

A Conservative Confession

Few psychological results are as well-grounded as hedonic adaptation. Human beings often have strong short-run reactions to even mild stimuli. An ice cream cone can put a huge grin on our faces. Missing a red light can make us scream with rage. In the long-run, however, human beings' emotional reactions to even extreme stimuli soften to a shocking degree. If you won millions in the lottery, the thrill would soon fade. If your girlfriend dumped you, the pain of that would soon fade, too. Hedonic adaptation isn't perfect, but it is a mighty psychological force.

I'm weird in many ways, but as far as I can tell, my hedonic adaptation is quite normal. Indeed, my only visible abnormality is self-awareness. I *know* that I'm going to hedonically adapt to most good and bad life events, so I place little stock in life events. And I get impatient with people who refuse to do the same.

So what? Well, all this leads to an uncomfortable epiphany. Intellectually, I'm convinced that even liberal, democratic societies are deeply unjust. Logically, for example, the analogy between Jim Crow and immigration restrictions seems apt. But psychologically speaking, I can still get used to this injustice. Indeed, I've long since done so.

So what politically aggravates me? *Change* in the wrong direction. Though I do my best to regulate my own emotions, I fall short of perfect Stoicism.

The upshot: Even though my political views are deeply unconservative, the honest truth is that if existing justices and injustices were locked in place for ever, I would personally be happier. When the world stops changing, it's easy to accept the world as it is.

What does this justify? Nothing, of course. But don't say that I only feel this way because my life is fine. Plenty of people with far more than me are filled with rage. Plenty of people with vastly less than me live relaxed, care-free lives. Why? Epicurus elegantly explained it millennia ago: What inspires positive and negative emotion is not so much our situation, as the gap between our situation and our expectations. The lower your standards, the better you'll feel.

And that is my conservative confession.