

Seeing our connection to animals

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Our role in human extinction

The ancient Stoics accepted that the cosmos would end in a conflagration, where all things would become fire. Yet, they would probably not have imagined that humans would become the primary factor in a global mass extinction, climate breakdown, or any other planetary-wide threat. They would have perhaps noticed the reduced availability of several species, given how many were brought into the Coliseum and various other amphitheatres to be killed for the pleasure of the crowd. They might have also had a rudimentary understanding of the environmental health issues associated with Roman mining and smelting, and of the squalid conditions that an ancient city packed with a million people generates.

Seneca discusses at length the negative implications of human greed and gluttony. So, it's not too much of a stretch that the ancient Stoics might have something to say about environmental justice, and how it's enacted in the prospective loss of a single species: let's say the elephants.

The intelligence of animals

Modern science has demonstrated that elephants are a lot more intelligent than most ancient Stoics believed. That isn't to say that the Stoics never considered the possibility that animals may have some degree of rationality. Cleanthes, for example, was amazed that ants appeared to have a code of conduct when it came to

war. Chrysippus, meanwhile, discussed the reasoning abilities of a hunting dog. Perhaps, if they had marvelled at elephants, as well as dogs or ants, they would have extended aspects of justice to certain non-human species.

Elephants are extremely caring animals and will go to great lengths to protect their kin. Elephants can collaborate, are capable of compassion, and show self-awareness. All of these traits are valued in highly functional human societies.

How then could some humans be so careless as to reduce an elephant to its tusks, without a second thought as to the role it plays in supporting the ecosystem? How could so many of us turn a blind eye to the black market that fuels poaching, or indeed excessive agricultural demands, both of which do not allow for humans and elephants to coexist. The first question asks whether we are trying to act wisely. The second whether we value courage. For matters relating to self-control and the environment we can read Seneca (for example, *Letters to Lucilius*, 89).

A question of justice

But what about justice?

If we value being able to point out a wild herd of elephants to anyone in the next generations, rather than to describe their extinction while handling an ivory necklace that we could have just as easily made out

of a fallen tree, then it's hard to argue that we have no obligation to them. Elephants are part of our extended family. We are related to them genetically and to some extent share with them the ability, through complex communication and memory, to intelligently navigate the world. Thus, if we can agree that causing unnecessary suffering, or stating no objection to it, is unjust, then failing to step up to the elephants' defence erodes any progress we may have made in developing our good character. If this is true, then we have every obligation to save the elephants, not merely for their sake but for ours.



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