

THE HUMAN CONDITION

THOUGHT FOR THE MONTH (#12)

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THE CONDITION

How easy is it to be a human – a happy human? There's no painless path to contentment and fulfilment. There are disturbing events that descend upon us without warning or "justice".

An early shock for many of us, when we are the youngest child, is to suddenly discover one day that there's a new baby in the house! Parents, grandparents, and others coo all over the little stranger. One suddenly has to take a back seat. And the newcomer is here for good! If one tries to push the intruder off the bed or otherwise defend one's turf, there is a prohibition by the elders – or an agonised explanation, but no return to our prior prime position.

Justice has no part in it. You are no longer "it" – the centre of attention. If your parents make the mistake of apologising to you for this given fact of life, you may spend the rest of your life sulking – and blaming others for every disappointment.

If the parents simply turn a blind eye to your hostile acts towards the usurper, you may grow up as an anti-social – one who takes out their frustrations on innocent parties. The younger sibling may have the smile permanently wiped off his or her face by the vengeful acts of the displaced sibling.

Let the shocked party express their sense of loss, and give comfort – but do not support an attitude of self-pity or revenge. Parents must treat the necessary adjustment as a **given fact of human life** – painful, but

requiring self-restraint and positive adjustments.

There are many more examples of random "injustice" in human life. For example, you fall in love with someone who seems to love you back – or you have paired and perhaps had children together. But you wake up one day to discover that a third party has swept the loved one off their feet and taken them away. The strife that results – anger, revenge, fighting (often dirty) over the sharing of property and children – makes for a bitter Family Court, may shatter our self-concept as civilised folk, and bring other pains too.¹

There are many examples of unforeseen disaster in human life – sudden accident, serious ailment, crime, war, an oppressive political regime – the list is endless. There is no umpire, cult, party, ideology or bank account that can make us immune from all of these misfortunes. There are always people facing emotional hills that have to be crossed to restore a joy of living.

Why is pain unavoidable in human life?

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

We modern humans have come a long way and have hugely improved the conditions of living. Most people no longer die from starvation or violence or from countless diseases which we have learned to cure or manage. Statistically, we enjoy greatly advanced physical security. But we still have to deal with animal emotions that are genetically ingrained within us.

¹ I read somewhere that *eternal triangle* issues are the most frequent cause of violence amongst non-criminals.

Yes, in the animal kingdom, some offspring attack younger siblings – even to death. Rival suitors often fight tooth and nail – even to death. If there's a year of limited rain (and food), desperate prehistoric rival tribes would fight – even to death. Etc. When civilisation breaks down, life quickly becomes *nastier, more brutish and shorter*².

THE SOLUTION

At the dawn of western civilisation, both ancient Greeks and ancient Romans upheld **stoicism** as a core value for civilised humans.³ Animus was restrained: the arts, the sciences, and philosophy flourished.

To enhance co-existence, we embrace a **social contract**. This is the price of modern living, of having a secure abode and sharing our planet with seven billion of our kind – and not having to defend oneself and one's family on a daily basis.

What does the **social contract** require of us? We need to deal with intense emotions while suppressing our natural instinct to violently attack those who (intentionally or otherwise) threaten or harm our interests.

Some people think that there's no way to be a happy modern human. Perhaps:

1. **they have never signed** the modern social contract and eventually end up in jail or other human zoos; or
2. they have renounced physical violence, but **they still chronically sulk** over *the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune*⁴, or
3. **they have outwardly signed** the social contract, but they still think *dog-eat-dog*; that for one to win, another must lose⁵. There is no end to this quest to **beat** others, but alas there is found to

be a diminishing limit to the joys which can be simply bought or stolen.

How does a modern human best steer their life? By positively embracing the **social contract**, built on principles of **honour** (trustworthiness) – based on centuries of self-discipline. Customs, morals and laws – our **mores** – are built on this.

Our mores are inevitably gradually **revised** to improve life as our civilisation evolves. But it is ignorant to mock our ancestors on the grounds that their social contract was less sophisticated than ours in some matter. We stand on their shoulders, we cling to 99% of what our elders leave to us. Mark my words: some of **our** current mores will also be regarded with disdain by **future** generations. We inch forward, but are always limited by the ignorance of our era.

Consistency in mores is **virtue** – denying ourselves when necessary the bestial responses we can feel in our bones when we are frustrated. We act according to the mores of our society – making them as fair as we can in our time – and pass on to our children the **mode of living** of **seeking the good** path of behaviour: the path of **honour** and **virtue**. If we show **devotion** to the concept of **virtue**, our young will do likewise and be better able to endure the many frustrations of life with dignity and hope.

We cling to honour and virtue, knowing that this will enable us to be more trusted, to access more golden opportunities, and, over time, to experience and share a greater sense of personal fulfilment.

Virtue is our best hope for quality of life, and participating with a sense of purpose, in our ever-evolving **human civilisation**. □

² Drawn from the phrase by Thomas Hobbes.

³ Two of many stoics: Zeno, Marcus Aurelius.

⁴ Drawn from Hamlet's soliloquy.

⁵ Sometimes called *a zero-sum game*.