

How Shall We Live?

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The Two Types of Suffering

There are two types of suffering: one type we have agreed with ourselves we will accept if it occurs, e.g., suffering as a result of deliberately failing to care for our health, or from physical injury received in sport or in military combat voluntarily participated in, or as a result of failing to achieve a life goal. This type we can call, “suffering for a purpose”, and is probably what philosophers like Nietzsche had in mind when they scorned philosophers and religious teachers who wanted to eliminate all suffering, because individuals who are willing to risk such suffering are essential to the health of any modern society.

The second type results from causes over which we have no control and has no transcendent value to ourselves or anyone else, e.g., suffering as a result of natural disasters, disease, the parents we were born to, the country and era into which we were born, the decisions of politicians, businessmen and military leaders. Call this type, “suffering for no purpose at all.”

People who have experienced both know all too well that suffering for a purpose is as nothing compared to suffering for no purpose at all. One characteristic of the twentieth century is the enormous increase in this latter type of suffering, as is evident in so much of this century’s art and literature.

There are people who believe that the fundamental goal of man should be the elimination of suffering which has no purpose. These people can in turn be divided into two groups: those who believe that the goal can be achieved without the elimination of man or of equally developed creatures elsewhere in the universe; or, even if the goal cannot be achieved, that this type of suffering is justified by the pleasures and accomplishments that man experiences in each generation. The second group (of which I am a member) believes that no one with a knowledge of history, in particular, the history of the twentieth century, can possibly believe that the second type of suffering will be significantly reduced in the future, and furthermore that nothing can justify this suffering to the degree that it occurs in the world.

We in the second group therefore believe that the only way to achieve the fundamental goal is by the elimination of man and of all equally developed creatures throughout the universe, this to be accomplished with the least increase of suffering possible, which we believe means: solely by attrition. If each male on average has no more than one child per lifetime, then it will be possible to eliminate the human race within 33 generations from the present day (early 1990s). In other words, if someone asks, “What is the purpose of human life?”, we respond, “To end the human race.”

The remaining question is, “How we shall live until we eliminate mankind?”

We believe that our *first* duty is not to transmit the evils of our parents (and ourselves) on to our children — that our first duty is to stop the river of poison that flows through so many families, and to destroy the high reputation that anguished despair has in the upper class. (This despair is called “neurosis” by a professional elite which has everything to gain from trivializing it into a “disease”.) We believe that a parent’s best guiding rule is, “Never will any child of mine be raised as I was.” Some of us have already proved, through our own children, that this can indeed be done, and that it can be done in a single generation.

Second in importance is friendship; in particular, we are convinced, like the ancients, that friendship is the best single weapon against the miseries of old age.

Third in importance is compassion for suicides; we do not believe, with Camus, that suicide is the fundamental philosophical question, because we do not believe that suicide should be regarded as an escape from suffering, since it is entirely conceivable that this life is already an afterlife. Rather, we believe that our task is to learn how to live with the fact of the second type of

suffering, doing whatever we can to diminish its intensity. Therefore we condone suicide only when it is done to help others, or when a person believes that the risk of equal or greater misery in the next life (if there is one) is worth the possibility of the brief moment of oblivion which he or she believes will occur in the transition from this life to the next. In these circumstances we believe we must do everything we can, in a loving way, to aid the person in succeeding.

“It is a brave act of valour to contemn death, but where life is more terrible than death, it is then the truest valour to dare to live... — Browne, Sir Thomas, *Religio Medici*, in *Sir Thomas Browne: Selected Writings*, ed. Keynes, Sir Geoffrey, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill., 1970, p. 50.

So, the question is not *if* you should commit suicide but *when*. The way to live is this: knowing that the next life may be worse than this one, hold out in this one until your suffering becomes so great that you are willing to take the chance that there will be a brief moment of oblivion before the next one...

Fourth, we believe that it is to our advantage to attempt to live and act without hatred. This does not mean that we do not fight for what we believe in, or that we resign ourselves to injustice or oppression; it means simply that from experience we have found that not hating an enemy seems to result in more and better victories than hating him or her does, and that hating God only duplicates a form of behavior which we condemn in him.

Fifth, we believe that each of us must share with others those things he has found that make the ordeal of this life more endurable, this sharing to be accomplished by word of mouth or by writing or by any other means. (Parts of this book are an example.) In this respect, we live for each other. Each of us — this lonely man in his apartment, trying to prepare himself for another day of work he detests, that woman growing old and unattractive, this young student knowing that it matters not one jot if he lives or dies — each is participating in an experiment to learn how just *this* life can be endured, so that he can pass on what he learns to those that follow. We too have our companionship, despite our lonely rooms and houses.

Sixth, fully realizing how paradoxical it is, we believe that we should give thanks if and when good things happen to us — not to God, but to whatever there is outside of God that we may regard as benign and capable of being pleased by such thanks for the good things that happen to us, this thanks, however, never being given on bended knee. At all times we refuse to pray for assistance, because we do not plead to any being.

Seventh, we believe we must *constrain the scope of the Object*, whether the Object be commercial, scientific, or ideological. How this can be accomplished is described in the chapter, “The Object”. There is a great temptation here to say *destroy* the Object, but we have had ample lessons in this century of what happens when we allow our rage to dominate our language, and hence, possibly, our thinking.

Constraining the scope of the object emphatically *does not* mean turning away from science and mathematics. Constraining the scope of the Object requires that we know in what circumstances it is appropriate to think in terms of Objects, e.g., in which circumstances scientific and mathematical and commercial criteria of truth are appropriate, and in which they are not.

An organization that is helping to constrain the scope of the Object — although I am sure the directors and members would be surprised if not actually amused at my saying this — is The Nature Conservancy, an organization which uses contributed money to buy land containing endangered species for the purpose of preserving it from development and other forms of destruction.

Finally, we believe that we must do everything in our power to bring the world to the realization that the only real solution to most of the world's gravest problems lies in reducing the human population. (Agreement with this point in no way implies agreement with the larger goal described above.) This can be accomplished by each male limiting himself to no more than two children per lifetime, and by each person each year contributing — even if the amount is only \$1 or \$5 — to organizations which are demonstrably helping to reduce the birth-rate in Third World countries.

Additional Thoughts

Sweet revenge: to do without simply because everyone else is doing the opposite. “Each day my misery defies you!”

We are like children: we want to be watched. We will do almost anything, including risk life and limb, if only there is someone to see it.

If there is no way to find out the right thing to do, then there is no right thing to do.

Most Americans live for their hair.

The single most important research needed by mankind is research into the nature of death. The sooner we know if there is, in fact, an afterlife or not, the sooner we will be able to answer the all-important question of suicide. Death, and not space or the ocean, is our last frontier. We need to find ways of increasing the length of time we can remain in contact with the minds of the dying. We need to encourage perfectly healthy people to voluntarily die, so they can add to our data about the experience, both as measured with scientific instruments, and as communicated by the dying person him- or herself, just as lucid dreamers have found ways to communicate with the outside world from within their dreams. When we know what happens after death, we will know, at last, how to conduct our lives.

A tormenting thought: Over the entire history of the human race, there have undoubtedly been some human beings who endured — for a second, a minute, an hour, a day or more — physical or mental agony which on any scale was far worse, far more painful, than that endured by any other human beings before or since: the child who loses a totem that was the child's entire soul and self; the artist who works a lifetime in obscurity only to see, in old age, all his works destroyed by fire or in war; the worst of medieval tortures — being boiled alive over a period of hours, days — the worst of mental illness. No matter how much we attempt to dismiss the fact, a fact it nevertheless remains: there have been agonies which were the worst.

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Part of the “honest accounting” described elsewhere in this book is overcoming our faith that wealth equals misery. When you look at beautiful houses, you simply have to accept as fact that at least a few of those who live in them do *not* suffer as you do, that in fact at least some of these people are loved, that life is easy for them and always has been, that they are happy with no effort, even though you will never be happy despite a lifetime of effort. To confront this overwhelming unfairness of life and accept it as a fact, and not to try to dirty it with thoughts of an afterlife in which the rich are punished, or with lies to ourselves about these people not having as much depth of character as we do — is part of the discipline of learning to live this life and possible future ones.

A very useful question: “How would I live if I had no hope of accomplishing anything worthwhile?”

The truth is, we *do* have a purpose in life, and that is, first, to learn how to live and die when life has no meaning or purpose, and then to pass on what we have learned to others. I once considered this idea nothing but the kind of facile thought that occurs when one has reached the limits of despair and seems unable to endure another hour of life. I now believe it to be the only way out for us. Everything else is a missing of this point. All we have — the only certainty on which we can begin — is that life is unbearable and that no one, so far, has a remedy that works for us. There will be a time in the future when intellectuals and artists will envy us because we had to face this, the worst of all human dilemmas.

We vote with our actions for the kind of world we want to live in. We do not have to be like residents of the ghetto, who litter their yards and streets and then complain about the mess they are forced to live in. We can pick up the litter on our own streets, we can make a point of behaving toward others as we wish they behaved toward us. We can be courteous in our everyday lives, in stores, on the phone, on the job, and especially behind the wheel of our cars. We are not compelled to live like those we despise.

Argument for living with as much pleasure as possible: if we are condemned to repeat this life, then we might as well make it as pleasant as we can!

Or perhaps, as Shaw said, we should live so that, when we die, God will be in our debt. At the very least, the fundamental question is, In what way can you conduct your life so that, when you end it, you will not be ashamed of how you lived? The only answer I can give is: devote your life to trying to correct something that bothers you deeply. Become good at whatever that is.

On big solutions: this book is nothing but a collection of fragmentary ideas that, in the author’s experience, have made an unbearable life more nearly bearable, if only for a few moments at a time. The ideas have been assembled without prejudice against their sources: pop

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psychology, New Age wishful thinking, old philosophies and religions, new philosophies and religions, the desperation of populations without a future. The only question has been, does the idea work — even if only for a few moments? This effort is carried out in full awareness of the contempt with which such a *layman's* approach is regarded by professional philosophers, and in full awareness that, at best, the result will not be a sudden bursting forth of the meaning of life, but simply the same old drabness and futility made, perhaps, at times, slightly more endurable.

“But surely, one of these days, some academic somewhere — some extraordinarily learned man, with bushels of publications to his credit and a prestigious chair at one of the world’s great universities — will come up with a big solution that once again explains everything. If we can only hang on long enough for the explanation that will save us... “

To which we reply, “We have seen enough of those big solutions. We have had enough of false promises, enough of *literature* disguised as truth. We prefer to carry out our piece by piece trial and error over the centuries, so that each generation can say, ‘We haven’t got much, but we have *something* that has stood the test of time.’”

The famous poet
writes poems
that say that we should
all go
back to
Nature.
He makes \$35,000 a year
and lives in
the Sierra.
Where will we find
the trees
to make
the paper
to print
so many books of poetry?

There is suffering so great that you know, in the depths of your soul, that you will never be able to say yes to a scheme of things in which such a thing is possible. Even if, from tomorrow on, all suffering were eliminated from the world, and the suffering of the past were revealed to be for a higher good beyond your wildest imagining, you know that forever more you must be a Naysayer to this world and to whatever brought it into being.

“If it doesn’t kill me it makes me stronger.” Nietzsche’s popular saying may be true for some, but it is not true for those who have lived through hours, days, weeks of such pain that they cannot even be properly said to have fought it and survived. The body’s cells merely kept working during this time. That is all that happened. There were no resources of the will or intellect capable of dealing with such agony, and the victim knew it every moment. He had nothing to fight *with*. He

merely, for one reason or another — a chance phone call from a friend, a few minutes sitting in a garden — postponed suicide. That is all we can say.

People who emerge from such experiences are not stronger. They are, in fact, like weak animals rescued from torture. The expressions on the faces of some of the Auschwitz survivors do not say, “We survived! We are victorious!” They say, “Please may I have a drink of water. And if you can find a reason not to make me suffer any more, I will do anything for you.”

“Without a sacred book to join [the members of the sect of the Phoenix] as the scriptures do for Israel, without a common memory, without that other memory which is a language, scattered over the face of the earth, diverse in color and features, one thing alone — the Secret — unites them and will unite them until the end of time. Once, in addition to the Secret, there was a legend (and perhaps a cosmogonic myth) but the shallow men of the Phoenix have forgotten it and now only retain the obscure tradition of a punishment. Of a punishment, of a pact or of a privilege, for the versions differ and scarcely allow us to glimpse the verdict of a God who granted eternity to a lineage if its members, generation after generation, would perform a rite. I have collated accounts by travelers, I have conversed with patriarchs and theologians; I can testify that fulfillment of the rite is the only religious practice observed by the sectarians. The rite constitutes the Secret. This Secret, as I have already indicated, is transmitted from generation to generation, but good usage prefers that mothers should not teach it to their children, nor that priests should; initiation into the mystery is the task of the lowest individuals. A slave, a leper or a beggar serve as mystagogues. Also one child may indoctrinate another. The act in itself is trivial, momentary and requires no description. The materials are cork, wax or gum arabic. (In the liturgy, mud is mentioned; this is often used as well.) There are no temples especially dedicated to this cult, but certain ruins, a cellar or an entrance hall are considered propitious places. The Secret is sacred but is always somewhat ridiculous; its performance is furtive and even clandestine and the adept do not speak of it. There are no decent words to name it, but it is understood that all words name it or, rather, inevitably allude to it, and thus, in a conversation I say something or other and the adept smile or become uncomfortable, for they realize I have touched upon the Secret. In Germanic literatures there are poems written by sectarians whose nominal subject is the sea or the twilight of evening; they are, in some way, symbols of the Secret, I hear it said repeatedly....

“I have attained on three continents the friendship of many devotees of the Phoenix; I know that the Secret, at first, seemed to them banal, embarrassing, vulgar and (what is even stranger) incredible...What is odd is that the Secret was not lost long ago; in spite of the vicissitudes of the Universe, in spite of wars and exoduses, it reaches, awesomely, all the faithful. Someone has not hesitated to affirm that it is now instinctive.” — Borges, Jorge Luis, *Labyrinths*, New Directions, N.Y., 1964, pp. 102-104.

A man comes home to his empty apartment after eight hours of mind-destroying boredom at his job and a four hour round-trip commute by bus. For all this effort, he earns enough to pay the rent and buy food and go to a movie once in a while. He is divorced, middle-aged, bald, no longer attractive to women (if he ever was). If he has any hope at all, it is that whatever death the world of man has decreed for him will be reasonably quick and not as painful as most. He reads, watches TV, goes to bed, and the thought that enables him to fall asleep in peace despite the fact that tomorrow he must face another day no different than this one, doing what he hates for people

he despises — the thought that makes him, too, part of a community, is this: *There are millions of others like me. Today we did one good thing, the only good thing: we brought no new human life onto this planet.*

“If...we contemplate the turmoil of life, we behold all occupied with its want and misery, straining all their powers to satisfy its infinite needs and to ward off its multifarious sorrows, yet without daring to hope anything else than simply the preservation of this tormented existence for a short span of time. In between, however, in the midst of the tumult, we see the glances of two lovers meet longingly: yet why so secretly, fearfully, and stealthily? Because these lovers are the traitors who seek to perpetuate the whole want and drudgery, which would otherwise speedily reach an end; this they wish to frustrate, as others like them have frustrated it before.” — Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Idea*, Chapter XLIV, “The Metaphysics of the Love of the Sexes”, last page.

“...I always considered myself a socialist, overoptimistic to a fault, until I had to listen — on a bus, in restaurants, even sitting in Central Park — to what ordinary Americans actually say to one another on their cell phones.” — Leonard, John, “Cri de Coeur”, in review of Epstein, Jason, *Book Business: Publishing Past Present and Future*, *The New York Review of Books*, Feb. 8, 2001, p. 17.

Anyone who thinks humanity is worth saving should first spend some time riding public buses, or watching daytime TV, or sitting in the crowd at professional football games. When watching daytime TV, think of our three-million year old ancestor Lucy whose skeleton was found in Africa not many years ago. Think of all the struggle and misery the race has endured since then: the wars, diseases, tortures, deaths; all the generations of mothers who lived and died through the pain of childbirth; all the centuries of operations performed without anesthetic; the entire tribes and populations wiped out by crop failures or marauding neighbors or locusts or Black Plague; think of the countless generations who kept themselves going with “Just get through the next day, the next hour, the next minute — things will be better”. Think of all the men and women burned alive at the stake, think of the millions of deaths in the two World Wars, think of all the desperate whispers of desperate souls to themselves over the millenia — “Get through this and nothing can possibly be worse. Just get through this!” And then realize that the product of it all is: Oprah Winfrey and Geraldo Rivera and the freaks who appear on their shows. Three million years of evolution. And you find my ideas about what should be done with the human race *depressing?*

But it is not necessary to contemplate the long ordeal that constitutes human history, in order to come to the conclusion that the human race must be ended. It is sufficient — at least for any decent human being — to read a detailed history of capital punishment¹ or of torture², and to

1. For example, Laurence, John, *The History of Capital Punishment*, Citadel Press, Secaucus, N.J., 1960

remember that all this outrageous, calculated, inflicting of pain was done in the name of the public *good*.

“The urge to destroy is a creative urge.” — Bakunin

There is only one capital crime now, and that is having more than two children.

The question is, how shall we live until the race is ended? Can we take Thoreau’s advice?

“However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are. It looks poorest when you are richest. The fault-finder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poor-house.” — Thoreau, Henry David, “Conclusion of *Walden*”, in *Great Essays*, ed. Houston Peterson, Washington Square Press, N.Y., 1967, pp. 220-221.

Some of us cannot take this advice. Furthermore, since we have absolutely no way of knowing if there is an afterlife, much less what it is like, we can only assume that what we have now is what we will always have. This *is* eternity! What can we do? It seems to help if we treat each day with respect; take the best care we can of this creature (could be a dog or a horse) that has been put in our care. It seems to help if we make each moment be as we would want it to be if we had control over such things. In other words, if we do the best we can for this creature we have by accident met and whom we know has been sentenced to a worthless life and a worthless death.

We can be born or placed into circumstances that are very nearly unbearable, but we are not obligated to accept our misery with the shock and dread that it demands of us. “The secret is not minding.”

2. For example, Scott, George Ryley, *The History of Torture Throughout the Ages*, Luxor Press, London, 1959

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