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Survival of the Fittest in the Time of Pandemic

Safehouse Infoshop

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People often equate Charles Darwin's notion of "survival of the fittest" with competition. People think that the natural way of the world requires some sort of battle. This is also often translated in how we deal with other people. "It's either myself or others," that's how many people justify cruelty and domination. But if we think closely, survival of the fittest does not always mean competition.

Survival of the fittest simply means that if a species is not able to adapt to the changes in the environment, that's when it starts to die out. If your fur is not thick enough, then you might die in the winter of Alaska. If your fur is too thick, then you would die like a Siberian Husky in the tropics. If you can not grow claws, you might not be able to catch prey, or be able to climb trees to avoid predators. Strength is not enough in survival. If we only consider strength, then no animal now can match the dinosaurs who were much bigger in size and appetite. They have walked the earth for millions of years, but eventually, they became extinct because they were not able to adapt to climate change.

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As pointed out by a former Russian prince turned biologist and anarchist named Peter Kropotkin, few people realize that mutual cooperation is as much a factor of evolution as competition. If we think about it, there are quite a number of species which might have not survived if they did not practice cooperation amongst themselves or with other species. Canines work in packs. Gigantic sea mammals like whales and sharks may die of parasites if they did not allow smaller fishes to ride on their backs. Bees (which are prehistoric in origin) or ants can not survive without the hive or colony.

Another misconception which may arise here is the conception of the alphas. Herds and packs tend to have alphas but these alphas are not there to terrorize their own specie. Alphas become alphas because they have the capacity to protect and search for food. Their position is not permanent. Being alpha in the animal kingdom does not have a time frame. Quite different from the human conception that alphas should reign for as long as six years even when he or she is not capable of feeding and protecting the group. We should also take note that in many species, alphas are of the female gender.

In the bee or ant colony, there are also roles taken by each individual. There's the "queen," the "soldiers," and the "workers." But this is entirely different to how we look at queens, soldiers, and workers in the human context. In the colonies of such arthropods, the queens are also replaceable, the soldiers do not harass the workers, and in contrast, the workers can become the heroes. In colonies, the queen or the soldiers do not have authority over workers. They do not make rules and they do not assert self-righteousness. Each individual act on their own will and understanding to preserve the colony. When a worker finds a good tree to establish shelter, it dances, to tell the others of the location, so others can verify if the claim is true. They require a constant check and balance similar to how internet open-sources work. Dictatorship does not work in nature.

Of course, there are instances where competition is evident in many species. But take note that this is only true when resources are scarce. In the human world, resources are more than enough to feed everyone in the world for multiple times. Scarcity is a myth repeatedly told by hoarders. Competition is only acceptable in scarcity, not in the abundance that we have now. Poverty and hunger, therefore, are crimes committed to the poor, most especially during a pandemic. Thankfully, instead, we witness cooperation almost everywhere during these times.

Survival of the fittest is not only about competition. Survival is also about adaptation and mutual cooperation.