

And The Devil Take The Hindmost

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DEVIL TAKE THE HINDMOST

A HISTORY OF
FINANCIAL SPECULATION

Edward Chancellor

— A —
NEW YORK TIMES
NOTABLE BOOK
OF THE YEAR

And the devil take the hindmost is an evocative phrase that encapsulates a worldview characterized by a sense of urgency, competition, and survival of the fittest. Originating from the realms of literature and folklore, this phrase reflects a philosophy that emphasizes self-interest and the idea that those who fall behind in a race or struggle for resources are left to their own fate. In this article, we will delve into the origins, meanings, implications, and cultural significance of the phrase, exploring how it has evolved over time and how it resonates in contemporary society.

Origins of the Phrase

The phrase "and the devil take the hindmost" can be traced back to the 17th century. It is often attributed to the Scottish poet Robert Louis Stevenson, who used it in his literature to convey the harsh realities of life. The phrase itself suggests a sense of urgency and a competitive spirit, indicating that those who cannot keep up or fail to adapt may suffer dire consequences.

Literary Roots

The phrase has appeared in various forms within literature and has been associated with themes of competition and survival:

1. Scottish Literature: The phrase's roots in Scottish literature highlight the ruggedness of life in Scotland during the 17th century, where survival often hinged on one's ability to keep pace with the challenges of the environment.
2. Folklore and Proverbs: Similar sentiments can be found in various proverbs and sayings across cultures, emphasizing the idea that those who are slow or unprepared will inevitably fall behind.
3. Modern Literature: Contemporary writers have also adopted the phrase, using it to comment on modern social structures and economic disparities.

Meaning and Interpretation

At its core, "and the devil take the hindmost" implies a cutthroat mentality where individuals prioritize their own survival over the welfare of others. The phrase suggests that in a competitive landscape, there is little room for compassion or cooperation.

Survival of the Fittest

The phrase aligns closely with the concept of "survival of the fittest," a term popularized by Charles Darwin in the context of natural selection. In both scenarios, the strongest or most adaptable individuals prevail, while those unable to keep up are left behind.

- Application in Business: In the corporate world, this mentality can manifest in cutthroat competition, where companies prioritize market share and profits over ethical considerations.
- Social Implications: The phrase also raises questions about social responsibility and the moral obligations individuals and organizations have toward those who may be less fortunate or unable to compete.

The Devil's Role

The inclusion of "the devil" in the phrase adds a layer of moral complexity. It suggests that there may be a malevolent force at play in competitive scenarios, one that thrives on the downfall of others.

- Ethical Considerations: This aspect of the phrase prompts discussions around ethics in competition. Should success come at the expense of others? Is it acceptable to adopt a "devil-may-care" attitude in pursuit of personal goals?
- Cultural Reflections: The devil symbolizes temptation and moral compromise, urging individuals to reflect on the consequences of their actions and decisions.

Cultural Significance

The phrase has permeated various aspects of culture, influencing literature, politics, and social behavior. Its resonance can be observed in the following areas:

In Literature

Many authors have utilized the phrase or its underlying themes to explore human behavior in competitive environments:

- Dystopian Novels: In works like "The Hunger Games" by Suzanne Collins, characters are often pitted against one another in life-and-death scenarios, reflecting the harsh realities of survival.
- Class Struggle: Novels that explore class dynamics often echo the sentiment of "and the devil take the hindmost," illustrating how societal structures can leave the vulnerable at the mercy of more powerful forces.

In Politics

Political discourse frequently echoes the themes of competition and self-interest:

- Economic Policies: Policies that favor deregulation and competition often reflect the mentality that supports the notion of the strong prevailing while the weak are left behind.
- Social Justice Movements: In contrast, social justice movements challenge this idea, advocating for a more equitable society where the welfare of all individuals is considered.

In Popular Culture

The phrase has also found its way into popular culture, often used in songs, movies, and television shows:

- Film and Television: Characters who embody the "devil take the hindmost" attitude are often portrayed as ruthless, highlighting the darker side of human nature.
- Music: Lyrics that reference the phrase or its themes often explore the struggles of individuals in a competitive society.

Modern-Day Applications

In today's fast-paced world, the philosophy encapsulated in "and the devil take the hindmost" remains relevant. Its implications can be observed in various contemporary scenarios:

Business Environment

The current business landscape is characterized by rapid innovation and fierce competition. Companies that fail to adapt may quickly find themselves outpaced.

- Startups vs. Corporations: New startups often face the challenge of competing with established corporations, leading to a "devil take the hindmost" mentality as they strive to carve out their niche.
- Workplace Culture: In many corporate settings, employees may feel pressured to prioritize their own success, sometimes at the expense of collaboration and teamwork.

Social Media and Online Competition

The rise of social media has intensified the competitive atmosphere, where individuals constantly seek validation and success.

- Influencer Culture: The pursuit of fame and recognition can lead to a cutthroat environment, where individuals are willing to go to great lengths to stand out, reflecting the phrase's underlying philosophy.
- Mental Health Implications: The pressure to succeed can have detrimental effects on mental health, leading some to question the sustainability of such a competitive approach to life.

Conclusion

"And the devil take the hindmost" serves as a poignant reminder of the competitive nature of human existence. While it captures the harsh realities of survival and ambition, it also raises critical questions about ethics, responsibility, and the societal structures that underpin our interactions. As we navigate an increasingly competitive world, it is essential to reflect on the implications of this philosophy and consider how we can foster a more compassionate and equitable society. Ultimately, while competition can drive innovation and success, it is crucial to remember that cooperation and empathy can lead to a more sustainable and fulfilling existence for all.

Frequently Asked Questions

What does the phrase 'and the devil take the hindmost' mean?

The phrase means that those who fall behind or fail to keep up will be left to their own fate, often implying a ruthless approach where survival of the fittest prevails.

Where does the phrase 'and the devil take the hindmost' originate?

The phrase is believed to originate from 17th-century England, commonly associated with gambling and competition, where it suggested that those who cannot keep pace with the leaders are doomed.

In what contexts is 'and the devil take the hindmost' commonly used?

It is often used in discussions about competition, business practices, or situations where individuals prioritize their own success over the well-being of others.

Can 'and the devil take the hindmost' be seen as a critique of society?

Yes, it can be interpreted as a critique of a cutthroat society where compassion is sacrificed in favor of ambition and self-interest.

How has the phrase 'and the devil take the hindmost' been used in popular culture?

The phrase has appeared in various literary works, films, and songs, often illustrating themes of competition, survival, and moral ambiguity.

What are some modern alternatives to the phrase 'and the devil take the hindmost'?

Modern alternatives include phrases like 'every man for himself' or 'survival of the fittest,' which convey similar meanings about individualism in competitive scenarios.

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