



Is longer, faster, stronger, smarter life also the happier?
Reflections on slower, sustainable and more inclusive life experience

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Abstract

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Worldwide concern with advances in life extension and enhancement technologies has brought together scientists, corporate managers and ethicists together in the world Forum on Tomorrow's People, Oxford University to debate the pros and cons of the current path. My contention in this paper is to suggest a reflection on an excessively technocratic approach to life enhancement and extension. A meaningful life is not just an individual life. It is embedded in social networks and collective consciousness. Focus on extension technologies for individuals distracts attention from the networks. Undoubtedly, caring institutions for the elderly are needed because lot of countries are having aged population. Perhaps in our anxiety to remain youthful forever, we have created a dilemma before the scientists and technologists who also are confronted with the problems of children, youth and physically challenged people. I discuss six key dilemma in the paper viz., (a) Why elongate the suffering? (b) Should an elderly person, on the brink of the death be given another chance, even if probability of survival is low or should the resources go for a child needing support for future? (c) Whose decision matters? (d) Whose rights matter more? (e) How to measure suffering? and (f) Who is smarter, stronger and stable?

Is longer, faster, stronger, smarter life also the happier? Reflections on slower, sustainable and more inclusive life experience¹

Anil K Gupta²

When we live longer, do we experience more? When we move faster, do we observe more? When we become stronger, does it make us afraid of weaker? Is smarter life also more segmented and unstable life (due to constant urge to become smarter!)? What is the purpose of more meaningful life, which accommodates the community happiness over individual one, sensitivity towards the learned helplessness of weaker section and higher chances for children to survive as against those who survive to live longer?

Many of these questions do not have clear answer. But surely some answers to these questions might offer clearer articulation of our values. May be some of these also help in sharper calibration of ethical compass? But then technologists do not really appreciate the burden of moral issues while making breakthroughs. Their contention can rightly be, as I have argued often, “technology is like words and institutions grammar”. If life-enhancing technologies widen the choices for few and elongate the time frame for even fewer, then let institutions evolve which can compensate for social imbalances and inequitable distribution of opportunities. The leadership by people who do not retire and thus carry forward their vision when proportion of younger people is higher than ever in the history, poses a dilemma for governance. Lack of caring institutions for elderly may create cultural codes justifying indifference by youth, busy with being smarter, and stronger. Dominance by elderly may squeeze space for leadership by youth. The shorter life span of certain social communities when denied access to basic needs may create public policy dilemma. Whether we should allocate more research resources on solving the problems of elderly who often happen to be the resource allocators, or on the problems of those whose chances of survival are low due to access constraints, some time just to the clean drinking water.

In a first year course I teach on Indian society and politics, a student suggested, why do not we link orphanages and old people’s house (in a session in which every student had to come out with new ideas for products or services). Idea was that the children have to get love and old people wish to give love. Both may get enriched in the process. Such inter-dependence among youth and old may imply a more inclusive society. Technological innovations by and for physically challenged may also increase their chances of active participation in social engagements, almost at par with the rest.

I have been involved in many studies which point to the need for redefining the meaning of sustainable life from the point of view of a) values of centurion women, b) respect for perfect strangers, c) aspirations of grassroots green innovators limiting the drudgery or inefficiency which common people should bear with, and d) the conservation ethic of knowledge rich –economically poor people living in biodiversity rich regions.

I will try to traverse the fuzzy boundaries between technological and institutional domains so that ethical basis of stronger, smarter and faster life is contrasted with weaker, humbler, and slower but steadier life pursuits.

Are we sitting on the bank of a river whose bed is getting silted up and thus banks are being questioned by the waves more often.

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Issues:

Extending life is possible when we know the limits. Till when a person is actually alive, has been an issue with the scholars in medical ethics. Boyce (2004) recalls an interesting dilemma that researchers working on life extension technologies face. Brack Hattler wanted to test blood oxygenation (a small catheter that might bulky respirators) in people. He was hesitant to try it in critically ill patients. The difference between brain dead people and people alive but critically ill and would die if taken off the life support system is thin.

Does life exist only till the moment our heartbeats, or till our brain functions. The new definition of death is: absence of all brain activity (Boyce, 2004). But, is this inactivity reversible? And so long as medical science can provide even one case of reversal, the probability remains that reversibility could be tried, if the patient was given a chance. For how long should the institutions give chance? So long as the family members can pay the bills. Or the concerned doctors find opportunities for testing new approaches with the consent of their family members. The purpose of life extension technologies becomes even more conflict ridden when one faces following situations.

a. Why elongate the suffering?

A brother and a sister are debating whether to keep the father who has been critically ill for several months, alive through the life support systems. Brother says so long as doctor feels there is even a remote chance we should try. The sister feels that in the process they are elongating the suffering of their father. Brother recalls an incident when one of the relatives came out of a similar situation and lived healthy for three years afterwards. What if the same could happen to their father. Sister who loves the father no less remains unconvinced. Brother prevails and father dies after a while. Till date, the brother is not able to decide whether he should have lessened the suffering instead of elongating it.

b. Should an elderly person, on the brink of the death be given another chance, even if probability of survival is low or should the resources go for a child needing support for future?

Imagine that in the above case, the brother had a daughter who was physically challenged or just weak and needed considerable resources to become a stronger so as to live in a self-reliant manner. The cost of keeping father alive on life support systems reduce the resources available for daughter to be helped. If the family comes from a poor economic background, the choice is traumatic.

c. Whose decision matters?

In the above case, the decision to withdraw the life support system cannot be taken only on the economic ground. Practically, many hospitals might not be willing to underwrite any cost if the family cannot afford. But, the medical ethics may require that once the patient is admitted, the chances for survival, recovery or reversibility in case of critical illness should not be determined only by the family. The scientific assessment should play a role. Otherwise, large number of poor people will cease to have right to life even under less critical illness because their ability to pay for medicine which might become available with the advancement of science, may be limited. Should therefore the decision to extend the life be taken by the medical council, ethics committee at the hospital, judgment of the doctors concerned, the family or other stakeholders such as those who wanted to research on such patients or on their organs. It is not an easy answer. Both the brother and the sister might agree that the father may be allowed to die and the doctor concerned may like to try further. The risks of failure often deter the trial of new technologies. However, in such cases, experimenting researchers might seek cooperation of the doctor, family and the ethics committee. The answer still eludes because the moral domain does not cover single plane or does not extend to the rights of those who can express their views. Even if father had declared

before getting terminally ill that he may not be kept alive beyond three months or a year, the dilemma of the family and the doctors may still exist. Because the situation when views *were* expressed is obviously not similar to, when views *have to be* expressed.

d. Whose rights matter more?

Large number of young and middle aged people refuse promotions in the organization when these entail transfer. These people prefer to be with their aged parents than to benefit from the opportunities that upward mobility offers in organizations. The ethics of generating efficiency in filial space and relatively speaking, inefficiency in professional space (because of lack of factor mobility) has not been fully appreciated. What impact such foregone economic opportunities have on society and younger people who find such 'sacrifices' often meaningless, remains to be properly assessed.

e. How to measure suffering?

Whether old people going through rehabilitatory therapy suffer more pain or the families which cannot afford it suffer more is not easy to estimate. For every one person whose life has been extended with the modern technologies, there are millions who do not have access to such technologies. Would the ones having access feel guilty? Or should those not having access to such technologies take these asymmetries as inevitable part of life? The suffering involved in knowing that pain can be reduced and one cannot afford it is much more than in not knowing the alternatives. The suffering is in choice.

f. Who is smarter, stronger and stable?

This is a tough call. Does smartness lie in outpacing others, or in sharing the opportunities with less privileged even when one could justifiably avail of these opportunities oneself. If two kidneys are available for transplantation, should they go to highest bidder, or the one who needs both to be replaced or to the patients who need one each? Should it go to younger people who have to live longer or to older people who have lived long but would wish to live longer? Does the strength lie in sacrifice, accumulation or denial of opportunities to others? Morally speaking, seeking self-gratification as a part of one's entitlement is completely compatible with guilt free existence if such entitlements are considered a natural consequence of one's ability or endowments. In such a framework, the consequences of choices matter less than the justification of the casual process. In other words, if entitlements have accrued as per the rules and the laws in force, then having privileged positions is not a matter of regret. Therefore, consideration for others may follow more out of altruism than as a moral necessity (though altruism itself may become moral necessity in an unequal society).

Physical strength may be a function of nutritional, lifestyle and access to life extension and enhancement technologies. It may also be influenced by the extent of inner joy, peace and tranquility. Perhaps, both are not completely substitutable though the degree of complementarity is enormous. Moral strength comes out of openness, transparency and expansion of one's realm of responsibility for not only human but also non-human sentient beings. The logical implication is: the wider the responsibility, greater is the chance for your suffering due to disabilities or inadequacies among the members of the conscious boundaries. One can suffer enormously because of the pain that birds, other animals or even trees may suffer (some will doubt that trees can suffer, disregarding J.C.Bose's experiments). At that moment, the access to technologies for life extension or enhancement is not a matter openly human choice. Even the suffering and longevity of animals may affect oneself. Resource allocation patterns thus include the dilemma of dealing with R&D resources for human as well as non-human life extension or enhancement. If smartness demands exclusion of these choices and strength implies denial of the opportunities to less privileged, then stability can be achieved through very high degree of coercion and that too for a short while. The world will not be worth living in if such became the rational order.