

Complaints and Complaints



The Imaginary Illness by Honoré Daumier, between 1860 and 1862

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (February 2022)

Like the great majority of people, I like to complain (it is humiliating for an intellectual to have to admit that he is like the great majority of people). Remove complaint from my thoughts or conversation, and I should have very little to think about or say. Offered the choice between a world in which there was nothing to complain of or about, and a world (such as ours) in which there is much reason to complain, I should unhesitatingly choose the latter. In the former, I should complain that there was nothing to complain about.

There are, of course, complaints and complaints. Some are purely individual or egotistical, but some point to general problems that affect many other people or the whole of society itself. A complaint is then emblematic of something beyond

itself and may even become socially useful or necessary. Complaint that is merely about oneself is often akin to whining, and often serves to justify descent into the psychological swamp of resentful self-pity.

Now in the country in which I am resident for tax (and other) purposes, the health care system is notorious for the inconveniences it visits upon the ill. Paradoxically, it is popular nevertheless, perhaps because the very unpleasantness of having to deal with it is taken as a token of its fundamental justice, as food rationing was taken during the war. I worked in the system myself, and I did my best to obviate its unpleasantness for the patients, though of course what one man can do in a system that employs a million people is rather limited.

I have now reached the age at which I am on the demand rather than the supply side of health care, and for several weeks have suffered from a condition, not life-threatening but unpleasant, that has prevented me from sleeping through the night. I will not elaborate on its further, so the symptomatology is not germane to the point that I will try to make. I will not burden the reader with the details that old men are apt to linger over almost lovingly when they speak to one another, as if there were a social pact between them: I pretend to be interested in your arthritic pains if you pretend to be interested in mine. (Some similar social compact accounts, perhaps, for the success of Facebook: you pretend to be interested in the trivia of my existence if I pretend to be interested in yours.) I have reached the age at which, when telephoning to my friends of my own age, it takes ten minutes to get through the health bulletin stage to reach the real subject matter of the call – assuming, of course, that the issuing of health bulletins is not itself the whole purpose of the call.

Anyhow, I decided to do something that I try to avoid as much as possible: go to the doctor. There is a large practice about

three or four hundred yards from my house, but that does not mean that it is easy to get an appointment to see a doctor there. Oh dear no! The receptionists at the practice have a reputation for protecting their doctors from importuning patients who so frivolously claim to need to see a doctor and must be prevented from doing so if at all possible. The recorded telephone message of this practice first tells patients that if there is anything seriously wrong with them, they should go straight to hospital without bothering the doctors in the practice.

So, when I arrived at the practice, I was all ready to complain: not only on my own behalf, of course, but on that of all the rest the townspeople who suffer the same kind of obstructiveness from the receptionists. I was already rehearsing in my mind what I would say and working myself up into a pleasant froth of righteous indignation. I would write, or threaten to write, letters here, there and everywhere; I would make their lives a misery until they improved their service.

‘Could you come back in an hour’s time?’ asked the receptionist. ‘A doctor will see you then.’

This was like a body blow; I had expected nothing so convenient. No grounds for complaint there, I thought as I returned home to wait the hour out.

I consoled myself with the thought that the consultation itself might give grounds for complaint. I have often remarked that the practice of medicine is not what it was: that as it advances technically and technologically, so it retreats in its more humane aspects, such that patients are treated as malfunctioning machines rather than as human beings. How often doctors now seem never so much as to glance up from their computer screens actually to look at their patients, let alone deigning to examine them. So, there was still hope for grounds of complaint. There is, after all, many a slip betwixt

appointment and satisfaction.

I was called in to see the doctor at exactly the time of my appointment. Here again cause for complaint was forestalled.

The doctor was a young woman of Nigerian descent who had obviously been brought up in England. She had absorbed the information about me from the computer screen before I entered the consulting room so that she was able to look at me rather than at the screen. Then – *mirabile dictu* – she actually asked to examine me and did so thoroughly and competently. She ordered some tests and gave me a further appointment for a week's time.

I departed in a state of mental vertigo. There was nothing to complain of! On the contrary, all (for now) was for the best in this the best of all possible worlds. I was disappointed, cheated of my opportunity for indignation! I wasn't cured yet, of course, but as I had no expectations of cure, at least as this stage, I could not work myself up into a fury about that.

Naturally, I didn't feel grateful either, although I thanked the doctor as I left her consulting room. There is no reason, after all, to feel gratitude when things work as they should. There is thus an asymmetry between complaint and gratitude: one complains when things don't work as they should, but one feels no gratitude when they do. There is a similar asymmetry where human rights are concerned: you complain when they are violated but are not grateful for receiving your due.

Perhaps this explains why people seem so angry all the time despite the unprecedented physical ease of their lives. As we grow ever more technically sophisticated as a society, but individually dependent upon mechanisms of whose workings we have not the faintest idea, we come to expect life to proceed like a hot knife proceeds through butter. When things go wrong – the computer crashes, the train is late, the car won't start, the gutter is blocked, the bank's website has a

temporary problem, the promised delivery doesn't arrive – we feel a quite disproportionate despair because of our expectations, though the inconvenience we suffer as a result is trivial by comparison with the kind of problems and deprivations that our forebears had to endure even within living memory, and did so with more equanimity than we can muster.

Thus, progress does not automatically bring with it the expected benefits, precisely because it changes our expectations at the precise moment, or very soon after, it takes place. The greater our expectations, the greater our frustrations and disappointments over matters that would scarcely have registered with past generations.

Technical progress is easy to assess, at least in theory. Few would deny that telephonic communications, for example, have improved out of all recognition in the last few decades. I remember the days when international calls were exotic, difficult to make and expensive. You had to book them in advance, either giving how much time you wanted or, after three minutes, a voice would come on the line to tell you how many minutes you had talked, necessary because the call might otherwise bankrupt you. The voice on the other end might be indistinct, as if attenuated along the undersea cable; there were peculiar delays and echoes. In many of the distant foreign parts I visited in the mid-1980s, no telephones worked in the rain; it was probably quicker to go to Europe than to telephone it. I doubt that many twenty-year-olds would credit that any such difficulties ever existed.

But could we say that our ability to be in instantaneous communication with one another wherever we may be on the earth's surface is an unmixed blessing? Would it be such even if people never used this ability to insult or humiliate one another, or make demands on us? How much anger do we now suffer when someone fails to respond almost immediately to whatever we have to say to him? Why doesn't he answer his

phone, for God's sake, why doesn't he reply to his e-mail? We begin at once to have paranoid thoughts about him: he is deliberately ignoring us, he has decided not to have anything more to do with us, he is now an enemy. What on earth can we have done to deserve this treatment? To paranoia is added the not altogether disagreeable feeling of injured innocence (there being no innocence that can compare to the injured variety).

It is now almost impossible to remain out of range of those with whom we would rather have no contact. Future generations will never know the joys of being incommunicado. The world is too much with us, wrote Wordsworth getting and spending – and that was in 1802! It is not too much with us now; it is with us perpetually, all the time.

If technical progress is often ambiguous in its effects, how much more reason do we have to be wary of those who call themselves progressives. Progress towards what, exactly? Mostly they reply, if they reply anything at all, 'Progress towards human liberation', but liberation from what, exactly? I think they mean liberation from limits and boundaries, freedom for them being a kind of perpetual orgy or at least compliance with their least whim. They desire to be free of the existential limits than Nature herself imposes on our existence, or if there are to be limits, they must be ones chosen by and for themselves and not those imposed upon them by circumstances beyond their control, or by other men's laws.

When you think of freedom in this fashion, of course, you are never free, because what you wish for is radically impossible: not impossible for merely empirical reasons, such as that you cannot learn to fly by jumping off a cliff and flapping your arms, however accoutred they may be with feathers, but for metaphysical reasons, namely that it is impossible to be free of all circumstances, the vast majority of which are inherently not of your choice. Those who speak of liberation in the sense above have an even less clear idea of what the

liberated life would be than do those who promise a heavenly existence after we die. Of course, we may be liberated from particular oppressive circumstances, but not from circumstance itself.

Friederich Engels, Marx's great collaborator, praised Hegel for having been the first to recognise that freedom was the recognition of necessity, necessity being those things that were beyond a person's control. This was not a happy formulation, for it suggested, even if it was not intended to do so, that a person was truly free precisely when he had no choice, which is absurd, but was a definition that enabled the most vicious dictators to claim that they were serving human freedom in the truest sense by their own dictating. By holding a gun to your head, or threatening you with annihilation, they were extending your freedom.

On the other hand, recognition of what is and is not within our control is an important manifestation of maturity. How far that control extends was the most important intellectual quarrel of the twentieth century, with extremists arguing either that nothing in a man's life, or alternatively that everything, was under his control. The extreme positions obviate the need for judgment of individual cases, which Hippocrates told us (in the medical context) is difficult. However, that something is difficult does not go to show that it can or ought to be dispensed with. Life is not the passage of a hot knife through butter.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [*The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd*](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [*Grief and Other Stories*](#) from New English Review Press.

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