

**William STEPHENS**

**Beastly Virtues: Animal Exempla in Seneca and Epictetus**

It is curious that the imperial Stoics, following a precedent of Diogenes the Cynic, employ so many wide-ranging examples of animal behavior. For example, what are we to make of the rigid dichotomy Seneca and Epictetus draw between rational and non-rational beings in relation to the diverse comparisons they make between human virtues and vices on the one hand and animal excellences and "bestial" behaviors on the other? Why are the most potent, diverse, and philosophically significant animal *exempla* found in Seneca and Epictetus? I argue that it is because such *exempla* serve a variety of protreptic purposes. While appeals to the over-arching rationality of the cosmos may provide some theoretical understanding for the place of human beings in nature, from a pedagogical and rhetorical standpoint animal *exempla* provide particularly effective guidance for human conduct. Cleverly deployed animal *exempla* help cultivate aretaic affective dispositions.

Epictetus' animal *exempla* are arguably the most creative and sophisticated, one of his innovations being to use the rhetorical technique of *prosopopeia* in several of them. Nonhuman animals - specifically birds and lions - are upheld as clear and conspicuous exemplars of Epictetus' most glorified value: freedom. He also uses both positive and negative animal examples to underscore the human norms of sociability and solidarity, gregariousness, cooperativeness, personal hygiene, whole-hearted commitment, temperance, self-sufficiency, faithful parenting, courage, and integrity. Medea, for example, is described as transforming herself from a human being into a *viper*. The bull, Epictetus explains, knows it has the resources to protect the herd from the lion, so his Stoic students should be aware of their own mental resources for coping with any hardships they face. The sheep doesn't *talk* about its fodder, but silently converts it into wool and milk, whereas Stoic students often boast of their philosophical principles instead of wordlessly living them.

Seneca admires animals on many counts: their enjoyment of pleasures, their ability to overcome grief and worry quickly, their self-control and austerity, how they limit their desires to their needs, their fairness, gentleness, and magnanimity. In contrast, Seneca argues, human beings invent and multiply pernicious luxuries, stoop to nepotism, harbor malice, remain relentless toward the vanquished, and debase themselves with bloody acts of cruelty, whereas even the wildest of animals becomes docile by persistent, unremitting kindness. In a culture in which animals were so often nearby, the use of colorful animal *exempla* proved an indispensable way to illustrate the Stoic *telos*-formula of "living in agreement with nature".