lives at the peak of their popularity. You will never regain the personal appeal you enjoyed as a baby

Scott Adams

Children are the R&D of the human species. Adults are the production and marketing

Alison Gopnik

Adulthood is the moment at which your expenditure on Christmas presents first exceeds the value of the gifts you can expect to receive

John Kay

This is what it's like to get old: You still feel 19, except your knees hurt

J.D. Daniels

We live half our lives in shock. And it's the second half

Martin Amis

The thing we value most of all is youth, which means that life automatically becomes depressing, because life consists, on the whole, of getting old

Michel Houellebecq

Spending your life concentrating on death is like watching a whole movie and thinking only about the credits

Nicholson Baker

If you want to accelerate someone's death, give him a personal doctor

Nassim Nicholas Taleb

I did not fully understand "terminal illness" until I saw Heathrow for myself

Dennis Potter