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Radical Minimalism

Dean Batchelder

This paper focuses on how I feel we should act with regard to the environment. I begin with a brief presentation of the human condition and the ethical structure that emerges from it. I then apply this to our interactions and demands upon our global environment.

Basically I argue that given an existential description of humanity, one in which we are totally free and thus totally responsible for our choices, we must radically expand what we consider to be of moral consideration. We are responsible to ourselves for the world we create through our actions. Given this, and presuming some concern for the environment, we should radically alter our lifestyles and consumptive habits to minimize the dissonance between our values and our devastating impact upon the environment.

Structure

I use several ideas from Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism to argue for a given view of human reality. This human condition leads to considerations of freedom, and thus, responsibility. I then expand on what I feel our responsibility to be. All this establishes the structure upon which the environmental arguments below are based.

Existentialism is basically the thought that humanity is not defined by anything other than itself. Humanity defines itself through its actions and there is no controlling human nature or God to determine who or what we are. Sartre thought that "[w]hat they [existentialists] have in common is that they think that existence precedes essence, or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be the starting point [of inquiry]" (Sartre 1995b, 13).

What is meant by this? Roughly it means that a thing exists before it is strictly defined. Sartre felt that this is only true for humanity, which is conscious and self-aware and free to act and decide. Since we are reflective and may choose, we cannot be defined. He used the term *for-itself* to describe this human reality. *In-itself* was used to describe the rest of existence: plants, tables, chairs, planets, and so on. The *in-itself* is what it is, freedom nor consciousness, and thus, no capacity to be other than it is. The *for-itself* because of its consciousness is radically free, and thus, undefinable. All this is a tortured way of saying that I, as a *for-itself*, can never *be* something in the same sense that a table or a plant (an *in-itself*) *is* something.

The *in-itself* has an essence: it fundamentally *is* something—a table or backpack or cat. For it, essence precedes existence. Essence is what a thing is: its definition, idea, nature, or program (see Palmer, 21). A table has an essence in this sense: it *is* a flat, horizontal plane supported by (a) leg(s), where this plane is raised off the ground on which it rests. This is what it is defined as, and there is nothing else to it, there is nothing else there.

Considering this table, Sartre argued that the inventor or manufacturer discovered or relied upon an idea (essence) of what a table is and produced an actual table according to this model. Thus, ". . . the idea of the thing precedes the actual creation of the object" (*Ibid.*, 22). This idea is what a table is, and it cannot stray from this idea and remain a table. And this is true for all manufactured or created artifacts. The same is to be said of non-human nature.¹ A cat *is* a cat in the same sense that a pair of scissors *is* that pair of scissors, and in a very different sense than I am anything. A cat has no consciousness through which to diffract the density of existence, and so it remains only what it is, an in-itself.²

It is our consciousness, and our acts based upon this consciousness, that set us apart from non-human nature and the rest of the universe. And since consciousness sets us apart from reality, and from what is and what we are doing, we can only interact with reality by choosing to, by acting.

Because of this, Sartre argued that there is nothing, no idea or function, that defines humanity: *we are* before we are defined.

. . . [M]an exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. . . . Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself (Sartre 1995b, 15).

¹ In his examples, Sartre seems to only consider manufactured items (Sartre 1995b, 13). However, the same seems to apply to non-human nature, and Palmer (23) presents such a position as, in fact, being the one that Sartre held.

² This is not to say that a cat (or what have you) does not experience the world or have memories and so on. It is more a claim that cats, and other non-human animals, do *not* experience the world as humans do. They do not have the capacity for self-reflection and deliberate action that we have. The issue is not the specifics of which organisms are in-itselfs and which are for-itselfs. Sartre's idea will not fall if consciousness is extended beyond humanity. The point is the fundamental difference that exists between these modes of being. More specifically: all non-living matter and much of non-human nature is being-in-itself, while *at least* humanity is a being-for-itself.

Humanity has no nature; there is nothing that we are. Humanity, before it exists, is undefinable and exists in a condition of radical freedom. Now, since there is nothing for us to conform to, we are free to determine what we are.

If existence really does precede essence, there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom. . . . [I]f God does not exist, we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct. So in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses (*Ibid.*, 22-23).

This radical freedom has very important consequences for our existence and for our ethics. Sartre argued that we are free to be and choose what we want; that we are not limited by nature or God. He argued that values do not exist except to the extent that we choose them and act on them (see Palmer, 76-77, and Sartre 1995b, 22-27). There is nothing beyond us to rest our values upon; we are free to create all values. No external non-human hook exists for us to latch on to, or to legitimate ourselves in terms of. And since nothing can be chosen for us, responsibility for everything rests upon us.

Even though values created by other humans do exist before we enter the world, they only have value for us if we give them value. Ultimately we are the ones who decide, for ourselves, to believe in x or to give y value. Those who precede us in the world cannot choose these values for us nor give them value for us.³ We choose everything for ourselves, and this is the condition of our freedom.

Because we are radically free, we are totally responsible for who and what we become. Because we are free to create and choose, we are the only ones responsible for what we are and what the world is. No one can choose or act for us. "Thus, existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him" (Sartre 1995b,

³ However, there is the problem of values chosen during infancy and childhood—for these value choices are not real choices, but we still value them. I am not sure that Sartre addresses this, but he could respond that as long as we continue to hold these values, we are daily choosing them, and thus are responsible for them in the same way that we are responsible for all our other values.

16). *I am responsible to myself for the world that I create to the extent that I create or fail to create it.*⁴

In examining Sartre's thought, that we create values through our acts, it becomes apparent that we should hold ourselves morally accountable for our actions, as they create and maintain values.⁵ What are we responsible for? Clearly the answer is some subset of *action*. For an act to be morally considerable, it must create, maintain, or influence values or value structures. It must be what I call a significant action.

Not all actions are significant. Many, such as looking here rather than there, or choosing a blue pen rather than a black one, are not significant. They do not influence the world in any appreciable way. A significant action would be an act that impacts, now or in the conceivable future, the current or future plans of ourselves, others, those in the future, or the non-human objects of our (or others') values.⁶

Existentialism radically expands our responsibilities: suddenly, in realizing that we create the world, we find that we are responsible for it. We are implicated, morally, to a much greater extent than we currently understand ourselves to be. Most of us will find a large discrepancy between our values and many of the values we place validity upon through our actions. And given our ethical commitments, the world as it is, is unacceptable.

⁴ An action, for Sartre, is equivalent to a failure to act. If we fail to get out of a situation (the military draft, for example), it is the same as if we put ourselves in that situation. "What happens to me happens through me, and ... everything which happens to me is mine.... For lack of getting out of it [the war], I have *chosen* it" (Sartre 1995b, 53-54).

⁵ For this paper, the total freedom-total responsibility connection is assumed to be secure. If the reader is unsure of the total freedom, thus total responsibility, connection, I may mention what I did in my Honors' Project (Batchelder, 1997). There, I assumed liberalism as a value system (political rights and justice, tolerance, freedom, etc.), and this established responsibility because the individual, by his own liberal values, held himself responsible. (This is not simply a sleight of hand, as most people who seriously hold to liberalism doubt that any argument may undermine the sense of justice and tolerance it supports. What argument would convince you to become a believer in fascism or totalitarianism?)

⁶ Roughly categorized, there are three categories of significant actions: immediately violent actions, indirectly violent actions, and non-violent actions. Clearly there will be gray areas surrounding the significance of an issue. How do we know if an act is significant? How can we weigh (or even know) an act's future impact? What about acts that are individually insignificant, but which become significant when taken in concert? And how are we to rank our responsibilities? How are we to decide how significant an act is? It must be the case that we are not as responsible for littering as we are for single-handedly starting a nuclear war. Nonetheless, the main point is still clear: we are responsible for our influence in the world.

Because of existentialism, we find that we have a great responsibility to act and change many of the ways in which we act, create, or work for the benefit of projects we find morally repugnant. This means that we are responsible to create, through our actions, a world that conforms to our values.

Environmentalism

There is no necessary reason the earth is kind to us: that it is open and beautiful and relatively benign.⁷ There is no necessary reason that life found purchase here, nor any reason that it will continue. The earth need not be what it is. It could be a barren waste (as the moon is) or a vision of fiery hell (as Venus is). We currently have the power to decide what the earth will be for us: if it will be lush and wild, or a barren nightmare. If we choose the latter (and by failing to choose or act for the first, we actively choose the second), I cannot see why our children will not hate us. We only know the tip of the iceberg of what we do, and we know our actions compromise immune systems, destroy ecosystems, poison air, land, and sea, shorten life spans, and kill all manner of life. We know it does this and we still continue on our path. What do we gain from this violence? McDonalds, Mitsubishis, ice-cold Coca-Cola, air conditioning, suburbs the size of Delaware, and green grass lawns in Arizona, growth for growth's sake, corporate profits and corporate democracy. If we destroy the earth for these things, we bring our children's hate upon us.

Part of what motivated me to argue this view of responsibility is the obvious scar that human action can and often does leave upon the world, and the nearly as obvious lack in addressing this in mainline ethics. It seemed to me (and this was even before beginning this project), that if I buy a product from a company that pollutes or clear-cuts or produces superfluous products, I am encouraging this company to act in this way. In doing so, I condone and actively support the way in which this company uses natural resources. And from this,

⁷ *Relatively* is an important caveat here. True, there are innumerable famines, mudslides, floods, earthquakes, violent storms, diseases, etc., that nature dishes out. However, if one reads beyond the headlines, it should be clear that many of these crises are the result of human interference, mismanagement, greed, or stupidity. If you clear cut forests on sharp grades above houses, there may be expensive mud slides. If you build major population centers on fault lines, there may be devastating earthquakes. Such things may/could have been easily avoided.

Resources are (generally) plentiful. Food, clean air and water, and land have been readily available for most people. That this is not the case in much of the world today is largely the result of amazingly unjust social and political systems.

My point here is that we have had it easy, and we could continue to have it easy if we scaled back on consumption and waste and distributed resources more fairly. It is not the environment's fault that we have environmental problems. Environmental problems are human creations that could have been, and hopefully still can be, avoided.

I should hold myself responsible for where my money goes. This thesis is basically an outgrowth of this point.

Many environmental philosophers are concerned to show that non-human nature has intrinsic worth; that is, that non-human nature holds moral weight or moral considerability without any reference to human utility.⁸ For these philosophers, such an argument is seen as the best way to give non-human nature a defense without resting it on a foundation that allows for its destruction, as the idea that non-human nature is here for human benefit or pleasure does. My argument clearly denies the possibility of such intrinsic worth.⁹ Given a materialistic universe, any conception of intrinsic worth makes no sense. In my presentation of the universe, there is no space for such a conception of value: if value is to be *in the thing* and independent of conscious thought, then value must be some type of independent metaphysical entity. But nothing is essentially anything. True, the in-itself does have an essence, but this does not mean that it is essentially anything to us. We choose a thing's value, and its value is not part of its essence. In this universe, an idea of value only makes sense if there is something to create and perceive value. But if this is true, nothing is intrinsically valuable; value is only in the mind of the valuer.

Further, existentialism strengthens the above by denying the weight of intrinsic value *even if* it did exist.¹⁰ We would have to choose and maintain such value; the universe alone cannot. If non-human nature is to be valued, it is we who must choose to value it regardless of its intrinsic value. It is beside the point to argue that non-human nature is intrinsically valuable.

And, though this puts us back where the environmentalist is loath to go, my position is *not* the same as the status quo. There, non-human nature has no value except what humanity gives it, and so we are free to exploit it. The Grand Canyon is just potential hydroelectric power; wildlife is just potential food or

⁸ For example, see Peter Singer's "Animal Liberation," Tom Regan's "Animal Rights, Human Wrongs," and Paul Taylor's "The Ethics of Respect for Nature" (in Zimmerman, 22-32, 33-48, and 66-83, respectively).

⁹ "Sartre's theory is ... radical. For him, there is no value existing prior to freedom. Value derives its reality from the fact that it is chosen, rather than being chosen because it has value." Thus, human existence and human life have no value outside of our choice of that value (Palmer, 76). Indeed, critics inevitably point out that this not only denies the intrinsic worth of non-human life, but human life as well. This is true, and still unimportant with respect to this paper, as liberalism is assumed and so the worth of persons is granted.

¹⁰ Existentialism would also dispose of the response that materialism alone does not deny music value. One may still replace God with Nature and arrive at the same conclusion of non-human nature's intrinsic value.

entertainment or sport: the Alaskan wilderness is just potential oil profits. Nature is valued instrumentally: it gets us stuff we like better, such as money.

For me, *nothing* has value except what humans give it.¹¹ And while non-human nature is not in itself valuable, we choose to maintain it, care for it, release it, and respect it. In doing so, we choose a world which centrally values non-human nature and one in which it is not valued instrumentally; it is valued because it is worth valuing, because we choose a world in which it is valued. It is a very different thing to say that I value a thing because it is beautiful and I feel that it should exist for its own sake, rather than valuing a thing because it can be exploited to produce profits, even though there may be agreement about the absence of intrinsic value. I can get to the same point as other concerned environmental philosophers without arguing for the intrinsic worth, or the right to exist, of various levels of creation.¹²

I see an environmental ethic rising from the treatment of responsibility I presented above. If we value the environment, we become responsible in a radical way to uphold this value through our choices. Such an environmental ethic is a radical and wide-reaching one. If we wish to claim that non-human nature deserves respect, we must act upon this belief in *every* aspect of our lives.

This makes more sense than an approach that posits universal duties to rocks, ecosystems, and snail darters. Such an approach initially seems a good strategy in that it allows environmentalists or animal rights activists to demand that non-human nature be given moral weight. Yet it is an odd argument, and I do not see the sense in this approach beyond the initial appeal. It seems clearer to say that if they are to have value, it is to be through us, and so we must choose a life that respects them.

Also, I feel that my approach is refocused where environmental ethics should be focused: instead of arguing where lines of moral considerability are to

¹¹ For existentialism, *nothing* has intrinsic value, not even human life. While this may be a point that opens the philosophy to attack, it also puts this point of mine into perspective. Human life does not have intrinsic value, but this does not lead to the horrors that we visit on non-human nature. So it cannot be that the absence of intrinsic worth opens the door to exploitation.

¹² To the critic who replies that such an argument relies upon the individual's personal opinion of nature, most intrinsic worth arguments are not going to go anywhere with a die hard skeptic. Such arguments seem aimed at other environmental philosophers. I find my argument more pleasing because I find it odd (to put it politely) to argue about the intrinsic worth of various unknown species, ecological systems, or communities. How can a community have a right to exist? What of the inanimate material necessary to support such a community—does it too have rights? If communities or populations migrate or mutate, should we attempt to stop such activity? Is predation wrong? Such questions seem odd. I believe that my argument avoids such questions, which is a point in its favor.

be drawn, this focuses on what we are going to do, how we are going to act, to protect the environment. Current discussions do not focus on what one does once one discovers that trees or rocks are of moral considerability. More energy should be spent on action, and less trees should be killed to feed debates on their inherent value.

This approach to environmentalism is quite radical. For me it leads to the thought that one cannot live in modern society without significant compromise. When buying something, we must consider whether we want or need it enough to justify the usually irreversible conversion of the resources embedded in (and embedded in the manufacture and distribution of) a given product for our use. Do we need a Coke that much? Do we *need* a highlighter, or a movie, or a car, in this light? This is especially true of resources that are obtained from very limited or precarious resource bases: teak, beef, marine fish, fossil fuels, etc.

This thesis leads to a minimalism of consumption and possession. We should consider what we want in light of the negative impact it will have on the environment, on others, and on future generations. This should not lead to a monk-like existence—balance is to be sought—but balance is unlikely to justify our current mass consumption.¹³

And, to some extent, even this is a compromise. For example, it is *extremely* difficult (to the extent that it verges on the impossible) to exist in this or any modern society and avoid the consumption and/or use of animal products and by-products. A similar point is to be made about car ownership: it is impossible to own, maintain, and drive a car without directly or indirectly supporting companies and policies that one should rather not support.

Thus, in this respect, existing in a modern consumer economy is a moral compromise for the environmentalist. It may be viewed as abandoning values we should hold to say that I prefer the use or ownership of this or (more generally) the benefits of modern society more than I do wild nature or, more broadly, international equity or social justice.

A number of obvious criticisms are possible, many of which may be true to some extent. One may reply that life is not *either/or*, that we may value both modern conveniences and these values. One may reply that to live in the world, especially our amazingly complex modern world, demands such compromises—that compromise is part of living in a complex society, or that we cannot spend all our time and resources fighting such problems. We cannot bury ourselves under liberal guilt, nor become modern-day Jainists.

¹³ Perhaps such a lifestyle will be parallel to the result of James Rachels' argument in "Morality, Parents, and Children" (Sterba, 101-109). The argument leading to such a lifestyle change is unlikely to be the same, however (I do not agree with the way in which Rachels argues).

There are two paths one may take in responding to these (or similarly aimed) counter-arguments. The first, more accommodating path is to grant the power of these replies, but to counter that we still have significantly more responsibility than we currently believe ourselves to have. Society may place such limits on us and demand compromises, but it is also true that we could significantly decrease our impact on the environment and its resources through fairly minimal changes in lifestyle. Especially as Americans, we live in *extreme* luxury and consider such luxury as non-negotiable, even though we may understand the grinding poverty that the rest of the world lives in and the massive wastes our consumption produces. We feel that our over-consumption and opulence are not objects of moral consideration, and that we need not become martyrs to a better world to solve many of the world's problems. But relatively painless changes will work immediate wonders. As the world begins to even out, more serious changes will likely be necessary, but we currently have no reasonable excuse to avoid changing our lives and consumption habits.

A second method of reply would be to totally deny the power of such counter-arguments. We choose our values. If we choose to compromise them for the benefits of modern consumption, we do not truly hold environmental beliefs. This approach denies that the cost of acting on a belief is an irrelevant consideration and is more in line with existentialism than the above. It says we are **fully** responsible for all of our impacts in the world.

I see this argument as a positive description of the individual's condition and her possibilities in the world. It is not defeatist, nor quietist. It argues for action and the creative possibilities of action. It tells the individual that he is the only one that places value upon his actions and choices, and so the world's possibilities become my possibilities. The world is what I, and we, make it.

This may seem ridiculous in an era of mass warfare and transnational government structures and corporations that largely establish our world and our possibilities in it. However, it also tells us that we are the ones that create this structure; that this structure is the result of human creation, and thus, can be changed. Further, it tells us what our part in this structure is, how we are responsible to ourselves for it. Acknowledging our responsibility is an important illustration of the ways in which our everyday lives permit gross injustices, domestically and internationally.

We should live as it is important to live. We should act upon our convictions and represent the importance of our beliefs to ourselves by acting upon them. If, as I have assumed here, we believe in the importance of liberalism, we should work to promote liberalism both here and abroad. We can do this in any number of ways. We can be more compassionate and tolerant, we can consume less, eat less meat, ride a bike, shop downtown instead of at malls, buy local, read and act on what we learn, hike, protest, fuck shit up, monkey-

wrench, volunteer, work for deliberative democracy and governmental reforms, ask where our tax money goes and why, fail to be polite about military spending and corporate subsidies, and generally understand that we are our actions and that our actions produce serious consequences in the world. The world does not have to be this way. It is ours, and we should take hold of it.

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