

Tiger and I

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Death is not black.

Death is orange with thin black stripes—a huge Bengal tiger baring its teeth less than two yards in front of me.

“I’ll eat you.”

Where does this raspy voice come from? The tiger and I are the only living beings on this lifeboat. Another survivor? Maybe my family...

My hope rises, then crushes hard as I hear it again. A murderous voice coming out of the tiger’s throat, sending chills down my spine.

“I am hungry.”

“You... you can talk?”

“What?” The tiger leaps back in shock. Confusion takes over its canine face, like a poorly drawn mask. So it, too, is surprised. How is it possible?

I begin to feel a weird sensation. Scrapes of knowledge dance around in my mind—of hunting and preys, of forest and weather, the scent of female and sex, hunger and food, man and fire rings and whips and pain...

That’s the tiger’s mind...

The only possible explanation is this—the tiger and I are both on the verge of death. Our hunger, thirst and fear are bringing our minds together, so we can understand each other...

The tiger can talk... maybe it can also think like me... maybe I stand a chance after all... Mustering all my courage, I force my voice out.

“Tiger, listen. I am not your food.”

“Why not?” The tiger stares at me, his eyes narrowing into two cruel narrow slits.

“Because... you can’t live without me.”

I take a deep breath and continue.

“You need me to survive. See the fishing line over there? You don’t have fingers to use it but I have. I can catch fish for you. Besides, God says that humans should rule over animals.¹”

Wrong answer. Apparently, the tiger isn’t religious.

“Feed me? Rule over me? Enslave me, as they do in the circus? Not anymore!”

The tiger bellows a deafening roar.

“No! No!” Its body arches back, ready to pounce. Blast it!

“I am not like the circus bastard. I want to help you... help us... to get back home... together...”

“You are not a bad human?”

“No. Trust me.”

I almost laugh at myself. How convincing I sound! Everyone can see through my lie.

Surprisingly, the tiger nods, suspiciously, but it does relax and sits back on its hind legs.

Animals are more willing to trust than humans...

So I try to squeeze out what I have in my pathetic little brain.

1 “... and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” (*The Holy Bible*, Gen 1:26)

“The only way to go back home is cooperation. I can get food for both of us, and you, with your excellent sense of smell and hearing can search for the land.” I guess a little flattery won’t hurt here... “To cooperate, we need to form a civil state through some sort of contract.”

Seeing no reaction from the tiger, I take it as a sign of encouragement. “A civil state is a society formed under mutual consent. It is governed by laws agreed by the general will. Every decision it makes follow the general will and therefore the interest of every citizen is protected. In our civil state, our general will is survival and going home, I guess. And everything we do will be for the interest of our general will. That means if I find a fish, I will share it with you. If you spot land, you will alert me. These are just part of the rules and our mutual obligation. The rest we have to discuss and compromise.”²

I decide to withhold the part regarding the legislator. Mentioning a legislator who is above the law will definitely rekindle the tiger’s rage, even though he has no right of legislation.³

The tiger shifts its massive jaw, as if it is grinding bones in its mouth.

I don’t like it.

“Why shouldn’t I raid away all your food? You still have to catch fish or you will die. I am the stronger one here.”

Rousseau did have said something about the right of the stronger, something about the stronger can’t stay being the strongest forever and the

2 “The people, being subject to the laws, ought to be their author.” (Rousseau 408; bk. II, ch. VI)

3 “He, therefore, who draws up the laws has, or should have, no right of legislation” (411; bk. II, ch. VII). The laws, according to Rousseau, should in fact be made by a god-like legislator because the people lack the foresight and judgment to set up a body of laws for themselves. Yet choosing one legislator among two people is impossible—one keeps on making unjust laws and the other keeps on denying them. Besides, no one on the boat fits the image of the ideal legislator. Thus no one on the boat is elected.

so-called right of the stronger fails with his force. Since right should have a permanent basis, the right of the stronger is nonsense (403; bk. II, ch. III).

But still, it will be hard to convince the tiger that its strength will fail. Not likely when there are just two of us on the lifeboat, and when this civil state isn't going to last long before we die, I die, or we go home. Its right isn't legitimate, sure, but who cares about that?

So I play the morality card.

“Listen, tiger. Do you want to become more than an animal?”

“What do you mean?”

“Now you can speak and think. Sure you are superior to an ordinary animal, but do you want to be human? Not like that circus bastard and his arrogant audience. No. A man and an intelligent moral being.”⁴

“By substituting instinct with justice and morality, we give up our natural liberty, which depends solely on strength, but in turn we gain civil liberty, which makes everyone equal. It is the base of our civil state.⁵ Justice and morality, I believe, is also the superior qualities of man, though not many of us can achieve them.”

The tiger's eyes light up. It almost looks proud and happy. Why...

“I am an intelligent being and a man!”

We humans exploit every loophole and inequality in our civil liberty, so that our civil state, under the disguise of the general will, is in fact ruled by the stronger. Inequality of civil liberty even passes onto the next generation, in the form of poverty, health, educational and technological gap. Why is this

4 “He deprives himself of some advantages which he got from nature, he gains in return others so great . . . instead of a stupid and unimaginative animal, made human intelligent being and a man.” (395; bk. I, ch. VIII)

5 “The fundamental compact substitutes, for much physical inequality as nature may have set up between men, an equality that is moral and legitimate, and that men, who may be unequal in strength or intelligence, become every one equal by convention and legal right.” (398; bk. I, ch. IX)

happening? Why justice, morality and intelligence no longer appeal to man?
I want to feel like the tiger...

Maybe the tiger and I can be friends after all...

“Friends?” The tiger tilts its head like a cat. I haven’t realised I have spoken my thought aloud.

“Yes, friends.”

“What is it?”

“Friendship is a kind of virtue necessary for living a happy life (Aristotle 176; bk. IX, ch. 9, line 1169b20), and in our case, making our situation bearable. Friendship is the recognised mutual affection and wish of well-being for each other (158; bk. VIII, ch. 2, line 115b30). A great man once said there are three kinds of friendship—friendship of utility, in which friends obtain benefits from each other; friendship of pleasure, in which friends derive pleasure from each other’s company...”

I wonder what kind of friendship I want to have with the tiger. I realise I long for the third type.

“And lastly, the perfect form of friendship, friendship based on goodness. People of good character become friends because they are similar in their goodness and love each other for their good character. This is the most permanent form of friendship because, unlike pleasure and utility, goodness is much more enduring.” (161–163; bk. VIII, ch. 4, line 1156b35–1157b5)

“Justice, morality and intelligence.”

“Yes. That’s right.”

But what goodness do I have?

If everyone can be friends, everyone loves each other, just like the utopia of religion, sure this world will be a better place. My family and I wouldn’t have to board the Poseidon to escape from the wars that had destroyed our

home. Maybe it is because we can only be good friends with a limited number of people⁶ and people of good character are rare.⁷

I start feeling angry.

“We are perfect friends now!”

“Well, perfect friendship takes time to...”⁸

“Time? How long?”

“Not very long...”

“But I want it now! Everything you say takes time! Where is my fish? I am hungry now!”

I don’t know what I have done wrong, but then the natural instinct of the tiger takes over and with an orange lightning, the tiger is now only inches from my faces. I freeze under its moist hot breath.

“All you are saying is nonsense. Food is what matters.” It hisses through its cold fangs.

“Come on then. Eat me!” I shout back and see my saliva shooting like tiny missiles on its face. Enough! I tilt back my head and bare my throat. I am desperate. I hate the way god gives me hope and snatches it away from me. I just want it to be over. My home, my property, my family... they are all gone. Death, if you want me to be afraid, then you will lose.

“Come on! What are you waiting for? I am not afraid. My death has meaning. My death will be a sacrifice for you. You can never kill me. I choose

6 “[T]here is a limit to the number of one’s friends; and probably this would be the largest number with whom one can be on intimate term—because this... is the chief factor in friendship and it is not hard to see that one cannot be intimate, and share oneself, with a large number of people.” (179; bk. IX, ch. 10, line 1171a1–1171a4)

7 “That such (perfect) friendships are rare is natural, because men of this kind (goodness) are few.” (161; bk. VIII, ch. 3, line 1156b25)

8 “And in addition they (friends of perfect friendship) need time and intimacy” (161; bk. VIII, ch. 3, line 1156b26).

my own death. I conquer death because I embrace death. Can you do that?" I laugh like a madman. "I have done it now! The meaning of life as the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.⁹ I'd rather have intense pleasure for a short time than quiet pleasure for a long time; I'd rather do one great and glorious deed than many petty ones. (175; bk. IX, ch. 8, line 1169a22) Aristotle! Sacrifice, the ultimate virtue! I have done it! Come on."

The hysteria dies as quickly and subtly as it comes. I feel exhausted and wet from the sweat all over my body. Somehow I manage to keep my posture, erect and strong. The tiger has leaped back, pacing back and forth on the other side of the lifeboat. It hasn't understood my words, but it is wondering why I have such courage. Maybe it will believe, somehow, that what I have said about friendship and society does make some sense.

I have nothing to lose. I stare out at the sea and reach out to the place where the sea and the sky connect so seamlessly into a boundless world of black. I begin to understand that life and death is really nothing after all. Because everything is interconnected. I am just one of the factors that is going to make the tiger survive. Nothing more. I myself am just a combination of factors that have, coincidentally and fortunately, enabled me to breathe. Soon these factors will also make the tiger live. I will always exist, just as I have never existed before.¹⁰

9 "The good for man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue or if there are more kinds of virtue than one, in accordance with the best and most perfect kind." (156; bk. I, ch. 7, line 1098a17)

10 "Avalokita looked deeply into the five skandhas of forms, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, and he discovered that none of them can be by itself alone. Each can only inter-be with all the others." (Thích Nhất Hạnh 10)
According to Thích Nhất Hạnh, the existence of everything in the world is interrelated, and this state of existence is called "inter-be". Nothing can exist independently without the others. Before life exists, its pratitya-samutpada already exists, thus a specific birth of life never exists. The same can be applied to death. Life is made up of death just as death is made up of life. Life and death are one and the same.

Then I catch the tiger's eyes. I can see hunger, thirst, loneliness, fear and confusion, not just in those beautiful yellow orbs, but also in the reflection of a tiny man in them. I realise how similar we are. Deep inside we are just the same—helpless creatures striving to stay alive in a cruel world.

Affection is built on equality and similarity.¹¹

I know he will understand that.

The world is cruel and precarious, but I know we are going to be best friends. I know we are going home.

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11 “The basis of affection is equality and similarity.” (Aristotle 167; bk. VIII, ch. 8, line 1159b3)

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Teacher's comment:

The student is good at describing the psychological inner world of the two characters. Her essay also reflects the major religions and philosophies we introduced. The character "I" is very sagacious. On one hand, "I" wished to persuade the tiger not to eat "me" by introducing the importance of friendship and civil society, while on the other hand, "I" clearly saw that real friendship based on goodness is very rare, and that the so-called "civil society" is indeed in the disguise of the general will. The climax comes near the end when "I" shouted to the tiger and finally realised that everything is interconnected, and that life and death is no exception. (Fong Sing Ha)

