

The Struggle For Existence And The Survival Of Fittest

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**Philosophical & Social Discussion
About The Struggle For Existence &
The Survival Of Fittest - Sayyid
Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i**

**Translated by
Sayyid Sa'eed Akhtar Rizvi**

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Authors(s):

[Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i](#) [2]

Translator(s):

[Sayyid Sa'eed Akhtar Rizvi](#) [3]

A Philosophical And Social Discussion About The Struggle For Existence And The Survival Of Fittest

From: Al-Mizan, An Exegesis Of The Qur'an, Vol. 4, Under Commentary of Surah Al-Baqarah, Verses 244 – 252

Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i

Translated by: Sayyid Sa'eed Akhtar Rizvi

According to scientists, scientific experiments show that existing things struggle with each other for their existence, because it is ingrained in their nature to protect themselves from extinction, and to make use of their powers in the purpose for which they are created. This struggle is carried on through mutual action and reaction – each influences the others, and is in its turn influenced by others. In the end, the more powerful and more perfect being vanquishes the weaker and the less perfect one. It means that nature goes on selecting, among individuals of a species, the fittest and the most perfect, and it alone is allowed to continue and propagate the species and all others gradually become extinct. Thus, we get two laws of nature: the struggle for existence, and natural selection and survival of the fittest.

As the society is based on the demands of nature, the abovementioned two laws are found in civilization also.

The best society is the one which is based on the foundation of a complete and firm unity; in which the rights of the individuals and groups, and of society in general, are well-balanced and well-preserved. Such a society has more right to survive; and others lacking in these qualities deserve to perish and vanish. Experience has shown that only those nations do survive which look well after their collective

duties, and proceed, fully alert, on the road of collective bliss and felicity. On the other hand, when disunity creeps into a nation, hearts become disunited, differences crop up, tyranny and mischief poison the atmosphere, the lords of the land indulge in luxuries and the will to strive for a cause is weakened in them, and, as a result, the nation or group is obliterated from the face of the earth.

Archaeologists have unearthed fossils, bones and skeletons of many animals which have become extinct, like the brontosaurus; or from whose species only a few examples have survived like alligators and toads. The only factors which led to their extinction were the laws of the struggle for existence, natural selection and survival of the fittest. Likewise, the species which are found today are constantly changing because of the said struggle and survival; and only the fittest and strongest deserves to survive. Then those strong and good traits are transmitted to the next generations, and thus the species continues to develop and flourish.

According to them, that is also how evolution initially began. Matter was scattered in space, and when it joined together, the stars, the planets and the species living therein came into being. Then what was fit for survival survived and existence passed on from generation to generation; and what was unable to withstand the struggle of stronger beings was destroyed.

This, in short, is the theory of the scientists.

Later scientists have had their own objections against this theory. There are even today many weaker species, both in animals and in vegetables, that go on flourishing. For example, man has domesticated and developed many species of vegetables and animals, these varieties are definitely fitter and stronger than their natural counterparts. Yet the natural varieties go on reproducing and transmitting their weak traits to the next generations. This phenomenon shows that the supposedly basic natural laws of struggle for existence, natural selection and survival of the fittest are not comprehensive.

This difficulty led later scientists to invent a new theory and that is adaptation to the environment. "Environment" covers all the surrounding conditions of time and space and factors which influence the state of a thing. The nature of thing adjusts itself to the surrounding influences. That is why every living thing, be it in the water or on dry land, in polar regions or in the equatorial zone, has limbs and faculties which are suited to that particular environment. If a life adjusts itself to the influences of its environment, it continues; otherwise, it is finished. The previously mentioned two laws – the struggle for existence, and. natural selection and survival of the fittest – should be based on this basic law of adaptation to the environment; and where this latter law is isolated, the former two laws, even if their conditions are fulfilled, cannot save a species.

The difficulty is that even this law is not comprehensive, as scientists themselves admit.

The fact, as admitted by science, is that these laws are correct to a certain extent, but they are not comprehensive and all-inclusive.

A comprehensive philosophical interpretation can be offered in the following way:

All that happens in this material world, whether it is the existence of a thing or the changes and alterations occurring in it, revolve around the law of cause and effect. Every material being tries to influence other things to make it agreeable to itself. The net result of this action is that every active agent takes some thing from the object of its action to add to its own perfection. Thus, every thing is constantly engaged in preserving its existence. To this extent, it may be accepted that there is a struggle for existence and survival in this world.

A strong active agent either changes a weaker object to suit its own needs or destroys it completely for the same purpose. Had that weaker object been stronger, it could have faced the opposite forces and preserved itself from the forced changes and destruction. To this extent, it may be accepted that there is a law of natural selection and survival of the fittest in this world.

When many causative factors gather around an object, and all, or most, of them combine to create an effect on the said object, it cannot escape from their combined force, and has to adjust itself accordingly. To this extent, the law of adaptation to the environment must be accepted.

But it must be remembered that these laws effect (in the thing which is capable of being effected) only that object's accidental properties and supplementary factors. It cannot change the thing per se into another thing.

Materialists do not believe that there are separate genera and species, completely different from each other. They think all things are basically the same – one matter, and that the different shapes are the result of different accidental properties; and it is only by these accidental or supplementary factors that species differ from each other. Otherwise, there is no basic difference between them. Every thing, after disintegration, returns to the same state – matter. It is because of this view, that they said that a species changes into another through the above-mentioned laws. We shall discuss this view, God willing, in an appropriate place.

To come back to our original topic:

A commentator of the Qur'an has said that the verse:

And were it not for Allah's repelling some men with others, the earth would certainly be in a state of disorder; but Allah is Gracious to the creatures (2:251).

Points to the laws of the struggle for existence and natural selection. According to him other two verses also point to the same laws:

Permission (to fight) is given to those upon whom war is made, for they have been oppressed, and most surely Allah is well able to assist them. (22:39).

Those who have been expelled from their homes without a just cause except that they say, Our Lord is Allah. And had there not been Allah's repelling some people by others, certainly there would have been pulled down cloisters and churches and synagogues and mosques in which Allah's name is much remembered; and surely Allah will help him who helps Him (i.e. His cause); most surely Allah is Strong, Mighty. (22:40).

Those who, should We establish them in the land, will keep up prayer and pay the zakat and enjoin good and forbid evil; and Allah's is the end of the affairs (22:41).

According to him, this verse points to the struggle for existence and for the defence of the truth; and that this struggle leads to the survival of the fittest and preservation of the beat.

The second verse, which he put for his argument, is verse:

He sends down water from the heavens, then the valleys flow according to their measure, and the torrent bears along the swelling foam, and from what they melt in the fire for the sake of (making) ornaments or apparatus arises a foam like it; thus does Allah compare truth and falsehood; then as for the scum, it passes away as a worthless thing; and as for that which profits the people, it remains in the earth; thus does Allah set forth parables. (13: 17).

According to the said commentator, this verse signifies that the torrents of the happenings and the scale of the struggle throws away and nullifies the scum of falsehood which might have harmed society, and the pure gold of truth, beneficial for society, remains. It clearly shows the law of the survival of the fittest in action.

The author says: The laws of the struggle for existence and natural selection (in the meanings mentioned earlier) are correct to a certain extent, and also it is agreed that the Qur'an supports them in the said meaning. But the two types of verses quoted by the said commentator have nothing to do with these two laws.

The first type of verse was revealed to show that Allah's will cannot be defeated; and that the truth, that is, religious beliefs and knowledge as confirmed by Allah, shall always prevail; and likewise, the standard-bearer of that truth shall always vanquish falsehood. To see the purpose of the verse, look again at the phrases,

"for they have been oppressed, and most surely Allah is well able to assist them" (22:39); and

"Those who have been expelled from their homes without a just cause except that they say, Our Lord is Allah" (22:40).

The purpose of those clauses is to make it clear that the believers shall be victorious; but not because of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. We should not forget that the strongest and the fittest, in the language of these laws, means the one who is the strongest and fittest in the physical and

material sense; it does not mean strong in truthfulness or fittest in the spiritual sense. According to these two laws whoever is better equipped with military hardware and more trained and better disciplined, will vanquish the weaker party – it makes no difference which party is in the right and which in the wrong.

But these verses tell us that the believers shall be victorious because they have long been oppressed for speaking the truth, and Allah is truth and He shall help the truth to prevail; falsehood shall not be able to withstand the proof of truth; Allah Himself shall assist the bearer of truth if he is sincere in his heart. The next words show this aspect clearly:

“And surely Allah will help him who helps Him; most surely Allah is Strong, Mighty” (22:40).

“Those who, should We establish them in the land, will keep up prayer ...” (22:41).

It shows that their confession of truth is based on sincerity. Then Allah ends the verse on the words, ***“and Allah’s is the end of the affairs” (22:41)***. This sentence reminds one of many Qur’anic sentences which prove that creation is relentlessly progressing on the path of perfection towards truth and real felicity and bliss. Doubtlessly, the Qur’an proves that victory is for Allah and His forces only:

“Allah has written down, I will most certainly prevail, I and My apostles” (58:21).

“And certainly, Our word has already gone forth in respect of Our servants, the apostles” (37: 171).

“Most surely, they shall be the assisted ones” (37: 172).

“And most surely Our host alone shall be the victorious ones” (37: 173)

“And Allah is predominant over His affair” (12:21).

In all these verses, victory has been reserved for the people of sincere faith and true belief, irrespective of their physical or material strength, while the laws of struggle and survival are based on physical and material strength and fitness.

Likewise, the second verse, quoted by the said commentator, which describes the parable of pure water and gold in contrast to the foam and scum, is revealed to show that truth shall last and falsehood shall go away. How? It does not say. It may be by physical struggle as in the case when truth and falsehood are both of a material kind. On the other hand, it may not be governed by the law of struggle, if either truth, or falsehood, or both are of the spiritual, and not the material, world. Allah says:

“And the faces shall be humbled before the Living, the Self-subsistent God” (20: 111),

“Whatever is in the heavens and the earth is His; all are obedient to Him” (2: 116),

“And that to your Lord is the goal” (53:42).

Thus, Allah is victorious and predominant over all things, and. He is the One, the Subduer.

It has already been explained that the verse under discussion, “***And were it not for Allah’s repelling some men with others, the earth would certainly be in a state of disorder***” (2:251), points to that reality upon which society. is based. Man’s instinct for subjugating others for his own benefit. This reality includes, to a certain extent, in the meaning accepted by us earlier, the laws of the struggle for existence and natural selection. But the basic law, which is also comprehensive, is the same instinct of subjugating others. And the verse should be interpreted in this light. It should not be based on two partial and non-comprehensive laws.

Let us look at this topic from another angle:

The two laws – the struggle for existence and natural selection – demand that plurality be replaced by singularity. Both sides of the struggle aim at annihilating the opposite party, so that the victor may add to itself the advantages of the vanquished party’s existence and its attachments. And nature, by its selection aims at keeping alive only the best. The net result will be to vanquish and annihilate many and to let only the one, that is, the best and the fittest, survive.

This is basically against the concept of society, because society is formed of a multitude, all of whom are expected to co-operate with, and help, each other. It is this natural law which is the basis of society and civilization, not those laws which exhort one man to eat up the other. The repelling which, as mentioned under verse 2:213, builds nations and protects them from mischief, is that repulsion which leads to togetherness and that unity which is based on plurality. It is not that repulsion which negates togetherness, nor is it that unity which destroys plurality.

The jihad and fighting ordained by Allah develop the earth and protects it from chaos, disorder and mischief, because it is through this fighting that the collective rights of the oppressed and down-trodden people are revived; and not because it shatters unity, annihilates people and obliterates their foot-prints. This basic difference between the two theories must always be kept in mind.

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