

On homeostasis

Poojan Shah

I remember looking at one of the dogs which stays with us in Shivalik enjoying a cozy afternoon tan from the sun during a particularly harsh winter and thinking “that’s the life!”. The dog seemed quite relaxed, fulfilled and content with its life - resting as its body required and “working” (burrowing through the trash bin near my room), say a couple of hours per day to get some food as and when required. If it gets bored it goes out for a walk or plays with other dogs. Turns out, there is a particular word describing this state of the dog - homeostasis.

Homeostasis (*noun*): the tendency towards a relatively stable equilibrium between interdependent elements, especially as maintained by physiological processes.

Let me also give an example of a time when it was not in homeostasis - once on an afternoon, I was in quite a hurry and accidentally stepped on its tail. Immediately it became alert and defensive. In a split second it rushed to the other end of the hostel, after which it returned to its lazy slumber. The sum total of its life consisted of long stretches of homeostasis, sprinkled with episodes of stress (like the one caused by me) which disrupt its homeostasis.

The idea that I want to put forward in this article is this:

It is good for humans to be in homeostasis.

Although now it seems natural to me that this is a good idea, for a long period of time I believed the contrary - that homeostasis is something which must be avoided at all costs. I used to believe that continually being in stress is something to be proud of, that contentment and satisfaction were qualities to be looked down upon. I think this was (at least, in part) due to spending too much time in a hyper competitive environment. I had a reversed (and to some length distorted) view of life: that life is supposed to be consisting of long stretches of stress, sprinkled with short periods of homeostasis (the only purpose of which is to prepare to take up even more stress). The ultimate goal of life was to be successful, without concretely defining what success meant. I saw this idea being lauded around me. For example, I would hear people talk about taking in excessive amount of stress to be a virtue. This could be the archetypical “new employee”, “startup founder” or “fame-hungry researcher”.

But after giving it much thought, I have come to believe that humans are not biologically programmed to be in a hyper-stimulative constantly changing dynamic environment, but rather in a state of relaxation and contentment. To relax is to be human.