

Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?



HELP ENLIGHTEN YOUR FELLOWS. BE SURE TO PASS THIS ON. SURVIVAL DEPENDS ON IT.

This appeared in The New York Times, but hell, if an item is interesting and politically tolerable, that is, not outright offensive due to its obvious mendacity, we'll consider it. A few questions pop up when seeing this kind of article on the Times. First, although by no means an ironclad boundary excluding the working class, animal rights continues to be associated with the comfortable classes, from the middle class on up. This has prompted a negative reaction among many thinkers of the left, who see investment of activist time in the defence of animals (and in radical environmentalism) as a form of trivialisation of issues concerning vulnerable humans—of which there are obviously far too many still— or outright dilettantism by people with too much money and time in their hands to do something useful.

This kind of thinking alerts us to the inherent contradictions when dealing with problems which are both ecological and political. Take for example the issue of jobs vs. species protections. This is (by now) a classical case of short- vs long-term thinking, and shallower vs deeper comprehension of what is involved. The short-term thinkers—which in this case comprise both the corporate class—the direct and outright exploiters of nature to the hilt—and the workers are ready to sacrifice and oppose any environmental restrictions on their libertarian impulses. The corporate guys are thinking only of profits, as is their wont, and the workers of their jobs, their very

livelihood. In any push-come-to-shove-situation the greater moral weight belongs with the workers. For them this is a matter of sheer survival in many cases; for the employer class it is a discretionary question, a matter of sinking their claws into an available prey, basically an opportunistic choice, but capital remains fungible and other opportunities may and will crop up. Taking the situation to a deeper and broader level we see a few more things: it won't do to go with the short-term "solution" because in the environment animals are integrated into environments in complex and subtle ways not readily apparent to the observer, especially the ignorant or invested observer. Take one out and a whole cascade of negative effects can soon come crashing down on everyone's head—human and non-human. Once that happens, the cure—if any—is not as easy as the act of destruction. So, going with the "profits & jobs" option has negative often severe repercussions. But there's more to this. This kind of almost myopic and frequently acerbic dispute between environmentalists (or rather ecoanimalists), workers and capitalists hides and postpones what humanity should really be discussing: (1) why are corporate entities enfranchised to do demonstrable harm to the environment with normally no punitive effect on their own interests? (2) Why does society tolerate an arrangement whereby one class comes to the table with practically all the marbles while the other must negotiate from a much weaker position and often concede or starve? (3) Why must we have environmentalists in this equation when the proper organization of society should have long taken care of assuring a decent livelihood for all humans and guaranteed survival for all species within its jurisdiction? As more and more questions like this pile up we inexorably see that the problem is not tripartite but bipartite, and that it is caused by that old sociopathic monster in our midst, capitalism, and its "normal" dynamics, all of which flow directly and constantly to a point of convergence to produce death for the ecosystems and its inhabitants, extra exploitation for man and beast wherever possible, and unless severely constrained by really effective legislation—a temporary rarity in capitalist society—humongous inequality and eventually the evisceration of any democratic rights.

This POV affords us the clarity to see that under capitalism people—and ecoanimal interests—are thrown into constant conflict. But in this state of tension the ecoanimalists cannot wait for capitalism to be overthrown to defend what they see as rapidly vanishing, capitalogenic climate change being

an undeniable reality. For their part, workers cannot wait for capitalism to be disposed of to put food on the table or a roof over their heads—they too face urgent needs with little leeway for accommodation.

Ironies abound

Now, it's been said (and documented) many times by people of the left that capitalists could care less about the poor or the miseries of the working class. But do they care about what other people in their class think? Obviously they do, to some extent, as such people may comprise not only strangers, like shareholders, or "public opinion" affecting the bottom line, but even members of their own families. So, here's what might happen when pieces like this run on the Times: some of these captains of industry and finance may actually see or hear about these pieces and be obliged to think and react to them. If they do so positively, it could end up being something to the relief of the environment, or the animals, both of which would inevitably have a beneficial effect on humans subject to the decisions of the ruling class. For a good environment is a universal good. Meanwhile, ecoanimalists must do their best to enlist workers in their struggles, and equally important, join the working class in theirs. Unity of all non-capitalist forces is the best way to kick the sociopath out of our homes and out of our lives. —PG

Opinion

THE STONE

Our species possesses inherent value, but we are devastating the earth and causing unimaginable animal suffering.

[The New York Times](#)

By Todd May

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[dropcap]T[/dropcap>here are stirrings of discussion these days in philosophical circles about [the prospect of human extinction](#). This should not be surprising, given the increasingly threatening predations of climate change. In reflecting on this question, I want to suggest an answer to a single question, one that hardly covers the whole philosophical territory but is an important aspect of it. Would human extinction be a tragedy?

To get a bead on this question, let me distinguish it from a couple of other related questions. I'm not asking whether the experience of humans coming to an end would be a bad thing. (In these pages, [Samuel Scheffler has given us](#) an important reason to think that it would be.) I am also not asking whether human beings as a species deserve to die out. That is an important question, but would involve different considerations. Those questions, and others like them, need to be addressed if we are to come to a full moral assessment of the prospect of our demise. Yet what I am asking here is simply whether it would be a tragedy if the planet no longer contained human beings. And the answer I am going to give might seem puzzling at first. I want to suggest, at least tentatively, both that it would be a tragedy and that it might just be a good thing.

To make that claim less puzzling, let me say a word about tragedy. In theater, the tragic character is often someone who commits a wrong, usually a significant one, but with whom we feel sympathy in their descent. Here Sophocles's Oedipus, Shakespeare's Lear, and Arthur Miller's Willy Loman might stand as examples. In this case, the tragic character is humanity. It is humanity that is committing a wrong, a wrong whose elimination would likely require the elimination of the species, but with whom we might be sympathetic nonetheless for reasons I discuss in a moment.

To make that case, let me start with a claim that I think will be at once depressing and, upon reflection, uncontroversial. Human beings are destroying large parts of the inhabitable earth and causing unimaginable suffering to many of the animals that inhabit it. This is happening through at least three means. First, human contribution to climate change is devastating ecosystems, as the recent [article on Yellowstone Park](#) in The Times exemplifies. Second, increasing human population is encroaching on ecosystems that would otherwise be intact. Third, factory farming fosters the creation of millions upon millions of animals for whom it offers nothing but suffering and misery before slaughtering them in often barbaric ways. There is no reason to think that those practices are going to diminish any time soon. Quite the opposite.

Humanity, then, is the source of devastation of the lives of conscious animals on a scale that is difficult to comprehend.

To be sure, nature itself is hardly a Valhalla of peace and harmony. Animals kill other animals regularly, often in ways that we (although not they) would consider cruel. But there is no other creature in nature whose predatory behavior is remotely as deep or as widespread as the behavior we display toward what the philosopher Christine Korsgaard aptly calls “our fellow creatures” in a sensitive [book](#) of the same name.

If this were all to the story there would be no tragedy. The elimination of the human species would be a good thing, full stop. But there is more to the story. Human beings bring things to the planet that other animals cannot. For example, we bring an advanced level of reason that can experience wonder at the world in a way that is foreign to most if not all other animals. We create art of various kinds: literature, music and painting among them. We engage in sciences that seek to understand the universe and our place in it. Were our species to go extinct, all of that would be lost.

Now there might be those on the more jaded side who would argue that if we went extinct there would be no loss, because there would be no one for whom it would be a loss not to have access to those things. I think this objection misunderstands our relation to these practices. We appreciate and often participate in such practices because we believe they are good to be involved in, because we find them to be worthwhile. It is the goodness of the practices and the experiences that draw us. Therefore, it would be a loss to the world if those practices and experiences ceased to exist.

One could press the objection here by saying that it would only be a loss from a human viewpoint, and that that viewpoint would no longer exist if we went extinct. This is true. But this entire set of reflections is taking place from a human viewpoint. We cannot ask the questions we are asking here without situating them within the human practice of philosophy. Even to ask the question of whether it would be a tragedy if humans were to disappear from the face of the planet requires a normative framework that is restricted to human beings.

Let's turn, then, and take the question from the other side, the side of those who think that human extinction would be both a tragedy and overall a bad thing. Doesn't the existence of those practices outweigh the harm we bring to the environment and the animals within it? Don't they justify the continued existence of our species, even granting the suffering we bring to so many nonhuman lives?

To address that question, let us ask another one. How many human lives would it be worth sacrificing to preserve the existence of Shakespeare's works? If we were required to engage in human sacrifice in order to save his works from eradication, how many humans would be too many? For my own part, I think the answer is one. One human life would be too many (or, to prevent quibbling, one innocent human life), at least to my mind. Whatever the number, though, it is going to

be quite low.

Or suppose a terrorist planted a bomb in the Louvre and the first responders had to choose between saving several people in the museum and saving the art. How many of us would seriously consider saving the art?

[dropcap]S[/dropcap]o, then, how much suffering and death of nonhuman life would we be willing to countenance to save Shakespeare, our sciences and so forth? Unless we believe there is such a profound moral gap between the status of human and nonhuman animals, whatever reasonable answer we come up with will be well surpassed by the harm and suffering we inflict upon animals. There is just too much torment wreaked upon too many animals and too certain a prospect that this is going to continue and probably increase; it would overwhelm anything we might place on the other side of the ledger. Moreover, those among us who believe that there is such a gap should perhaps become more familiar with the richness of lives of many of our conscious fellow creatures. Our own science is revealing that richness to us, ironically giving us a reason to eliminate it along with our own continued existence.

One might ask here whether, given this view, it would also be a good thing for those of us who are currently here to end our lives in order to prevent further animal suffering. Although I do not have a final answer to this question, we should recognize that the case of future humans is very different from the case of currently existing humans. To demand of currently existing humans that they should end their lives would introduce significant suffering among those who have much to lose by dying. In contrast, preventing future humans from existing does not introduce such suffering, since those human beings will not exist and therefore not have lives to sacrifice. The two situations, then, are not analogous.

It may well be, then, that the extinction of humanity would make the world better off and yet would be a tragedy. I don't

want to say this for sure, since the issue is quite complex. But it certainly seems a live possibility, and that by itself disturbs me.

There is one more tragic aspect to all of this. In many dramatic tragedies, the suffering of the protagonist is brought about through his or her own actions. It is Oedipus's killing of his father that starts the train of events that leads to his tragic realization; and it is Lear's highhandedness toward his daughter Cordelia that leads to his demise. It may also turn out that it is through our own actions that we human beings bring about our extinction, or at least something near it, contributing through our practices to our own tragic end.

***Now in print:** [“Modern Ethics in 77 Arguments,”](#) and [“The Stone Reader: Modern Philosophy in 133 Arguments,”](#) with essays from the series, edited by Peter Catapano and Simon Critchley, published by Liveright Books.*

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gender comfortable!

Things to ponder

While our media prostitutes, many Hollywood celebs, and politicians and opinion shapers make so much noise about the still to be demonstrated damage done by the Russkies to our nonexistent democracy, this is what the sanctimonious US government has done overseas just since the close of World War 2. And this is what we know about. Many other misdeeds are yet to be revealed or documented.

OVERTHROWING OTHER PEOPLE'S GOVERNMENTS: U.S. THE MASTER LIST

By William Blum – Published February 2013

INSTANCES OF THE UNITED STATES OVERTHROWING, OR ATTEMPTING TO OVERTHROW, A FOREIGN GOVERNMENT SINCE THE SECOND WORLD WAR.

(* indicates successful ouster of a government)

China 1949 to early 1960s	Ghana 1966 *	Afghanistan 1980s *
Albania 1949-53	Chile 1964-73 *	Somalia 1993
East Germany 1950s	Greece 1967 *	Yugoslavia 1999-2000 *
Iran 1953 *	Costa Rica 1970-71	Ecuador 2000 *
Guatemala 1954 *	Bolivia 1971 *	Afghanistan 2001 *
Costa Rica mid-1950s	Australia 1973-75 *	Venezuela 2002 *
Syria 1956-7	Angola 1975, 1980s	Iraq 2003 *
Egypt 1957	Zaire 1975	Haiti 2004 *
Indonesia 1957-8	Portugal 1974-76 *	Somalia 2007 to present
British Guiana 1953-64 *	Jamaica 1976-80 *	Honduras 2009
Iraq 1963 *	Seychelles 1979-81	Libya 2011 *
North Vietnam 1945-73	Chad 1981-82 *	Syria 2012
Cambodia 1955-70 *	Grenada 1983 *	Ukraine 2014 *
Laos 1958 *, 1959 *, 1960 *	South Yemen 1982-84	
Ecuador 1960-63 *	Suriname 1982-84	
Congo 1960 *	Fiji 1987 *	
France 1965	Libya 1980s	
Brazil 1962-64 *	Nicaragua 1981-90 *	
Dominican Republic 1963*	Panama 1989 *	
Cuba 1959 to present	Bulgaria 1990 *	
Bolivia 1964 *	Albania 1991 *	
Indonesia 1965 *	Iraq 1991	

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