Choose without suffering

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Imagine Eve, who works a service industry job. Her manager tells her, at the last minute and without warning, that she has to staff an event tomorrow in a town a few hour's drive from where she lives, and she has to wake up at 5am to get there on time.

Let's further suppose that she's on shaky footing with her manager as it is, and so she is posed with the following choice: she can either wake up at 5am tomorrow and go to work, or she can lose her job.

Imagine Eve's demeanor, upon learning this fact. It's likely dour, to say the least. She's probably grumpy and annoyed and malcontent, and she's likely to vent and complain all evening. She'll likely spend a lot of cognitive effort tolerifying the situation, convincing herself either that it's not going to be that bad to wake up early, or that her manager is a terrible person.

This is a common occurrence, I think: if you give humans the choice between bad and worse, they get *grumpy*.

When people find that none of their options cross a certain "acceptability" threshold, they get *frustrated*.

This, I think, is part of why tolerification is such a common human response to unfortunate situations. In an intolerable world, *none* of your options seem acceptable: so you tolerify, until at least one option (perhaps indignance, perhaps cynicism, perhaps doing nothing differently) passes the acceptablility threshold. Only then are you able to act.

This behavior won't do, for someone living in a dark world. If you're going to live in a dark world, then it's very important to learn how to choose the best action available to you without any concern for how good it is in an absolute sense.

When given a choice between bad and worse, you need to be able to choose "bad", without qualm.

I think that one of the big reasons why people get annoyed when none of their options pass the "acceptable" threshold is they're often failing to see a hidden third alternative, and some part of them knows that this might be the case. In this setting, the frustration might even be *useful*, if it puts them in a mental state where they search more fervently for an escape hatch.

Furthermore, by acting flustered, people may well be able to draw other humans to their aid, and the additional assistance can often help make the situation better.

So frustration in the face of a choice between bad and worse may be a useful response in many situations. (At the least, it was useful enough to our ancestors.) Indeed, when you're offered the choice between bad and worse, the first thing to do is *look for a third option* and the second thing to do is *ask for help.* Find shortcuts. Try to cheat. Call in the cavalry, if you can.

But once you determine that you really have been offered a choice between bad and worse, and that there are no other options —

Then it is useful to be able to choose "bad," without suffering over it.

The first step to being able to choose the best option available without suffering, is to simply understand the distinction. Next time you find yourself feeling flustered because none of your options pass an absolute acceptability threshold, pause and reframe, and look at the *relative* acceptability of your actions instead. Simply knowing the distinction and watching out for it in real life may well be enough.

For me, another useful tool for choosing without suffering is to ask a "what if" question about a hypothetical universe, before making a choice in the real world. Let's say I'm trying to eliminate extreme poverty, and none of my actions seem

good. I might say to myself, "imagine you lived in a world where all your choices led to bad outcomes; what would you do then?" I can improve the lives of these three people, and then a million people will die of preventable disease anyway. Or I can try to alter the flow of politics, and then a million people will die of preventable disease anyway. Or I can put money into researching preventable diseases, and then a million people will die of preventable diseases anyway. No matter what I do, at least a million people will die of preventable diseases. What would I do in *that* world?

Clearly, the answer is "whatever action saves the *most* lives." I sometimes find it easier to frame my real problems as if they were hypothetical, identify the answer *there*, and then apply that to the real world.

In the hypothetical worlds where there are no third alternatives and all the actions before you, it doesn't matter that all the actions lead to bad outcomes. The best choice is still quite clear: take the action that leads to the best outcome, and take it without remorse. In the hypothetical, confident that there are no alternatives, it's quite easy to imagine selecting the least bad option from a terrible lot. In fact, it's easy to imagine doing this without any impulse to complain or struggle, but instead only a grim resolve to do the best you can in a bad situation.

So in the real world, do the same. Notice when you're measuring your options against what you think *should* happen; notice when you're measuring the futures you can attain

against the futures you *want* to attain; and treat that as a cue to reframe. Look at your actions available options again, and stop measuring them against an objective ideal, and start measuring them against each other. Look for cheats, look for third alternatives, look for ways out...

...and then, when you're done and you've considered all available options,

simply take the best action available.

Take it, without suffering, no matter how bad it is.

That is all there is to do.