Van Gogh maintained the optimistic position that suffering can help a person to grow and is indispensable in the development of creativity. His statements about such matters are often paradoxical, but they are also designed partly to deflect the full force of the scandal of unjust suffering and to prevent it from becoming overwhelming for him. A poignant contrast also emerges between the confidence frequently expressed in Van Gogh’s response to suffering in his early letters and his brave but frightened struggles with his own illness towards the end of his life.

The asceticism that accompanied Van Gogh’s willing embrace of suffering is consistent with (and helps to explain) the high value he placed on perseverance—the determination, that is, to stick things out—which is one of his most strongly marked personal characteristics. He was convinced that perseverance is the only path to real achievement, and he never tired of saying so, regardless of the utopian ideal he was pursuing at the time. Patience, deliberation, and repetition were, for Van Gogh, the foundations of virtue, whether in the moral life or in art. As far as painting is concerned, he believed that creative spontaneity is acquired only
by a great deal of labour and persistence, especially in the face of the discouragements that come from our unavoidable failures and from the storms of life in general.

The inevitability of suffering and failure was also a constant reminder for Van Gogh that experience often falls short of our hopes and aspirations, and in this context, the idea of imperfection was highly significant for him. Just as he felt that his embrace of Sien Hoornik’s imperfections was a sign of his moral superiority to his denigrators, so he also came to believe that the deliberate inclusion of imperfection—expressed even as “ugliness,” as he says—is a marker of authenticity and of true beauty in a work of art.

**Suffering**

Repeatedly, Van Gogh maintains that suffering is a stimulus to creativity. The persistent ascetic strain in his personality led him even to seek out suffering, and he recommends deliberately exposing oneself to danger so that an ordeal can be endured and overcome. He also remained convinced that a special value attaches to beauty that emerges from hard and bitter experience. And yet we might also feel that Van Gogh sometimes tried to mitigate his extreme sensitivity to suffering with an overly emphatic insistence on its benefits. It is as if in order to manage his fear of a dreaded enemy, he rushed straight at it.

During his religious phase, Van Gogh favoured St. Paul’s injunction to be “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6:10). Here, St. Paul interprets Jesus’s death and resurrection in a highly compressed form, acknowledging sorrow as a prior condition through which (and in spite of which) we discover a greater joy.
But Van Gogh was never much interested in Christ’s crucifixion. He was, however, attracted to the related idea that those closest to God are afflicted by suffering as a sign of divine favour (1), and he drew some uncomfortable conclusions from this point—for instance, that suffering is better than mirth or laughter (2, 4) and that we should hate this life and despise ourselves (3). Offsetting these opinions, he also maintained that suffering and illness are God’s opportunity to allow us to make new, life-enhancing discoveries (4).

While giving up his allegiance to orthodox religion, Van Gogh describes his “moulting” as painful but necessary if he is to emerge “renewed” (5). Later, he applies the idea of rebirth through suffering to art, claiming that he can’t draw sorrow unless he feels it first (6). Writing to Van Rappard, he uses Jesus’s words to confirm his own self-sacrifice—“whosoever will lose his life shall find it” (7)—going on to claim that painting is more important to him than health.

Van Gogh also liked the idea of exposing himself to the storms of life on the grounds that he would grow in the tempest (8, 9). He states a preference for “the drama of a storm in nature” because the garden of Christ’s suffering (Gethsemane) is preferable to any unchallenging paradise or “paradou” (10). His ascetic habits even drove him sometimes to choose to paint rather than buy food, so that he had to battle resolutely against exhaustion and depression (11, 12). He also records a wide range of setbacks, disappointments, illnesses, and painful altercations with his family, but he offers reassurances as well, expressing a life-affirming defiance in the face of the suffering (13, 14) that he resolutely refuses to avoid (15). In brief, he claims that his desire to paint remains stronger than the deprivations he endures because of it (16), and he goes on proclaiming the positive value of misfortune (17, 18). And so he wonders at a beautiful blossom, magically produced from a gnarled, old branch, twisted and bent by bitter experience: such is the artist’s life (19), given over to the transfiguration of suffering by beauty.
(1) The Christian life nevertheless has its dark side too; it is mainly men's work.

Those who walk with God, God's friends, God's pious followers, those who worship Him in Spirit and in Truth, have been proved and tried, and have oft-times received from God a thorn in the flesh; blessed will we be when we can repeat after our father, Paul: when I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child: but now that I have become a man, I put away childish things, and I became, and God made me: sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. [51]

Paris, Monday, 27 September 1875. To Theo van Gogh

(2) [. . .] it's also true that there is no joy without insufficiency.

Sorrow is better than joy, and it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasts, for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.

Even in mirth the heart is sad. [90]

Isleworth, between about Saturday, 2 September, and Friday, 8 September 1876. To Theo van Gogh

(3) Then one indeed understands a little why He uttered these words “He who hate not, even his own life also, he cannot be My disciple,” because there is reason to hate that life and what is called “the body of this death.” And it has indeed been rightly said: If you desire to learn or know anything to your advantage, then take delight in being unknown and unregarded. A true understanding and humble estimate of oneself is the highest and most valuable of all lessons. To take no account of oneself, and always to think well and highly of others is the highest wisdom. [135]

Amsterdam, Saturday, 24 November, and Sunday, 25 November 1877. To Theo van Gogh

(4) “My illness is not a bad thing.” No, for Sorrow is better than laughter. No, being ill and supported by God's arm, and
acquiring new ideas and resolutions during the days of one’s illness, which couldn’t occur to us when we weren’t ill, and acquiring clearer faith and firmer trust during those days, that’s not a bad thing. [95]

Isleworth, between Monday, 23 October, and on or about Wednesday, 25 October 1876. To Theo van Gogh

(5) That’s why, first of all, so I’m inclined to believe, it is beneficial and the best and most reasonable position to take, for me to go away and to remain at a proper distance, as if I didn’t exist. What moulting is to birds, the time when they change their feathers, that’s adversity or misfortune, hard times, for us human beings. One may remain in this period of moulting, one may also come out of it renewed, but it’s not to be done in public, however; it’s scarcely entertaining, it’s not cheerful, so it’s a matter of making oneself scarce. Well, so be it. [155]

Cuesmes, between about Tuesday, 22 June, and Thursday, 24 June 1880. To Theo van Gogh

(6) And well—yes, I know that Ma is ill—and I also know many more sombre things, both in our own and in other families. And I’m not insensitive to them, and it seems to me that I couldn’t draw Sorrow if I didn’t feel it myself. [217]

The Hague, on or about Friday, 14 April 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(7) [. . .] I brazenly acted against the doctor’s advice in some respects, not because I thought his advice was wrong or that I knew better, but because I reasoned to myself: I live to paint and not primarily to conserve my constitution. Sometimes the mysterious words, whosoever will lose his life shall find it, are as clear as daylight. [341]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 9 May 1883.

To Anthon van Rappard
The fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm fearsome, but could never see that the dangers were a reason to continue strolling on the beach. They leave that wisdom to those to whom it appeals. When the storm comes—when night falls—what’s worse: the danger or the fear of danger? Give me reality, the danger itself. [228]

The Hague, on or about Tuesday, 16 May 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

[. . .] don’t think that I have high opinions of my present work. No, I don’t, for example, attach any market value to it, but my idea is that I want to work without more protection than other people have, and so I’ll throw myself into it not because I’m already there now, but because I believe “I will mature in the storm.” [406]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, Monday, 12 November, or Tuesday, 13 November 1883. To Theo van Gogh

Yes, for me the drama of a storm in nature, the drama of sorrow in life, is the best. A “paradou” is beautiful, but Gethsemane is more beautiful still.

Oh, there must be a little bit of air, a little bit of happiness, but chiefly to let the form be felt, to make the lines of the silhouette speak. But let the whole be sombre. [381]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 5 September 1883. To Theo van Gogh

I also believe that it may happen that one succeeds and one mustn’t begin by despairing; even if one loses here and there, and even if one sometimes feels a sort of decline, the point is nevertheless to revive and have courage, even though things don’t turn out as one first thought. [274]

The Hague, Sunday, 22 October 1882.

To Theo van Gogh
(12) I’ve been feeling very weak of late—I fear that I’ve rather overworked myself—and those “dregs” of working, those afterpains of exertion, how horrible they are. Then life has the colour of dirty water, it’s like a rubbish dump.

At those times one would like to have a friend near one. Sometimes that clears up the dim mist.

On such days I sometimes worry terribly about the future and am melancholy about my work, and feel powerless. But it’s dangerous to speak too much of this or to keep thinking about it, so enough. [306]

The Hague, Saturday, 3 February 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(13) I tell you frankly that I’m beginning to fear I shan’t get through in this way, for my constitution would be good enough if I hadn’t had to fast for a long time, but again and again it was a question of either fasting or working less, and as far as possible I chose the first, so that now I’m too weak. How to endure that? [366]

The Hague, on or about Tuesday, 24 July 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(14) In my view we all have moments of melancholy, of stress, of anguish, to a greater or lesser extent, and this is a condition of every self-conscious human life. Some apparently have no self-consciousness. But those who have such moments, although then sometimes in an anxious state, aren’t unfortunate because of that, and nothing unusual is happening to them. [327]

The Hague, Sunday, 11 March 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(15) [...] I would rather have my sorrow about one thing and another than forget or become indifferent—if you could feel precisely the extent to which I draw my serenity from worship of sorrow and not from illusion—perhaps even for you brother,
my inner self would be very different and more detached from
life than you can now imagine. [382]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 6 September 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(16) You might not be able to understand it, but it’s true—when I
receive money, my greatest hunger, even if I’ve fasted, isn’t for
food, but is even stronger for painting—and I set out hunting
models right away, and I carry on until it’s gone. [550]

Antwerp, Monday, 28 December 1885.

To Theo van Gogh

(17) How much sadness there is in life. Well, one may not become
melancholy, one must look elsewhere, and to work is the right
thing, only there are moments when one only finds peace in
the realization: misfortune won’t spare me either. [386]

Hoogeveen, on or about Friday, 14 September 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(18) It seems to me that there are those moments in life when
it’s better that the blow should fall, albeit it hard, than that
one should be liable to be spared by the world. As to me, I’m
bound to misfortune and failure, it’s damned hard sometimes,
but there it is. I still don’t envy the so-called fortunate and
eternally successful ones, since I see too much behind it. [418]

Nuenen, on or about Friday, 28 December 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(19) What you write about Serret interests me greatly. A man like
that who eventually produces something heart-rending as
blossom from a hard and difficult life is a phenomenon like
the blackthorn, or better yet a gnarled old apple tree which
suddenly bears blossoms that are among the tenderest and
most “pure” things under the sun.
When a rough man blossoms—it’s indeed a beautiful sight—but HE has had to endure an awful lot of cold winters before then—more than even the later sympathizers know.

The artist’s life and WHAT an artist is, that’s very curious—how deep is it—infinitely deep. [408]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, Saturday, 1 December 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

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In Arles, Van Gogh declares that the main lesson in life is how to deal with suffering (20), and in St. Rémy, he repeats the paradox from his Isleworth days—that illness helps to heal us (21). Yet, in these later letters, the focus shifts to the inner landscape of Van Gogh’s personal suffering, and especially to the anguish caused by his illness. Already in 1888, he found it difficult to handle his “mental emotions” (22), and his confinement in hospital was difficult albeit sometimes comforting (23). He is now not so sure as he was before about being able to rejoice in affliction or to find meaning in pain (24), and he admits to being frightened (25, 26). There is poignancy in these passages, but, as Van Gogh assures Willemien, he is reconciled to the suffering that he can’t avoid (27), and he affirms his belief that happiness and unhappiness are inextricably bound up together in human life (28).

(20) What can you say, to suffer without complaining is the only lesson that has to be learned in this life. [750]

Arles, Tuesday, 19 March 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(21) Although being ill isn’t a cause for joy, I nevertheless have no right to complain about it, for it seems to me that nature sees
to it that illness is a means of getting us back on our feet, of healing us, rather than an absolute evil. [849]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Saturday, 1 February 1890.

To John Peter Russell

(22) Because loneliness, worries, vexations, the need for friendship and fellow-feeling not sufficiently met, that’s what’s very bad, the mental emotions of sadness or disappointments undermine us more than riotous living: us, that is, who find ourselves the happy owners of troubled hearts. [611]

Arles, on or about Sunday, 20 May 1888.

To Theo van Gogh

(23) I’m “in a hole” in life, and my mental state not only is but also has been—distracted.

So that whatever might be done for me I can’t think of a way of balancing my life. Where I must follow a rule, like here at the hospital, I feel more tranquil. [767]

Arles, Thursday, 2 May 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(24) It is precisely in learning to suffer without complaining, learning to consider pain without repugnance, that one risks vertigo a little; and yet it might be possible, yet one glimpses even a vague probability that on the other side of life we’ll glimpse justifications for pain, which seen from here sometimes takes up the whole horizon so much that it takes on the despairing proportions of a deluge. Of that we know very little, of proportions, and it’s better to look at a wheatfield, even in the state of a painting. [784]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 2 July 1889.

To Theo van Gogh

(25) In the crises I feel cowardly in the face of anguish and suffering—more cowardly than is justified, and it’s perhaps
this very moral cowardice which, while before I had no desire whatsoever to get better, now makes me eat enough for two, work hard, take care of myself in my relations with the other patients for fear of relapsing—anyway I’m trying to get better now like someone who, having wanted to commit suicide, finding the water too cold, tries to catch hold of the bank again. [801]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 10 September 1889.

To Theo van Gogh

(26) Well yes—we’re not the master of that—of our existence, and it’s a matter, seemingly, of learning to want to live on, even when suffering. Ah, I feel so cowardly in that respect, even as my health returns. I still fear. So who am I to encourage others, you’ll rightly say to me, it hardly suits me. [842]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Monday, 20 January 1890.

To Joseph Ginoux and Marie Ginoux-Julien

(27) It’s very likely that I have a lot more to suffer. And that doesn’t suit me at all, to tell you the truth, for I wouldn’t wish for a martyr’s career in any circumstances.

For I’ve always sought something other than the heroism I don’t have, which I certainly admire in others but which, I repeat, I do not believe to be my duty or my ideal. [764]

Arles, between about Sunday, 28 April, and Thursday, 2 May 1889. To Willemien van Gogh

(28) The difference between happiness and unhappiness, both are necessary and useful, and death or passing away ... it’s so relative—and so is life.

Even in the face of an illness that’s unsettling or worrying, this belief is absolutely unshaken. [805]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Friday, 20 September 1889. To Theo van Gogh
Perseverance

There are close links between Van Gogh’s attitudes to suffering and his willingness to undergo hardship and deprivation, especially in acquiring his craft as an artist—a task that called for a high degree of self-reliance and self-motivation. In undertaking this task, Van Gogh placed a high value on perseverance. The deliberateness and patience with which he set about his apprenticeship as a draughtsman and a painter do much to qualify the once widespread view that he was a spontaneous, misunderstood genius—a romantically heroic victim of the philistine prejudices of an indifferent bourgeois society. To the contrary, the letters show that he thought carefully about how he might best shape his career in relation to the professional art world of his day, to which he hoped to make his own distinctive contribution. He knew that the road would be difficult, and he repeatedly extols perseverance as a way of buoying up his spirits in the face of obstacles and, when he became ill, as a way of maintaining stability in an unpredictable world.

Van Gogh’s religious convictions did much to establish the strong link that he continued to feel between commitment and a willingness to stick to a task despite discouragement (1). In Amsterdam, he describes his favourite plant, ivy, as a figure for patient endurance (2), and he holds that a worthwhile task justifies the effort regardless of whether or not the result is successful (3, 4). In preparing for the religious life, Van Gogh affirms a principle that will continue to inform his practice as an artist—namely, that proper foundations are necessary and are acquired only by a long apprenticeship (5). At the end of his stay in the Borinage, when he is filled with uncertainty about his new vocation, his decision
simply to persevere is in itself sustaining: “to keep on, keep on, that’s what’s needed” (6).

(1) [..] one can’t become simple and true all at once. But let’s persevere nonetheless, but above all be patient, those who believe shall not make haste. [56]

Paris, Thursday, 14 October 1875. To Theo van Gogh

(2) I have a lot of work already, and it isn’t easy, but meekness will help one to get used to it. I only hope to bear in mind the ivy, “which stealeth on though he wears no wings.” [114]

Amsterdam, Saturday, 19 May 1877. To Theo van Gogh

(3) [..] and yet the days fly by, as I have lessons daily and have to study for them, and would even so much like the days to be a little longer in order to get more done, because it’s not always easy work, and even if one has been at it for some time, it gives but little satisfaction, enfin, what is difficult is good, I feel convinced of that even if one sees no results. [129]

Amsterdam, Tuesday, 4 September 1877.

To Theo van Gogh

(4) That is the avowal that all great men have expressed in their works, all who have thought a little more deeply and have sought and worked a little harder and have loved more than others, who have launched out into the deep of the sea of life. Launching out into the deep is what we too must do if we want to catch anything, and if it sometimes happens that we have to work the whole night and catch nothing, then it is good not to give up after all but to let down the nets again at dawn. [143]

Amsterdam, Wednesday, 3 April 1878.

To Theo van Gogh
5 A person doesn’t get it all at once, and most of those who have become something very good have gone through a long, difficult period of preparation that was the rock upon which their house was founded.  [137]

Amsterdam, Sunday, 9 December 1877.
To Theo van Gogh

6 But on the road that I’m on I must continue; if I do nothing, if I don’t study, if I don’t keep on trying, then I’m lost, then woe betide me. That’s how I see this, to keep on, keep on, that’s what’s needed.

But what’s your ultimate goal, you’ll say. That goal will become clearer, will take shape slowly and surely, as the croquis becomes a sketch and the sketch a painting, as one works more seriously, as one digs deeper into the originally vague idea, the first fugitive, passing thought, unless it becomes firm.  [155]

Cuesmes, between about Tuesday, 22 June, and Thursday, 24 June 1880. To Theo van Gogh

As he struggled with his personal shortcomings (7), Van Gogh returned often to the idea that slowness, deliberation, and repetition are indispensable in the production of an authentic work of art. However spontaneously a successful painting might be executed, it is actually the product of a long period of prior calculation and practice (8). You can’t have too much patience, Vincent assures his erstwhile boss, Hermanus Tersteeg (9), and every discouragement is to be resisted (10).

Towards the end of his life, perseverance also served to provide stability and to enable him to keep going despite the unpredictable epileptic attacks that laid him low for weeks on
end (22). In Arles, he recommends staying silent in order to study for ten years (23), but in St. Rémy, he states, ruefully, that such a plan didn’t work for him. Still, his misfortune has been good because it gave him time to keep on producing more preparatory studies (24, 25). Once again, he concludes that slow, long work is the only way, a fact that is all the clearer now that he has set aside his earlier ambitions for success (26).

(7) Certainly it’s presumptuous to feel sure of one’s success, and yet one may believe: my inner struggle will not be in vain, and I want to fight it; despite all my own weaknesses and faults I want to fight it as best I can.

Even if I fall down 99 times, the hundredth time, too, I’ll get up! [187]

Etten, Saturday, 19 November 1881. To Theo van Gogh

(8) Don’t believe, then, that I would artificially maintain a feverish state—but you should know that I’m in the middle of a complicated calculation that results in canvases done quickly one after another but calculated long beforehand. And look, when people say they’re done too quickly you’ll be able to reply that they looked at them too quickly. [635]

Arles, on or about Sunday, 1 July 1888.

To Theo van Gogh

(9) Although at times I’m overwhelmed by worries, all the same, I’m calm, and my calmness is based on my serious approach to my work and on reflection. Although I have moments of passion, and my disposition tends to make them worse, nonetheless I’m composed, as His Hon., who’s known me long enough, very well knows. Now he even said to me: you have too much patience.
Those words aren’t right, one can’t have too much patience in art, that word is beyond the pale. Perhaps in my case Mr H.G.T. [Hermanus Tersteeg] has too little patience. [210]

The Hague, Saturday, 11 March 1882. To Theo van Gogh

(10) Art demands persistent work, work in spite of everything, and unceasing observation.

By persistent I mean in the first place continued labour, but also not abandoning your approach because of what someone else says. [249]

The Hague, on or about Friday, 21 July 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(11) For the great doesn’t happen through impulse alone, and is a succession of little things that are brought together.

What is drawing? How does one get there? It’s working one’s way through an invisible iron wall that seems to stand between what one feels and what one can do. How can one get through that wall?—since hammering on it doesn’t help at all. In my view, one must undermine the wall and grind through it slowly and patiently. [274]

The Hague, Sunday, 22 October 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(12) For you’ll understand that sometimes I’m burdened with cares. Still, we must make shift with what we have, and undermine with patience the things we can’t lift with strength. [337]

The Hague, on or about Saturday, 21 April 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(13) To me, the drawings I’m doing now are a shadow of what I mean, but a shadow that already has a certain shape, and what I seek, what I’m after, isn’t something vague but things from
full reality that can only be mastered by patient and regular work.

Look, imagining how I would have to work in fits and starts is a ghastly prospect for me. [365]

The Hague, Monday, 23 July 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(14) People said that I was going mad; I myself felt that I wasn’t, if only because I felt my own malady very deep inside myself and tried to get over it again. I made all sorts of forlorn attempts that led to nothing, so be it, but because of that idée fixe of getting back to a normal position I never confused my own desperate doings, scrambling and squirmings with I myself. At least I always felt “let me just do something, be somewhere, it must get better, I’ll get over it, let me have the patience to recover.” [394]

Hoogeveen, Friday, 12 October 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(15) […] I don’t in the least seek flattery, or that people should say “I think it beautiful” when they think it ugly; no, what I want is an intelligent honesty that isn’t vexed by failures. That would say to me if I had failed 6 times, just as my courage failed me, now you really must try again for the 7th time. You see, I can’t do without that push. And I think that you would understand it and I would benefit tremendously from you. [397]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Tuesday, 16 October 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(16) […] the issue is to really go on trying to find a better system of working. So, patience and perseverance. [561]

Antwerp, on or about Thursday, 11 February 1886.

To Theo van Gogh
(17) And in any case, there’s nothing better to do than to wait without getting impatient, even if one has to wait for a long time. [696]

Arles, Wednesday, 3 October 1888. To Émile Bernard

(18) It remains the cause of a kind of disappointment to me that I don’t yet see in my drawings what I wanted to have in them. The difficulties really are many and great, and not to be overcome at a stroke. Making headway is a kind of miner’s labour that doesn’t go as quickly as one would wish and as others expect. But if one is faced by such labour, the first things one must hang on to are patience and faith. [327]

The Hague, Sunday, 11 March 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(19) [. . .] that our love for art might inspire in us a collier’s faith to say what others have said before and will say again after us. Namely that even if the situation is ominous, and even if we’re very poor &c. &c., yet we firmly concentrate on one single thing, on painting, naturally. [404]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Thursday, 8 November 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(20) There’s a saying of Gustave Doré’s that I’ve always found exceedingly beautiful—I have the patience of an ox—right away I see something good in it, a certain resolute honesty; in short there’s a lot in that saying, it’s a real artist’s saying. When one thinks about people from whose mind something like this springs, it seems to me that the sort of arguments one all too often hears in the art trade about “gift” is such a hideous croaking of ravens. “I have the patience,” how calm that is, how dignified that is. They wouldn’t even say that if it weren’t precisely because of all that croaking of ravens. I’m not an artist—how coarse that is—even to think it of oneself—should one not have patience, not learn patience from nature, learn patience from seeing the wheat slowly come up, the growing
of things—should one think oneself such a hugely dead thing that one believed one wouldn’t grow? Should one deliberately discourage one’s development? [400]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, Sunday, 28 October 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(21) The symbol of Saint Luke, the patron of painters, is, as you know, an ox; we must therefore be as patient as an ox if we wish to labour in the artistic field. But bulls are pretty glad not having to work in the filthy business of painting. [628]

Arles, on or about Tuesday, 19 June 1888.

To Émile Bernard

(22) [. . .] I’m ploughing on like a man possessed, more than ever I have a pent-up fury for work, and I think that this will contribute to curing me.

Perhaps something will happen to me like the thing E. Delacroix speaks of—“I found painting when I had neither teeth nor breath left,” in this sense that my sad illness makes me work with a pent-up fury—very slowly—but from morning till night without respite—and—this is probably the secret—work for a long time and slowly. [800]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Thursday, 5 September, and Friday, 6 September 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(23) Me, I’d be quite happy to stay silent for 10 years doing nothing but studies, then do one or two figure paintings.

The old plan, so often recommended and so rarely carried out. [657]

Arles, Wednesday, 8 August 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(24) [. . .] I myself am very, very discontented with my work, and the only thing that consoles me is that experienced people say that one must paint for 10 years for nothing. But what I’ve done is only those 10 years of unfortunate studies that didn’t
come off. Now a better period could come, but I’ll have to strengthen the figure work, and I must refresh my memory by very close study of Delacroix, Millet. Then I’ll try to sort out my drawing. Yes, every cloud has a silver lining, it gives one more time for study. [805]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Friday, 20 September 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(25) You’ll see that I’m gaining a little patience, and that persevering will be a result of my illness. [806]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Saturday, 28 September 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(26) [. . .] I end up resigning myself by saying, it’s experience and each day’s little bit of work alone that in the long run matures and enables one to do things that are more complete or more right. So slow, long work is the only road, and all ambition to be set on doing well, false. For one must spoil as many canvases as one succeeds with when one mounts the breach each morning. [823]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 26 November 1889. To Theo van Gogh

Imperfection

Imperfection is closely linked to Van Gogh’s ideas about suffering and perseverance: that is, people suffer because of the physical afflictions that attend our natural condition and because human sympathy and understanding are limited. In his early letters, Van Gogh writes that religion is helpful in that it encourages people to deal with these problems by loving one another despite their vulnerabilities and failures. But when he rejected organized
religion and was himself subsequently rejected by Kee, he turned to Sien partly because of her imperfections, as a demonstration to his detractors of his moral superiority to their self-righteous religious orthodoxy. In so doing, he retained the spirit of the Christian injunction to love your (flawed) neighbour as yourself, even though he had parted company with official Christianity. It is as if he secularized the idea of spiritual consolation by insisting on its moral rather than its religious significance.

Van Gogh took his thinking about imperfection a step further by suggesting that authentic works of art are likewise validated—humanized, brought to life—by how they thematize imperfection within themselves. For instance, when he writes about the working poor, he extols both his imperfect suffering subjects and the artistic effectiveness of depicting them in a deliberately unfinished, or imperfect, manner.

In Arles, Van Gogh was especially interested in how painting transfigures the ordinary world, not by accurate representation but by calculated exaggeration, and even by sometimes deliberately making things look ugly. The idea of imperfection was now fully integrated into his aesthetic theory. One result was that Van Gogh not only called attention to the imperfect condition of the suffering world that he depicted; he also made that world poignantly and vividly present through a calculated incorporation of imperfection within the work of art itself.

Van Gogh acknowledges that he has to make mistakes in order to learn (1), and he claims that for a person to be without imperfection is itself an imperfection (2). Later, with some ironic admiration, he applies this idea to Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson*, declaring that its only fault is that it is faultless (3).
In his relationships with Kee and Sien, Van Gogh’s thinking about imperfection took on a strong further significance. That is, although he acknowledges a personal weakness in falling for Kee, he insists also that this weakness is admirable (4). Then, after Kee rejected him and he took up with the unfortunate Sien, he interpreted his dedication to someone so destitute and forsaken as a sign of his own integrity (5). There is a certain appeal, he argues, in the very fadedness of such women as Sien (6), and there is something beautiful even in her ugliness (7). Although Sien is neither nice nor good—well, neither is Vincent (8–10). Still, even in an imperfect world, the ideal continues to attract (11), enhanced by the special poignancy that attends our human failure to attain it.

Van Gogh’s experience with Sien and his insights into the beauty of imperfection were soon transferred to his thinking about art. Increasingly, he argued that imperfect and unfinished works can be all the more affecting because of their deliberately thematized shortcomings. His moral experience is thus transferred to his understanding of the aesthetic (12–15), and, interestingly, he makes the same point to Theo about writing, when he admits that he doesn’t always find the right words and, as a writer, has no “claim to perfection” (16).

(1) If we but try to live uprightly, then we shall be all right, even though we shall inevitably experience true sorrow and genuine disappointments, and also probably make real mistakes and do wrong things, but it’s certainly true that it is better to be fervent in spirit, even if one accordingly makes more mistakes, than narrow-minded and overly cautious. [143]

Amsterdam, Wednesday, 3 April 1878.

To Theo van Gogh
(2) [. . .] it is good to have love one to another namely of the best kind, that believeth all things and hopeth all things, endureth all things and never faileth.

And not troubling ourselves too much if we have shortcomings, for he who has none has a shortcoming nonetheless, namely that he has none, and he who thinks he is perfectly wise would do well to start over from the beginning and become a fool. [143]

Amsterdam, Wednesday, 3 April 1878.

*To Theo van Gogh*

(3) It put me in mind of what Bürger or Thoré, I think, said about Rembrandt’s Anatomy lesson. That painting’s only fault is not to have any faults. [171]

Etten, Friday, 26 August 1881. *To Theo van Gogh*

(4) I felt with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind, “She and no other.” You show weakness, passion, ignorance, worldly inexperience if you say “she and no other,” some might suggest, “don’t commit yourself, find a way round it.” God forbid! May this weakness of mine be my strength, I want to be dependent on “her and no other” and even if I could, I shouldn’t like to be independent of her. [180]

Etten, Monday, 7 November 1881. *To Theo van Gogh*

(5) Well, gentlemen, I’ll tell you—you who set great store by manners and culture, and rightly so, provided it’s the real thing—what is more cultured, more sensitive, more manly: to forsake a woman or to take on a forsaken one?

This winter I met a pregnant woman, abandoned by the man whose child she was carrying.

A pregnant woman who roamed the streets in winter—who had to earn her bread, you can imagine how.
I took that woman as a model and worked with her the whole winter. I couldn’t give her a model’s full daily wage, but all the same, I paid her rent and have until now been able, thank God, to preserve her and her child from hunger and cold by sharing my own bread with her. [224]

The Hague, on or about Sunday, 7 May 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(6) Theo, I find such infinite charm in that je ne sais quoi of withering, that drubbed by life quality. Ah! I found her to have a charm, I couldn’t help seeing in her something by Feyen-Perrin, by Perugino. Look, I’m not exactly as innocent as a greenhorn, let alone a child in the cradle. It’s not the first time I couldn’t resist that feeling of affection, particularly love and affection for those women whom the clergymen damn so and superciliously despise and condemn from the pulpit. [193]

Etten, on or about Friday, 23 December 1881.

To Theo van Gogh

(7) I hear gossip about how I’m always together with her, but why should I let that bother me?—I’ve never had such a good assistant as this ugly??? wasted woman. To me she’s beautiful, and I find in her exactly what I need. Life has given her a drubbing, and sorrow and adversity have left their mark on her—now I can make use of it.

If the earth hasn’t been ploughed you can’t do anything with it. She has been ploughed—so that in her I find more than in a whole batch of the unploughed. [232]

The Hague, Sunday, 28 May 1882.

To Anthon van Rappard

(8) She isn’t kind, she isn’t good, but neither am I, and serious attachment existed throughout everything as we were. [382]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 6 September 1883.

To Theo van Gogh
(9) But as one realizes more and more that one isn’t perfect and has shortcomings, and that others do too, and thus there are continual difficulties that are the opposite of illusions, so I believe that those who don’t lose heart and don’t become apathetic as a result mature through it, and one must endure in order to mature. [310]

    The Hague, Thursday, 8 February 1883.
    To Theo van Gogh

(10) You and I likewise, we occasionally do something that’s perhaps a sin, but after all we’re not merciless and we do feel compassion, and precisely because we don’t consider ourselves to be without fault and know how these things work, we don’t scold fallen or weak women as the ministers do, as if it were all their own fault. [348]

    The Hague, Sunday, 3 June 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(11) [. . .] imperfect and full of faults as we are, we’re never justified in stifling the ideal, and what extends into the infinite as if it were no concern of ours. [341]

    The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 9 May 1883.
    To Anthon van Rappard

(12) In short, I want to reach the point where people say of my work, that man feels deeply and that man feels subtly. Despite my so-called coarseness—you understand—perhaps precisely because of it. [249]

    The Hague, on or about Friday, 21 July 1882.
    To Theo van Gogh

(13) So too with engraving—the reproduction through photogravure of the needlework school by Israëls, say, or the painting by Blommers or the one by Artz, is superb, as published by G&Cie. But if this process were to completely
replace true engraving I think the ordinary engravings
would eventually be missed, with all their shortcomings and
imperfections. [295]

The Hague, on or about Friday, 22 December 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(14) Or rather, my position is that for my part I’d rather see
studies like these, even though they’re unfinished and even
if much is completely neglected, than drawings that have a
subject, because through them I get a vivid memory of nature
itself. [298]

The Hague, Wednesday, 3 January 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(15) My aim is to do a drawing that not exactly everyone will
understand, the figure expressed in its essence in simplified
form, with deliberate disregard of those details that aren’t
part of the true character and are merely accidental. Thus it
shouldn’t, for example, be the portrait of Pa but rather the
type of a poor village pastor going to visit a sick person. The
same with the couple arm in arm by the beech hedge—the
type of a man and woman who have grown old together
and in whom love and loyalty have remained, rather than
portraits of Pa and Ma, although I hope they’ll pose for it. But
they must know that it’s serious, which they might not see for
themselves if the likeness isn’t exact. [361]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 11 July 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(16) Because I myself am not one of those who don’t fail in words
either—such people would be perfect—and don’t make the
slightest claim to perfection. [351]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 7 June 1883.

To Theo van Gogh
In Drenthe, Van Gogh continues to emphasize the necessary imperfection of the human condition (17). Later, he writes that we should keep striving to do better (18) and should not fear making mistakes (19). Again, he argues that what holds true for people holds true for art, and neither the best people nor the best paintings are free of faults (20). Just so, his own work will remain imperfect because it will never be finished (21).

Van Gogh also insists with increasing vigour on the affective aspects of imperfection in a painting, where the right kind of misrepresentation can make a positive contribution by imparting a quality of life and energy that are missing from merely correct academic studies (22–25). Although a painting might be crude, it can be all the more heartbreaking because of that (26). The same is true in actual life, where, for instance, an apparently plain girl might have real beauty, such as Frans Hals would paint (27). We just have to learn to look in order to discover that a certain kind of imperfection hurls error into the shade (25, 28), even though the deliberate introduction of imperfection into a work of art can easily be mistaken for mere lack of technique (29).

In Arles, Van Gogh developed his thinking about the expressive vitality of imperfection by attending more closely to the means by which it is produced. For instance, exaggeration and simplification (30–33) can be used to distort the actual appearances of things in the interests of an enhanced aesthetic effect, so that beauty is discovered even in what at first seems ugly (31, 34). Admittedly, Van Gogh makes risky arguments here, because imperfection and ugliness are not commendable in themselves, and everything depends on how they are incorporated into the work. As he writes to Willemien—clarifying the basic idea on which he had insisted in The Hague—ordinary, imperfect things
can be transfigured by the alchemy of art (35). In this process, art does not itself pretend to perfection; rather, it re-enacts within its own practice something of the imperfect world that it depicts.

(17) It’s also true in life that the good is such a high light that it goes without saying that we can’t reach that. If we set our spectrum lower and nonetheless try to remain bright and not lapse into lifelessness, this is the most reasonable thing to do, and makes life less impossible. [395]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, Friday, 12 October, or Saturday, 13 October 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(18) And if one has to see to it that one learns something by experience, it would be mightily pleasant if one was good and the world was good &c.—yes indeed—but it seems to me that one increasingly comes to realize that we ourselves are as bad as the world in general—of which we are a speck of dust—and the world as bad as we are—whether one does one’s very best or acts more indifferently, it always becomes something else—works out differently—from what one actually wanted. But whether it turns out better or worse, happier or unhappier, doing something is better than doing nothing. [434]

Nuenen, between about Wednesday, 5 March, and about Sunday, 9 March 1884. To Theo van Gogh

(19) I tell you, if one wants to be active, one mustn’t be afraid to do something wrong sometimes, not afraid to lapse into some mistakes. To be good—many people think that they’ll achieve it by doing no harm—and that’s a lie, and you said yourself in the past that it was a lie. That leads to stagnation, to mediocrity. [464]

Nuenen, Thursday, 2 October 1884. To Theo van Gogh
(20) It’s neither the best paintings nor the best people—in which there are no errors or bias. [465]
    Nuenen, Thursday, 9 October 1884. To Theo van Gogh

(21) Still, what should I do with the painting? It’s as big as last year’s woman spinning. I’ve got it in the cottage again to do more things to it from life. I believe I’ll finish it though—in a manner of speaking—for I myself will actually never think my own work finished or ready. [499]
    Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 2 May 1885.
    To Theo van Gogh

(22) At least it’s a thing that I’ve felt, and one such that I would be able to point to defects and certain errors in it myself, just as well as other critics.
    Yet there’s a certain life in it, and perhaps more than in certain paintings in which there are no errors at all. [494]
    Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 18 April 1885.
    To Theo van Gogh

(23) When I see in the Salon issue, for instance, so many paintings which are impeccably drawn and painted in terms of technique, if one will, many of them bore me stiff all the same, because they don’t make me feel or think anything, because they’ve evidently been made without a certain passionateness. And there’s something passionate in what I’m sending you. [500]
    Nuenen, Monday, 4 May, and Tuesday, 5 May 1885.
    To Theo van Gogh

(24) But I want to point out something that’s perhaps worth noting. All academic figures are constructed in the same way and, let’s admit, one couldn’t do better. Impeccable—without
faults—you’ll already have seen what I’m driving at—*also without giving us anything new* to discover.

Not so the figures of a Millet, a Lhermitte, a Régamey, a Lhermitte, a Daumier. They’re also well constructed—*but not the way the academy teaches, after all.* [515]

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 14 July 1885.

*To Theo van Gogh*

(25) And—there’ll be mistakes both in the drawing and in the colour or tone that a **realist wouldn’t readily make.** Certain inaccuracies of which I’m convinced myself, which if need be I myself will sometimes point out more severely than other people. Inaccuracies sometimes, or imperfections.

And yet I believe that—*even if I keep producing work* in which people, if they want to look at it precisely from that angle and with that aim, can find **faults**—it will have a certain life of its own and **raison d’être** that will overwhelm those faults—in the eyes of those who appreciate character and **mulling things over in their minds.** [528]

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 18 August 1885.

*To Anthon van Rappard*

(26) One more effort that’s far from finished—but one at least where I’m attempting something more heartbroken and therefore more heartbreaking. [634]

Arles, on or about Thursday, 28 June 1888.

*To Theo van Gogh*

(27) There were very good-looking girls there, the best-looking of whom was ugly. I mean, a figure that struck me like an amazingly beautiful Jordaens or Velázquez or—Goya—was one in black silk, probably some inn landlady or other, with
an ugly and irregular face, but with vivacity and piquancy à la Frans Hals. [546]

Antwerp, on or about Sunday, 6 December 1885.

To Theo van Gogh

(28) But when Israëls or when Daumier or Lhermitte, say, draw a figure, one will feel the form of the body much more and yet—this is why I particularly want to include Daumier—the proportions will sometimes be almost random, the anatomy and structure often completely wrong "in the eyes of the academicians."

But it will live. And above all Delacroix, too.

It still isn’t expressed properly. Tell Serret that I would be desperate if my figures were good, tell him that I don’t want them academically correct. Tell him that I mean that if one photographs a digger, then he would certainly not be digging. Tell him that I think Michelangelo’s figures magnificent, even though the legs are definitely too long—the hips and buttocks too broad. Tell him that in my view Millet and Lhermitte are consequently the true painters, because they don’t paint things as they are, examined drily and analytically, but as they, Millet, Lhermitte, Michelangelo, feel them. Tell him that my great desire is to learn to make such inaccuracies, such variations, reworkings, alterations of the reality, that it might become, very well—lies if you will—but—truer than the literal truth. [515]

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 14 July 1885.

To Theo van Gogh

(29) I won’t go into generalities about technique, but I do foresee that, precisely when I become stronger in what I’ll call power
of expression than I am at this moment, people will say, not less but in fact even more than now, that I have no technique. [439]

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 18 March 1884.

To Anthon van Rappard

(30) But imagining the terrific man I had to do, in the very furnace of harvest time, deep in the south. Hence the oranges, blazing like red-hot iron, hence the old gold tones, glowing in the darkness. Ah, my dear brother— —and the good folk will see only caricature in this exaggeration. [663]

Arles, Saturday, 18 August 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(31) The idea of the sower still continues to haunt me. Exaggerated studies like the sower, like the night café now, usually seem to me atrociously ugly and bad, but when I’m moved by something, as here by this little article on Dostoevsky, then they’re the only ones that seem to me to have a more important meaning. [680]

Arles, on or about Tuesday, 11 September 1888.

To Theo van Gogh

(32) The olive trees with white cloud and background of mountains, as well as the Moonrise and the Night effect—

These are exaggerations from the point of view of the arrangement, their lines are contorted like those of the ancient woodcuts. [805]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Friday, 20 September 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(33) While always working directly on the spot, I try to capture the essence in the drawing—then I fill the spaces demarcated by the outlines (expressed or not) but felt in every case, likewise with simplified tints, in the sense that everything that will be earth will share the same purplish tint, that the whole
sky will have a blue tonality, that the greenery will either be blue greens or yellow greens, deliberately exaggerating the yellow or blue values in that case. [596]

Arles, on or about Thursday, 12 April 1888.

To Émile Bernard

(34) Now as for recovering the money paid to the landlord through my painting, I’m not making a point of it, because the painting is one of the ugliest I’ve done. It’s the equivalent, though different, of the potato eaters.

I’ve tried to express the terrible human passions with the red and the green. [676]

Arles, Saturday, 8 September 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(35) I’ve just finished the portrait of a woman of forty or more, insignificant. The face faded and tired, pockmarked, an olive-tinged, suntanned complexion, black hair.

A faded black dress adorned with a soft pink geranium, and the background in a neutral tone between pink and green.

Because I sometimes paint things like that—with as little and as much drama as a dusty blade of grass by the side of the road—it’s right, as it seems to me, that I should have an unbounded admiration for De Goncourt, Zola, Flaubert, Maupassant, Huysmans. [804]

Saint-Rémy-de Provence, Thursday, 19 September 1889. To Willemien van Gogh