



Chapter 5: Human vulnerability

A primary relation between the human being and the environment is that of vulnerability.

Vulnerability and its sequelae provide a major set of concepts for explaining human behaviour in all its forms. To say that a human is vulnerable is to say that her needs can be frustrated and interfered with, the result being the experience of distress and its associated behaviours.

A. Physical vulnerability

Physical needs can be frustrated by physical privations or traumas leading to acute distress experiences such as hunger, thirst, cold, fatigue, the pain of disease or accident or attack, sexual tension. In the animal realm there appear to be something like emotional distress experiences involved with some, at any rate, of the physical ones. Thus there is anger vented in defensive or offensive aggression when the issues concern mating, territory or food. There is fear leading to immobility or flight when under attack, as an alternative to counter-aggression. There is grief in some species exhibited in wailing and mourning when there is separation from parent or offspring or mate. Human beings, it is reasonable to suppose, function in similar ways, with emotional distresses of anger, fear and grief and their behaviours, tied in with physical frustrations.

In animals of the same species, anger with its associated aggressive threat or fight behaviour appears to have adaptive functions: it leads to social cohesion and leadership by maintaining dominance hierarchies; it makes for an effective use of available territory (and food) by separating groups out over it; it benefits progeny by selecting out the best parents; it protects the young. Nor, in natural habitats, is it necessarily highly destructive: the norm is often threat behaviour or token fights rather than serious wounding and killing, although the latter does occur. Intra-specific aggression among animals seems more harnessed to the preservation of life than to its destruction.

Among monkeys and apes, intra-specific aggression is stronger in baboons, weaker in gorillas and chimpanzees, but in the wild it is almost entirely reduced to threat displays with very little overt fighting. In unusual environmental circumstances however, as in captivity where there may be crowding and/or sudden disturbances, unfamiliar irritations, then all these species can be violently aggressive to their own kind.

We do not know the sort of aggression that occurred among early hominids, but it does seem reasonable to suppose that the human organism, physically comparable as it is to the primates, has tendencies toward the adaptive aggression shown among primates and, when under physical duress such as overcrowding, to the more violently destructive aggression also exhibited under such conditions by primates.

B. Personal vulnerability

But the organism is not only the locus of physical needs, it is also the medium for the fulfilment of what I have called personal needs rooted in capacities for love, understanding and choice, where these capacities have a potential reach far beyond the confines of physical survival needs. Thus any interference with physical needs, any threat to the integrity of the organism, is at the same time some kind of interference with or threat to the fulfilment of personal needs. Why, for example, do human infants and children have a grief-like crying and sobbing response to minor physical hurts? Is it because the physical pain and shock is also experienced as an immediate interruption of their need to love and be loved?

Thus to understand fully human response to physical privations and trauma, we must take into account, I suggest, not only the fear, anger and grief tied in with organismic frustration but also a different order of fear, anger and grief that is tied in with the frustration of personal needs as defined. (The reverse may also be the case: frustration at the purely human level may of itself lead to distress at the physical level - fatigue, insomnia, pain, wasting.) Interrupt and restrict a child physically, then the simple angry fight response of the impeded organism can be enormously fuelled by the angry, righteous indignation of a being whose need to be self-directing in her exploration of the world has been suspended. There is often this double loading of distress to take into account.

But the two sorts of frustration can be relatively independent of each other. Thus the human adult at any rate can experience minor physical frustrations without distress at the level of personal needs; and conversely can have all physical needs fully satisfied while undergoing major frustrations of personal needs.

C. Primary sources of personal vulnerability

By primary sources I mean sources that are intrinsic to the human condition prior to human invention and intention. They are the inherent stresses of human existence, of the given system of persons in the world, stresses which can frustrate basic personal needs.

1. **Tensions between physical needs for survival and personal needs for self-realisation and cultural achievement.** This is the great tension between life and mind, between the biocentric nature of the organism and the mental aspiration of the person, accentuated by a physical environment that can demand persistent, repetitive, arduous address to survival tasks. The relentless meeting of physical needs can significantly frustrate the meeting of

personal needs - for shared loving, for knowledge, for varied cultural achievement - through lack of time, energy, resources, opportunity. Distress may thus accumulate at the personal level, without time or knowledge to resolve it.

- a. If, as well as these effects of the persistent demands of survival, there is added actual frustration of physical needs as a result of drought or pests or disease or any other natural cause, then we have the crucial area of double distress: the distress of physical frustration compounds the already cumulative distress of personal frustration.
 - b. The biocentric nature of the organism may set up another kind of stress at the mental level. Physical needs may spontaneously distort the untutored human imagination into phantasies of disproportionate physical fulfilment, especially when these needs are subjected to the stress of frustration. There can thus be a stress-induced artificial inflation of physical satisfactions that can of itself subvert a real fulfilment of the person: mental capacities are frustrated by being harnessed to the irrelevant pursuit of redundant bodily gratification.
 - c. The postulated stress here is that of psychological gravity: the untutored capacities of the person are drawn into the orbit of physical needs, falsely illuminating and enlarging them, to the distortion of both.
2. **Tension between love needs and the universal phenomenon of separation.** Birth is a separation; death is a separation; disease, injury, congenital defect may involve separation; shorter or longer partings between those who love seem, to be inescapable components of living, working and surviving. Birth may be profoundly traumatic.
 3. **Tension between understanding needs and the relative inscrutability of phenomena.** The world has not yielded up its intelligibility lightly: knowledge has been laboriously won. The unknown surrounds humans on every side. The human psyche is even more inscrutable than the phenomenal world. Humans want to understand, but the veil is drawn thickly around them and within them.
 4. **Tension between self-direction needs and the resistant, refractory, elemental nature of the physical.** There is a great gap between aspiration and action, between the chosen possibility and its realisation in the world. Bodily skills have to be acquired, tools made, tough material worked. The world abounds with great frustrators of human effort, of the determination to take charge: fire, flood, deluge, drought, earthquake, avalanche, volcano, pests, vermin, animal marauders, disease, accident, deterioration, decay, and so on.
 5. **The inherent intrapsychic instability of, the internal tensions among, unprogrammed but potentially unlimited, human capacities, whose behavioural fulfilment is entirely acquired.** This instability is accentuated by an environment which abounds with examples of destructive ruthlessness both in the animal kingdom and in the natural elements. A human may be frustrated and disoriented simply by the excess of options available. And in this state of internal disarray, destructive examples in nature may inspire inappropriate choices. Alternatively, situations may arise where human needs frustrate each other, so that love fulfilled or knowledge gained or autonomy achieved may be at the expense of one another.
 6. **Finally, of course, there is simply the presence of other members of the human race, all of whom are also subject to all the same sources of personal vulnerability, as well as the many sources of physical vulnerability.**

There is thus an inherent social instability in the given system of things: social transactions have to occur among beings who are immersed in a given world that can cause in them as individuals great personal stresses and frustrations on top of purely physical stresses and frustrations. Interacting with other beings who are personally and/or physically distressed is yet another source of frustration of personal needs.

In one sense, all these interacting tensions can be seen as conditions of growth, the stresses that call human development into being. The human condition is inherently stressful, but in a human-affirmative or provocatively creative way. Up to a point, a tension or combination of interacting tensions, is a line of stress that provokes a growth-promoting and constructive burst of energy - affective, cognitive, conative - from the human being. Separation can intensify and clarify love; the inscrutability of the world provokes the mind into enquiry; the intractability of matter and its sudden cataclysms challenge achievement; the demands of survival arouse a technological and cultural development that transcends the purely biological; the inherent instability of human potential provokes self-knowledge and self-development; the inherent social instability that occurs in the given world is a spur to social creation, co-operation, collective achievement. The world provides a dramatic series of shocks and blocks that arouses the person slumbering in the organism, the society slumbering in nature.

However the human condition also appears to be such that these tensions can interact and occur at a rate resulting in an accumulated overload of distress that can lead to compulsive, distorted, destructive behaviour. I have a phantasy caricature of a negative possibility for the life of early humans: they are beset by separation anxiety through high infant mortality, sudden death by natural disaster or animal attack, by disease or accident; they are beset by fears rooted in ignorance; by mounting frustration at the sheer implacability of the material world; they are internally confused by the inchoate aspirations of a multifarious, untutored and unknown potential; they are externally confused by association with other humans exhibiting the same range of tensions. And all these **personal** distresses compound a continuous series of **physical** dangers and distresses - pain, hunger, cold, animal-like aggression (from animals and humans), and the fear and anger that go with them. Above all, because of the relentless need to pursue and maintain survival in a difficult environment, these compound distresses accumulate without respite - without time to recover from them or knowledge to resolve them - until a condition of overload is reached and behaviour breaks down into distorted and maladaptive forms **between people**.

The general thesis then is that the sources of physical vulnerability combined with the primary sources of personal vulnerability can have two different effects. Up to a certain level of intensity they provoke a truly human development: human capacities are exercised and fulfilled in meeting the challenge of physical existence. Beyond this level they overload the human system and behaviour starts to become distorted, especially behaviour between people. Distorted and perverted human behaviour is the secondary source of personal vulnerability.

The level of intensity will fluctuate as a function of the changing patterns of interaction of very

many variables. The critical threshold of overload will be idiosyncratic for each individual: a parent whose children all of die in infancy will be in a very different state of stress than one who loses none. But there may well be pervasive ecological factors that from time to time determine thresholds in a whole community.

In general it seems reasonable to suppose that, given varied individual thresholds in a society, we shall find the typically human phenomenon of genuine cultural achievement interfused with distorted and perverted behaviour some of which will be congealed in accepted social practices and institutions.

The fact that the intrinsic stresses of the human condition are such that human behaviour can break down into distorted and perverted forms is itself a kind of meta-challenge - to transpersonal development, in my view. The first order challenge of the stresses is to personal and interpersonal development, but the continued vulnerability of **this** achievement is a second order challenge to cultivate the wider reaches of human awareness. In the theory and method of co-creating (Chapter 19, *Sacred Science*, Heron, 1998), I develop the radical view that cosmic self-forgetting, an ongoing contraction of spiritual awareness and attunement, is that which ultimately sustains all distorted human behaviours.

D. Secondary sources of personal vulnerability

Basic personal needs are frustrated by the interfering actions of other humans. The most obvious and most vulnerable victims are children.

1. **Physical interference.** Bodily harm or the threat of bodily harm; a difficult birth; sexual interference; deprivation of contact, food, water, heat, sleep, sex. This can lead to compound distress, as I have suggested: the emotional effects of physical frustration combined with the emotional effects of personal frustration. The emotional perturbation at the personal level when physical needs are frustrated will be much greater, I suggest, when other humans are the intentional frustrators than when non-human conditions are. Children who are physically harmed and deprived by their parents can clearly suffer, as well as the physical distress and its concomitants, a great interference with their needs both for love and for self-direction.
2. **Psychological interference.** That is, interference with personal needs as such. Love needs can be frustrated by parting, separation, loss that is the result of human decision and intervention; by censure, criticism, reproof, mockery, invalidation whether verbal or non-verbal; by psychological neglect, withdrawal, disregard, alienation, rejection. Needs for understanding can be frustrated in children by failure of adults to respond to enquiry, to give needed and relevant information, to communicate freely and appropriately, to provide an environment full of mental stimulation and arousal at critical periods of response, to facilitate imagination, phantasy and mythapoeic thinking, to provide equipment and opportunity for practical skills and learning how, to provide reading and writing skills. Needs for self-direction in children can be frustrated by adults' nagging, by endlessly imposed prescriptions, commands, demands,

precepts, minatory "shoulds" and "oughts" and "musts" and their negatives, by taking over and doing everything for, by failing to provide time and place for self-directed play, exploration, activity, interaction. There is probably no such thing as exclusive frustration of one basic personal need. Love frustrated is also in some way understanding and self-direction distorted (and similarly with each of the latter two): the unloved child may in later life exercise her intellect in strange ways and compulsively reject others in a way that severely restricts her ability to take charge of her life.

3. **Social interference.** The personal needs of a great number of people can be systematically interfered with in rigid organisations and societies in which there is political oppression, economic exploitation, denial of human rights. Personal needs here may be almost totally negated, or their fulfilment may only be tolerated up to a point and in certain restricted social areas, or the needs may be tolerated only in distorted and warped forms of development. But whatever distortions are imposed on the oppressed, complementary distortions are found in the oppressors. Social interference with personal needs can be looked at in three categories, the third including within it the second, and the second the first:
- **Face-to-face interference.** The actual behaviour event where one or more persons interfere with the humanity of one or more persons.
 - **Organisational interference.** A particular organisation - the household, the school, the company, the department - whose normative structure is oppressive in some or other respect to some degree.
 - **Societal interference.** Cultural oppression - the oppressive features of the combined norms and values of a whole society, its political, economic, cultural, religious and domestic associations. Subcultural oppression would derive from the norms and values of a given social class, or ethnic group, or geographical community.

Organisation and societal interference can be seen as the institutionalisation of distorted and perverted human behaviour. Oppressive interaction face-to-face generalises into oppressive normative structures. The distorted society is the artifact of distorted individuals and tends to be self-perpetuating until riven apart by the extremity of its own distortion. While an oppressive normative structure will be maintained by oppressive face-to-face interactions that occur within it, the mere existence of an oppressive normative structure can of itself be a source of oppression independent of any particular act within it. Thus once a person is sensitised to the structure, she will conform behaviour to it without there necessarily being any intervention from anyone else.

Social interference with personal needs is not all of a piece. At the face-to-face level, these are some, at least, of the important distinctions to be made:

- Interference that follows from distorted or perverted behaviour as these are defined in earlier sections.
- Interference that follows from authentic good intention combined with ignorance. In the light

of greater knowledge the interference would be seen to be both unnecessary and avoidable. The ignorance may have been avoidable or unavoidable: in the former case the good intention becomes somewhat tarnished.

- Interference that follows from a rational, humane and well informed decision. The interference here may be regarded as necessary and unavoidable in the circumstances.

There is unfortunately a blurred area between the first two of these and again between the last two. It may be unclear whether or not an ignorant good intention is but the masquerade of compulsive behaviour; or whether or not what appears to be a wise decision will be seen with the greater wisdom of hindsight to have been but ill-informed good intention.

E. Tertiary sources of personal vulnerability

A related and equally important distinction is that a social norm that has an interfering effect is not necessarily an obviously oppressive or unjust norm. In other words, I am postulating an area of unavoidable tension and conflict between personal needs and normative structures, however enlightened those structures may be. Persons can only be persons in relation. They can only realise their authentic personal needs in corporate systems of interdependence, in coherent and stable social structures, which by virtue of their nature tend to be conservative. At their best, such structures represent recently past levels of achievement in realising human capacities. But if, as I postulate, such capacities are potentially unlimited in their range of fulfilment, then tension can arise between the degree of fulfilment evident in prevailing social practices and the innovative thrust of these capacities toward new levels of achievement. So that is one area of unavoidable tension: between the innovative individual and the social conserve, whatever the nature of the conserve.

But apart from the drama of social change and innovation, there tends to be an unavoidable tension between individual needs and the corporate "needs" of the organisation or collective within which the individual seeks fulfilment. The social realities of the human condition being what they are, I postulate that even in the most enlightened organisational development, tension and conflict will arise on the interface between individual need and corporate purpose. What makes an organisation enlightened is that it has built-in procedures for acknowledging such conflict and working constructively with it.

The child faces this tension in a particularly acute form, since the younger she is, the less readily she can grasp that the family collective has a purpose or purposes which may at times legitimately constrain the immediate fulfilment of her human needs. Frustration tolerance, skills in the constructive handling of tension and conflict, all appear to be necessary and legitimate concepts at the level of personal needs. When the capacity to love is fulfilled, it includes, paradoxically, just this ability to accept a measure of personal frustration, to work through conflict to the fulfilment of wider social purposes.

These individual-in-society tensions I call tertiary sources of personal vulnerability because I

believe they are intrinsic to social structures as such, however enlightened those structures may be, and only occur in their pure or intrinsic form in organisations that have started to clean themselves up, that have become relatively free of the more obvious distortions and perversions. I see such tensions as a creative issue when human beings start to climb out of their long history of individual and social breakdown, rather than as a contributory factor to such breakdown.

The distresses to which these tensions may give rise will very much be self-generated by autonomous persons who will voluntarily undertake to undergo them as necessary part of personal growth and social change. This is the arena of voluntary, conscious, intentional "suffering": the stress-seeking behaviour of the self-actualising person.
