

Sustainable Suffering

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There are many aspects of our life which we do not commonly share with strangers. Call these our 'personal' aspects. Yet 'personal' need not be too narrowly understood to include just a solitary individual. Sometimes, of course, I am exclusively concerned with myself. But my concerns about my wife involve at least two individuals. Some of my other personal concerns involve even more people. I also have deep concerns as an academician, as a citizen, as a Bengali, and so on, each of which I often share with complete strangers. I will call these somewhat indiscriminately, my 'social/political' concerns. Especially in view of recent feminist theorizing, I do not intend any theoretically sharp distinction between the social and the personal.

Amidst growing strife and mounting tension, it is natural for a discussion on tolerance to turn into a discussion on *intolerance*. We think of the Babri masjid and the Bombay blasts and we shift to topics such as the role of state, rights, and liberties, origins of violence and virtues of non-violence, solidarity, extremism, discrimination and dissent. Such angry topics then naturally dominate discussions of moral and social issues in the country.

Nevertheless, while focusing on heavy issues, we become insensitive to the value and complexity of our personal lives where some of the moral issues find their deepest expression. We are left to seek all morality and all goodness in our political lives alone. Psychoanalysts like Erich Fromm testify to the resulting mess in our psyche.

In any case, a large majority of people have little interest in or access to the heavy political issues that engage the intelligentsia. Most people are engaged most of the time in making sense of their own lives in relation to their immediate families, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and the like. Their actions are largely evaluated in such local setting and their critical sense of what is right and good is often restricted there as well. For larger political issues, most people essentially follow the word and the crowd. I am not recommending this state of affairs; I am taking this to be a fact of life in any corner of history. So if these people are to make moral sense of their lives, an examination of moral issues must enter their personal domains which seldom find heroic expression.

Sometimes it is obvious if an issue is personal or social in the sense suggested above. For example, the issues of death and loneliness are essentially personal. Issues regarding the morality of war or nuclear energy, on the other hand, are very clearly social. So for these issues the divide between the personal and the social need not be carefully marked since they belong to only one of the sides, as the case may be, of the divide.

Some issues, however, span *across* the divide in that they arise both for the individual as embedded in his local setting and for the larger social groups to which he belongs. Classical issues of moral philosophy such as those of responsibility dignity, obligation, loyalty, sacrifice, freedom *and* tolerance typically belong to this class. If we are not careful in locating the divide in discussing these issues, we might confuse our social concerns with the personal, and vice-versa, to end up with rather simplistic versions of human nature.

For example, a large majority of people may be said to be leading morally unworthy lives if their lives are to be judged on the social count alone. Most people fail to fulfill their social

obligations and responsibilities, lack any discernible social dignity, shy away from sacrifice, do not enjoy any significant social freedom and, as we all see, fail to exhibit genuine social tolerance.

Are the majority of people then morally bankrupt or do they appear to be so only because we are demanding clarity on only those aspects of their lives over which they have the least control? Since we have a greater control over our personal lives, we enjoy significant moral privilege in our local setting despite our social failings; *that* privilege is seldom denied. Our moral worth thus lies primarily in what we do with this privilege.

Bertrand Russell once suggested that in launching an enquiry it is a wholesome idea to stock the mind with as many puzzles as possible. Keeping to examples in moral philosophy, consider what is classically known as the paradox of obligation. Fulfilling a duty is a significant moral act only when it is done freely. Doing an act freely implies that one has a choice of not doing it. However, duties preclude that choice: duties *must* be fulfilled. Is the fulfillment of a duty then a moral act at all? Does it make sense to praise someone for fulfilling a duty? Our concept of obligation is clarified as we reach satisfactory answers to these questions.

Consider the following pair of theses which we may take to be facts about personal tolerance:

(a) Tolerance is invariably accompanied by *suffering* since the question of tolerating what we enjoy does not arise. Therefore, as we tolerate more, we suffer more.

(b) As we grow older, we become progressively more tolerant or, in terms of this seminar, we expand the limits of our tolerance. In effect, as we age, we tolerate more.

Combining (a) and (b) it follows that the later part of our lives is *invariably* one of great suffering. This conclusion is puzzling. Most older people, despite their gout or cough, actually seem to lead a life of bliss. Factually then suffering in old age is not inevitable; morally, a life of bliss is always desirable particularly in old age. How do we square up these factual and moral expectations with (a) and (b)? For the rest of this paper, I will try to disentangle some of the central issues which surround this problem.

First of all, we must convince ourselves that (a) and (b) are indeed factually salient. For example, is tolerance always accompanied by suffering? The suffering at issue may be mild as when we (cheerfully) tolerate the pranks of children, especially our own. The suffering need not be of a physical kind although, in extreme cases, they may lead to physical suffering, headaches for instance. This happens when we tolerate uncomfortable ideas, language, music, customs, attitudes and the like. We will look into these cases with more details as we proceed. In general then, whatever the form and the degree of suffering, tolerance begets suffering. So, increasing tolerance must lead to increasing suffering, other things being equal. Unabated suffering, in any form, is not desirable. By the time we reach old age, therefore, such suffering must ultimately lead to misery.

As for the second fact, it is commonplace that, compared to an earlier age, we learn to take many more things in stride as we mature without there being a change in the *causes* themselves. A needle always hurts. Yet while children scream at the very sight of a needle, adults hardly grimace. The reasons for which teenagers break into massive fights seem fairly tolerable later on. Notice also that the limits of tolerance *progressively* expand. Children of the same age hardly tolerate each others' pranks; older children will tolerate identical pranks from younger siblings; parents, of course, tolerate much more but grandparents often do better.

Perhaps we are gathering only convenient facts. Perhaps schoolchildren tolerate more domination by adults than college students. Since we have already accepted the first thesis relating tolerance to suffering, we can use that now to examine (apparent) counter-examples. Psychologists sometimes claim, and parents and teachers, of course, readily agree, that younger children often *desire and need* domination of the kinder variety. As long as such domination is in demand, it is questionable whether these children *suffer*. If they don't, then the concept of tolerance does not properly apply in this case. The moment they begin to suffer under such domination they cease to tolerate although they might fail to express their intolerance. We examine this point in detail later. As these children grow even older, they can tolerate similar, perhaps even worse, domination in life. So the second thesis that tolerance grows in time has not been refuted so far.

Theses (a) and (b) then appear to be sound. How then do we escape the puzzling conclusion that aging is inevitably accompanied by increased misery? One option here, as with most puzzles, is to bite the bullet and accept the conclusion as it stands. So instead of challenging the conclusion we should be resigned to the idea that old age *is* miserable; the perceived bliss is illusory. In fact, it could be suggested that a rather pessimistic view of old age is not surprising at all since it is fairly natural and is widely held in a variety of traditions.

For example, this view could even be a consequence of an otherwise shining view of life promoted in the Romantic tradition. Romantics held that youth was the pinnacle of human life. A series of images upheld this view – impatient, intolerant, innovative and unbending. Beginning as angels, we reach our godly best by about the age of thirty. What follows thereafter is progressive degeneration in every respect. We need not examine the merits of the Romantic

tradition since, even outside the tradition – that is, in traditions with a less flattering view of youth – an apprehension about old age is, nonetheless, widely held.

A large part of this apprehension has, no doubt, to do with the increasing proximity of death as we age. Perhaps the growing presence of death creates a sense of detachment in our minds as we begin to perceive the futility of much that engaged us before. This gradual change in our minds possibly makes us more tolerant in at least one sense of the term. Despite the obvious human interest of these connections, I will not discuss them here primarily because these themes have a tendency to fly out of analytical control unless we use ample space. So, for the time being, let us keep to the mundane.

Even then a part of our uneasiness with old age is certainly linked, if not directly to the prospect of death, to the prospects of diminishing freedom to break out of our current predicaments. A lack of freedom to change our course of life forces increasing tolerance which, in turn, leads to increased suffering. The conclusion of the puzzle thus merely reinforces a fairly standard view of old age. If we are pessimistic enough, the puzzle disappears. Notice also that the view, not surprisingly, upholds a rather defeatist view of tolerance: tolerance is associated with dependence, helplessness, lack of freedom and lot of sighs.

I think that there are several problems with the opinion just covered. The first problem is an existential one: the option requires that we write a significant portion of our life off even before we have lived it. Moreover, if we have learnt to abhor the very idea of old age before living it and since, ultimately death apart, we must step into this age, then we *will* end up in great misery.

I guess there must be a (Skinnerian conditioning) fable somewhere in which someone was told about his imminent transfer to hell. Then the person was actually transferred to heaven but

he kept on screaming nonetheless because he dared not open his eyes. Actual experiences of later life, fortunately, sometimes soothe our frayed expectations: a sudden parting of the clouds, a blissful breath of air. But often they are of too little significance and too late. So something needs to be done *before* the onset of old age.

Yet raising an existential problem is not giving an *argument* against the pessimist. Since old age *is* bad, the pessimist will ask, why deceive ourselves? Why not get used to the idea that old age is not worth living? However, I am going to argue that if we agree with the pessimist at this point, we must also agree that *no* age is worth living.

Notice that thesis (*b*) does not mention any particular age, young or old; it simply says that we suffer more as we proceed. Of course, the thesis has its sharpest effect on old age, as we saw. But this final effect is just an accumulation of previous effects. If the final convulsions of the drug-addict are bad, the little pricks which led to this state couldn't have been good. Following his own course then the pessimist must concede that the very phenomenon of growing up is miserable; *living* is miserable. Such a global pessimism, amounting to outright *nihilism*, was no part of his argument earlier.

Earlier, the pessimist was interested in rejecting the value only of old age since he felt secure, perhaps under the fountain of youth, that all the glory he needs can be acquired before he gets to that sorry stage. But now the effects of thesis (*b*) are coming home to roost. If anything, the pessimist now needs to find a different argument (namely, one that defends outright nihilism). When an argument for outright nihilism is in fact offered, we may decide not to enter it. On the other hand, the pessimist will be changing the game if he now plans to offer a restricted version

of thesis (*b*) such that it applies only to old-age. Again we may decide not to play this game since we are concerned with the *given* version of thesis (*b*).

Let me illustrate the somewhat untidy methodological point raised above with a more familiar issue. Suppose someone makes an appeal against the killing of living things for food and demands a ban on animal-slaughter. This person will be secure in his knowledge that vegetables abound. However, when the effect of his appeal is traced to vegetables as well, he cannot demand a similar ban on vegetables (that leaves nothing to eat) *unless* he offers new arguments for the virtues of starving to death. Such arguments will be plainly pointless since we are engaged in deciding on how to survive without feeling guilty. Alternatively, he could come up with some new, restrictive notion of life (feeling of pain, mobility among others) that, he hopes, includes just the living things he wishes to protect. Those who entertain a more general notion of life will lose interest at this point.

The puzzle then cannot be meaningfully solved by granting the conclusion. So the only option currently at hand is to go back to theses (*a*) and (*b*) for another close look. Recall that the damaging effect of the conclusion really flows from the global nature of thesis (*b*) which the pessimist failed to spot. Yet, there is nothing *intrinsically* damaging in the idea that we grow more tolerant as we grow old. If ‘growing more tolerant’ is something akin to ‘becoming kinder’, then thesis (*b*) actually encapsulates a nice prospect.

It is only in conjunction with thesis (*a*) that thesis (*b*) acquires its notoriety. Once we concede that tolerance embodies suffering, increasing tolerance will be accompanied by increased suffering and the rest of the consequences follow. Thesis (*b*) then is both natural and benign; it is

thesis (*a*) which requires a closer look if we wish to escape the puzzle at all. As far as I can see, that exercise, in turn, requires a closer look at the notion of suffering at issue.

Recall that children who find domination by adults intolerable sometimes fail to express their intolerance. This, of course, is a widespread phenomenon not restricted to children alone; unexpressed intolerance abounds in our civil life. The point is: a failure to *express* intolerance should not be taken as a sign to continued tolerance.

I think our common notion of tolerance is fairly confused on this point. Sometimes we do say things like ‘I must do something about it, I can’t tolerate it any more,’ meaning that we have tolerated something *until* we have made a protest. In such cases, a protest typically takes one of the following forms: raising one’s voice, and maybe one’s arm, writing a letter to the editor, filing a lawsuit, casting an angry vote, organizing a march, forming an association and the like.

I will be facing an intolerable situation if I am tied to chair with a gun placed near my head. Yet, in this situation, I am not likely to protest in any of the forms listed above. Have I tolerated my *predicament* especially when, *ex hypothesi*, my situation would have been intolerable? I do not think I have shown tolerance under the circumstances; all I have shown is helplessness, maybe even cowardice. The point can be strengthened by including, in the list of forms of protest, something like *inner protest*. While I was tied down I could have been planning retaliation once I get a chance, i.e., I could have been *waiting* to adopt one of the forms of outer protest. If that is the case, then I have not tolerated my situation at any point at all. A show of tolerance then cannot be inferred even from a complete absence of outer protest. Why then do we sometimes (confusingly) use the concept of tolerance in such cases? I will return to this question in a moment.

When I am tolerating I am no doubt suffering; this part of thesis (a) seems to me to be questionable. Yet when I am tolerating I am not protesting even in the widest sense of 'protest'. So I must be suffering willingly, *voluntarily*. Voluntary suffering must be rare in our social life and, therefore, such efforts are often heroic. During the early, idealistic phase of Russian revolution, it is said that some capitalists, torn with guilt, actually threw the gates open willingly to face the wrath of the workers. Political activists often go to jail with full knowledge of imminent torture. These deeds are heroic because they are rare; most of us fail to reach such heights. Thus I doubt whether thesis (b) significantly applies to our social life.

In our ordinary civic life we sometimes exhibit social tolerance of a less heroic sort when we agree to stand in a long queue or follow (time-consuming) traffic rules or agree to pay tax. But notice we also exhibit *severe* limits of tolerance in these cases. Perhaps we do not even genuinely satisfy the component of voluntariness on most occasions. Even when we do, our intolerance is fairly short-lived. We constantly review the point of such tolerance, we watch others closely and we weigh the consequences of our imminent intolerance. Each of these reveal an attitude of exasperation. I have no space here to discuss why we do so and I am certainly not questioning the moral value of protest. But the fact remains that in our social lives, heroic deeds apart, we fail to display genuine tolerance in the long run. Hence, our *claims* of tolerance, like much of our other claims in the social setting, are often full of hypocrisy. Who would like to miss the chance of flaunting a virtue especially when you can avoid practicing it? This I hope explains why our concept of social tolerance is confusing.

While genuine social tolerance is rare, crawling like a horse with a baby on one's back is routine. We look forward to such suffering. Young aspirants in various fields invite and tolerate years of back-breaking practice. Parents tolerate hours of anxiety when their children go out. We

sit quietly as the barber twists our head around. We pay through our nose to get our cavities filled. We listen to long stretches of unwelcome music or gossip or lectures. In fact, as soon as we turn to our personal lives, examples just flood in to show that our personal lives are filled with occasions for genuine tolerance. As our personal life widens and becomes more complex, such occasions multiply requiring, in turn, a growth in our tolerance. Thus both theses (a) and (b) have genuine applications in our local setting.

Yet our life does not necessarily become miserable as we grow. Since genuine tolerance has a voluntary component and is largely restricted to our personal lives, we have significantly more control here. In some sense, we *decide* to tolerate. So we may as well decide not to after a certain point. We may put the baby down when it really begins to hurt. We may defer going to the barber or ask for a shorter cut. We use one of several available strategies: we avoid, we ignore, we break away, we lose interest. Thus although we suffer and we learn to stretch the suffering, we seldom so stretch the suffering as to lead to personal unhappiness.

More importantly perhaps, as the examples suggest, suffering is almost always compensated with positive feelings of relief, happiness, pride, joy, expectation, achievement, importance and the like. This is the reason why we invite and look forward to such suffering. In most cases these feelings are aroused not only in the person tolerating but also in the person tolerated. So there is an altruistic element in tolerance as well: I tolerate because the child is happy. Altruism, as we all know, is largely restricted to our personal lives.

So the twin features of control and compensation make such suffering, to use current jargon, *sustainable*. In tolerance we display the brighter side of our lives. We combine courtesy and compassion with enough cunning to tame even suffering. This requires skills of living of the

highest order. Despite strife and tension, the flow of life is such that most people are still able to perform reasonably well. Those who fail to do so end up in great misery.

What then is the solution to the puzzle? Recall that if the premises of the puzzle are true, then the conclusion 'as we grow old we suffer more' logically follows. This conclusion suggests an image of increased and ultimately unabated suffering necessarily accompanying growing up. That was the puzzling element which the conclusion inherited from the first premise alone. This unsufferable element may now be tamed with the notion of sustainable suffering. As we grow old we suffer more no doubt, but the suffering increases horizontally rather than vertically. We become tolerant about many more aspects of our complex lives while we slowly step out of those aspects on which we begin to lose control. Possibly in the end, we so deflate our local setting as to be able to step out of almost every aspect of our lives except the absolutely immediate ones.