

# The big lie

BY MANU HERRÁN

*“A powerful piece.”* —[David Pearce](#)

***People wonder about the cause of poverty when scarcity is the natural state of things. Why? Because we are “designed” (metaphorically) to survive and reproduce our genes as much as possible. Not to discover reality. Not to enjoy. This is why evolution has selected in us the fear of death and the belief in that life is always worth living. We are “programmed” to make our life as long as possible, at any cost.***

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For me, “life” has always been synonymous with “happiness”. I grew up in a large family and have always associated the noise of family gatherings with the happiest moments. My relationship with animals, and in particular dogs and cats, has always been about joy, laughter and games. Pain has always been a test, surpassable, that made me stronger. Death was something that happened to others, while I was endowed with a transcendent perspective on existence.

But, as I discovered later, it was a rather aesthetic transcendent perspective on existence. Everything I believed about life was wrong. Or rather, it was totally true, but only a tiny part of reality: It was true only for me and a small group of lucky people like me.

I remember as a child sometimes finding myself having disturbing thoughts, a trace of suspicion that everything around me might be a fragile decoration that hid a terrible truth on the other side.

***“I am a member of the privileged species in the privileged moment in the privileged place. Others are not so lucky.”***

Over time I have realized to what extent I am an extraordinarily fortunate being. I belong to the dominant privileged species (the human species). I was born at the time of the greatest prosperity and guarantee of rights in all known history. And if this were not enough, I was born in the middle-upper class of a relatively quiet and safe country. In short, I am a member of the privileged species, in a privileged moment, in a privileged place. The others have not been so lucky.

The fact of being privileged and basically relating to other privileged beings has made me think, for most of my life, that this was normal. But the truth is that we humans, in general, suffer a lot. Of course, we use our intelligence and other resources within our reach to suffer as little as possible, but we can't always avoid suffering. In the Second World War, 75 million people died in very painful circumstances. More than 300 million people in the world suffer from depression and more than 800,000 commit suicide each year.

***“The problem is not to die. Everyone dies. The problem is having a miserable life or a terrifying death.”***

Surely animals in nature usually suffer more than humans. Only one in five lion cubs reaches two years of age. And they do not die with palliative care, analgesics and anesthetics, but from hunger, thirst, diseases, or being devoured or attacked by other animals. The mortality rate of lions may seem high, but on the contrary: most species have a reproduction strategy known as “r” (r-selection) in which many descendants are generated, each of which has a very low probability of survival.

Animals on industrial farms have no better luck. We boil live lobsters and crabs before eating them. Nearly one million chickens and turkeys are boiled alive as well each year in U.S. slaughterhouses, often because

fast-moving lines fail to kill the birds before they are dropped into scalding water (2013 estimate).

I insist on stressing the suffering because the problem is not to die. Everybody dies. The problem is having a miserable life, or a terrifying death. Among disappeared detainees, executed, tortured and political prisoners, the number of victims of the Pinochet dictatorship exceeded 40,000 people. More than 4,000 people were tortured in the Basque Country in the last 50 years, according to a report. Since the coup in Egypt, 60,000 people have been arrested and many tortured. More than 11,000 children have died in the civil war in Syria and hundreds have been executed or tortured. Figures of tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of people suffered from Inquisition in some way or another. About 50,000 patients die each year in Spain with avoidable suffering, because they do not have access to palliative care. Every day more than 2,000 children around the world die in painful accidents. In only one year and only in the European Union, 252 million pigs were sacrificed. 77% of these pigs were castrated without anesthesia. During one year, 140,000 experiments are carried out on non-human animals in Spain in which the animal dies or suffers great damage.

These are just some examples. Although I have not lived any of them, I can imagine what these atrocities are like and I am convinced that I do not want to experience them at all, nor do I want anyone to have to go through them. I would not risk living their lives. If I were offered to live any of those lives, I would, of course, reject it. Not only that: in fact, I would refuse to live any life that was not mine, unless it was a better life. So, if it were possible and offered it to me, I would refuse to be reincarnated at random. With the information I have, I consider that I have no interest in living a random life as a sentient being, whether animal or human. I would not take that risk. So what's the point of bringing new lives into existence and putting them at risk of experiencing some of those horrible experiences? It would only be a good idea to do so if we could reasonably assure their happiness. This way of posing the problem seeks impartiality in the form of what is known as "the veil of ignorance", although the name is confusing to me and I think it's more appropriate to call it "veiled egoism" or "blind egoism".

***“Evolution has designed us to believe that life is worth living and is more important than avoiding suffering. We are designed to survive, not to enjoy.”***

Some may argue that most lives, both human and animal, are worthwhile, since most of them do not commit suicide. But there are very specific reasons why we should not commit suicide, even if this was the most rational option. In the first place, committing suicide is not easy. Technically, it is very difficult to do without suffering, so trying to commit suicide can make the situation even worse. On the other hand, for many it may be inconceivable. They simply do not raise the possibility. In addition, the very state of suffering can cloud reason and impede suicide.

Suicide can be a desperate but rational act. Those who commit suicide consider that their life is not worth it or that it is unbearable. If animals do not do it massively, I think it's because suicide is complex, difficult (in the physical and in the mental sense). And for many humans, in my opinion, the same thing happens. At a deep level, I believe there is no significant difference between the reasons why non-human animals whose future lives are expected to be negative do not commit suicide, and the reasons why most humans do not do so in similar circumstances. The reason is the same: we were not designed (metaphorically) to enjoy, but for the survival of our genes. Evolution has not created us with a good ability to commit suicide. Moreover, evolution produces the bias of believing that life is worthwhile, no matter what happens. We are designed to survive, not to enjoy. This is the great deception that evolution has caused in us: evolution has designed us to believe that life is worth living, and that living is more important than avoiding suffering.

Evolution has even designed us to have the feeling that there is more enjoyment than suffering. People wonder about the cause of poverty, when scarcity is the natural state of things. Misery is the normal thing: for what it is necessary to inquire is about prosperity. Sadly, there is a lack of symmetry between enjoyment and suffering. As Eduardo Mendoza said in the mouth of one of his novel characters (I quote from memory because I do not find the literal quotation, but the idea is faithful): it is frustrating to see how a stroke of good luck is not enough to make up for a lifetime of discomfort and misery; and yet a setback of fortune can ruin a lifetime of happiness in a minute.

I know that these ideas can be extravagant or depressing, but unfortunately, I think they reflect reality better than the usual belief that life is wonderful and that everything will be fine. Although talking about these issues can be sad, reflecting and being prepared can avoid great

suffering in the future, for ourselves and for other loved ones, and even for others we will never know. Perhaps reading and being interested in avoiding intense suffering is the best decision you can make in your entire life. Expect the best, but be prepared for the worst.

### **Do you want to be happy?**

We all want to be happy. And happiness is not a matter of years. A short life can be happy while a long life can be miserable. A short and happy life will always be preferable to a long and miserable life although, as I said, we are programmed to make our life as long as possible, at any cost. This is the deception to which evolution subjects us, but which I think we can and must get rid of.

***“Happiness is not a matter of years. A short and happy life is always preferable to a long and miserable life.”***

I do not intend to encourage the idea of ending indiscriminately the lives of others or one's own life, nor do I advocate the idea of the “button of the destruction of the universe”, although an empty world would be better. Even if lives have a clearly negative net worth, and deaths would be without suffering, there are many reasons why it's a bad idea to try to finish lives systematically. With “ending lives systematically” I mean lives of a large group of individuals: those who fulfill certain characteristics, for example, belonging to one, several or all sentient species, perhaps also human, so that individuals are considered statistically, and not individually. It is not a good idea. What I intend to do fundamentally is to promote the idea that suffering is very relevant, and that ending extreme suffering is the most relevant of all. We need to stop extreme suffering, but not in any way.

What are the reasons why it is a bad idea to try to *systematically* terminate lives whose future net worth is predictably very negative? There is a first group of motives that I consider to be intuitive, related to the respect for individual freedom, or to seek the convergence of different value systems, as well as the indecision to do something that may be totally contrary to our most basic impulses (for example, our most basic impulses of survival or empathy). Another second group of motives would be practical, such as avoiding social alarm, and generally

avoiding a greater evil -such a mistake that leads to disasters-, or that is, simply, technically or politically difficult to do, if not impossible.

There is a third group of motives, perhaps unintuitive but logical, based on the consequences of our actions. On the one hand and on a “short-term” basis, humanity is demonstrating its ability to end all suffering as it is demonstrating its ability to end all forms of life, for example with nuclear war. But to do so, humanity must exist. In particular, the [voluntary human extinction movement](#) would be one of the worst possible ideas in this sense, as it would leave the rest of sentient animal species in a world full of suffering.

On the other hand, and in the “long term”, the disappearance of all sentient life would only delay the problem, since foreseeably evolution would open up again, creating new sentient beings in an endless cycle. This is, in my opinion, the definitive argument against the “button of the destruction of the universe”, and is the reason why it is interesting that humanity continues to exist in general, and effective altruists in particular: someone has to take care to ensure to avoid future suffering, somehow building an [earthly paradise](#).

Why do I say that ending extreme suffering is the most relevant of all? As explained by the [Organisation for the Prevention of Intense Suffering](#): “Suffering is rarely if ever a good thing in itself, even though it can lead to personal growth and sometimes allow us to appreciate happiness that follows it even more. But the intense suffering of torture or certain chronic diseases can make life literally unbearable. This suffering, which cries out to be relieved, is on a whole different level, and it makes minor forms of suffering pale in comparison. There is nothing else that has greater urgency than preventing or relieving the intense suffering of sentient beings.”

That is why I defend euthanasia, assisted suicide and palliative care whenever there is intense suffering that does not lead to a greater good. We are all going to die and if we find ourselves in an irreparable situation, it does not make any sense to extend our lives by a few weeks or months, not even a few years, if this is going to add much suffering to our lives. It will always be better to live a little shorter life, but with less suffering. For the same reason, I also call for responsibility on the issue of reproduction. Bringing new lives into the world without being able to ensure that they will be happy, not just these children, but the children of their children and so on, does not seem like a good idea.

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