

Okay Humans, What's the Fucking Point?!

Eco-Absurdism: Absurdism as Environmentalism

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Before I start this, I would like to conclude. I will conclude this by stating that, rather than a political program, ideology, strategy or theory, eco-absurdism is really just a feeling. What type of feeling? Well, one that can really be best articulated verbally in the question “okay humans, what is the fucking point?”.

I am going to present some arguments, theories and thoughts around this feeling and the question, but as far grasping this conceptual term that I am presenting you with, you don't need to worry – any more than the sense of worry/or impending doom you already have.

Eco, in the sense I am using here as a prefix, means that squishy, muddy, messy, inhuman, beautiful, mystical, natuary space, or world, that those of us who consider ourselves as environmentalists place value in. It is the harsh and inhuman Real that is greater than the human Reality, which Leviathan, civilisation, the state, the system, or whatever word you want to use that basically means totalitarian-anthropocentrism, supposedly saves us, as we identify with humanity, from. Wikipedia's definition of environmentalism states –

“Environmentalism or environmental rights is a broad philosophy, ideology, and social movement regarding concerns for environmental protection and improvement of the health of the environment, particularly as the measure for this health seeks to incorporate the impact of changes to the environment on humans, animals, plants and non-living matter. While environmentalism focuses more on the environmental and nature-related aspects of green ideology and politics, ecology combines the ideology of social ecology and environmentalism. Ecology is more commonly used in continental European languages while ‘environmentalism’ is more commonly used in English but the words have slightly different connotations.”

If you were to ask me what environmentalism means to me though, I'd likely say that “I like badgers, I think trees are awesome and I kind of don't really want what we call the human race to continue it's suicide bomber mentality, by killing itself and taking out the rest of the world with it, through pollution, habitat destruction and so on”.

We know the situation is pretty fucking dire. I used the F word quite intentionally there, not for shock value, but for emphasis. Environmentalists are often too concerned with being polite over being honest. The idea that the apocalypse is fine, but no one should be rude, is not one I can get behind personally. So I will state again, with no offense intended, but just harsh honesty – the situation is pretty fucking dire, and we know it.

200 species lost every day. The last decade was the hottest ever recorded. Deforestation is worsening habitat loss. The situation is pretty fucking dreadful – again no offense intended.

Now, don't worry, this is not another of what philosopher Timothy Morton calls "information dumps", which sadly plague environmentalist discourse, and operate on the same line of reasoning as the dumping of "externalities" that the producers of the world operates on. You are not a garbage site for me to dump a load of factoidal objects on to, for you to clean up, because if you don't who will. There will be no more terrible bits of environmental information for you to process – I trust that you have arrived here aware and that you have done your own research.

Moving on to the question at hand of "what is the fucking point?", you will have probably noticed that, rather than being a rational sort of question, there is an emotional quality to it. Despair, anxiety and nihilism often embody this question, which is at the core of existential philosophy – which seeks to explore what are perhaps big and unanswerable questions. Some other similar questions are why are we here; what is the point to all of this; is it possible to have a meaningful existence; why do we live when life involves suffering; how can I know what is morally right or wrong in a universe that appears indifferent to my actions; and if God lets us bring back 1 soul from the dead, do we choose Jimi Hendrix or Kurt Cobaine? But these kind of all circle back to "what is the fucking point?", or perhaps spiral downwards, with a gravitational tug back down to the inhuman earthly universe.

Okay, Absurdism – what is it?! Well, some state that it is the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any. It is also a philosophy, with, yes you guessed it, philosophers. The 3 philosophers I intend to focus on here are Camus, Kierkegaard and Shestov and, as this exploration of their absurd ideas navigates the somewhat weird and dark terrain, I (perhaps absurdly) hope that you will find textures and qualities of anarchistic eco-radicalism.

Camus' 2 most immediately relevant works for this discussion are *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus states that the only real philosophical question is whether or not to commit suicide. Camus considers this question on the backdrop of considering the world as a basically unreasonable place to be. Following from this basic unreasonableness, Camus argues that life is unreasonable and with this that there is no reason to live – oh the absurdity of it all and the horror. With this, Camus argues that, as much as there is no reason to live, there is actually no reason to die – so there is nothing to be gained from suicide. In *The Rebel*, Camus brings this existential philosophy into the field of politics, by expanding the position to argue that there is no reason to kill – this was largely an attempt to respond to the tyranny the world had seen under the Nazis and was seeing under USSR Marxism during the 1950s.

We might consider questioning why we should kill this planet, that is the soil from which we have all grown, as an act of suicide?! I have not yet found any reason to do so.

Camus' philosophy holds a position that embraces that there are limits to reasoning, substantial limits. Environmentalists will often turn to scientific reasoning, as a means of justifying arguments, positions and actions. This continually seems to miss the target, as people seem find environmental discourse and non-humanised environments to be a different world to theirs. From an eco-absurdist perspective, this is probably due to the limits to scientific reasoning. If it is not scientific reasoning, environmentalists will often turn to religious/or spiritual type reasoning, as a means of supposedly overcoming certain alienating factors. This comes though with its own limits, which have similar impacts to that of scientific, as Gaia doesn't always feel right here to the non-pagan.

We might consider, following from Camus' arguments, what it might be to embrace an eco-absurdist praxis of metaphysical unreasonable rebellion – metaphysical rebellion as a refusal to conform to the human condition, in this context meaning the humanised condition of ecocide and “development”. When I state “unreasonable” here, I mean an eco-rebellion that is not attempting to be logical or rational, in the way we consider reasoning to be, but is born from wild animal desire.

One of Camus' most famous statements is that – we must consider Sisyphus happy. Camus likens the human condition to that of Sisyphus, who spends all day pushing a rock to the top of a hill, only to see it roll back to the bottom at the end of the day. A great deal of environmental discussion is focused on ideas of self-sacrifice, on us individually giving up stuff – in ways that do not inspire joy and are often off putting. There is a great deal of angst and anxiety that goes with ecological thought, as there is an inhuman phenomenon that we find ourselves immersed within, when we venture into this space.

Sisyphus's position is similar to that of individualist anarchists, such as Albert Libertad, who wrote of the joy of life. This anarchist philosophy and practice, is drawn from a refusal to renounce the world, as authority has built it, in rebellion; that is, choosing to embrace life, as embracing anarchy, as an act of rebellion. There is an obvious likeness here to environmentalist action and philosophy, as a refusal to renounce the world, in the face of what authorities have built and abused. This becomes more pronounced in the anti-civilisation philosophy of individualist anarchist Feral Faun's thought on pan-eroticism – an experience of mad love and appreciation for the living wild world that is inhuman. There is also something similar to this in environmentalist author Daniel Quinn's environmentalism-as-fighting-for-what-you-want-or-desire.

With my personal direct anarchist praxis, one of the aspects of Camus' thought that resonates most with me, and what I think is perhaps most needed for environmentalist discourse, is that which he expounds in the statement – “integrity has no need for rules”. Here Camus, in many ways, is rejecting what would usually be considered moral limits. Now, he isn't stating that “anything is permitted”, in the way that people often think amoral philosophy argues. He is actually stating that, if you have an experience of integrity, as a personal commitment to authentic desire, you will not obey the morality of laws and rules that support terrible structures of abuse and tyranny. Following this, from an eco-absurdist perspective, if we have a sense of integrity, environmentalists do not need rules or laws to dictate their choices.

At the core of Camus's philosophy is rebellion and revolt.

There is one more Camus work I will reference here, due to its relevance regarding Covid-19, which is *The Plague*. Put simply, the book is about a French Algerian city dealing with a disease. But more than this, it is a work about individuals finding themselves within situations where they are powerless, in the sense of having no ability to control what is happening in the world, while being powerful, in the sense of having the ability to make decisions and being able to affect other living beings. There is a certain inhumanism to the novel that is reminiscent of Robinson Jeffers' poetry and darker shades of environmentalist discourses, especially for pessimists like myself. What Camus communicates to his reader through this novel, which is of most relevance to eco-absurdism, is this –

“I have no idea what's awaiting me, or what will happen when this all ends. For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing.”

This offers neither promises and hope, nor the abandoning of courage, self-piteous renunciation or defeatism, with an unapologetic embrace of life that accepts uncertainty.

Kierkegaard's philosophy follows from this quite fluidly, with its main focus being freedom. Kierkegaard rejected the Hegelian dialectic of reconciling contradictions, in favour of embracing the either/or of choice. He noted that we are confronted by situations where we experience both an inability to act and a need to act. This is extremely relevant to the ecological situation, as we obviously have to act, but also are unable to do anything. We cannot, as Kierkegaard would put it, think our way out of these choices; we have to live our choices. Ecological resistance and rebellion is something we live, as we live our absurd lives in this unreasonable world.

The terrible quality to this situation and the freedom we cannot escape, but must live, is of course the source of eco-anxiety, which is prevalent today. Anxiety is central to Kierkegaard's ideas on freedom. Anxiety includes an awareness of freedom, of our being free, having always been free, and with it the terror of responsibility that freedom includes. So, anarchists, be both joyous and horrified, anarchy is here and there is no being saved from it.

I am now going to move onto Shestov's absurdist philosophy. Shestov is one of those philosophers who I both wish were more widely read and ideas talked about, and think that it is probably better, in many ways, that he isn't better known – as better known brilliant philosophers are often subject to bad faith readings, which distort their positions.

At the core of Shestov's philosophy of despair is an embrace of uncertainty. The ecological situation presents a space of uncertainty, which we are attempting to navigate through. Shestov states this on the matter –

“The obscure streets of life do not offer the conveniences of the central thoroughfares: no electric light, no gas, not even a kerosene lamp-bracket. There are no pavements: the traveller has to fumble his way in the dark. If he needs a light, he must wait for a thunderbolt, or else, primitive-wise, knock a spark out of a stone.”

If we take this line of thought with us, as we explore the uncertainty of the ecological situation, then we are reliant upon primitive methods of exploration and the primordial energies of what Deleuze called dark precursors– events that seemingly come out of nowhere, with untraceable origins, such as a thunderbolt, or even coronavirus. In his thoughts on Dark Ecology, Timothy Morton argues for a similar approach to ecological thinking – where we are exploring the uncanny terrain of the strange yet familiar – that embraces weirdness.

There is also a rebellious quality to Shestov's absurdist philosophy, which is highly relevant to environmental thought, embodied in his statement that –

“The business of philosophy is to teach man to live in uncertainty – man who is supremely afraid of uncertainty, and who is forever hiding himself behind this or the other dogma. More briefly, the business of philosophy is not to reassure people but to upset them.”

Take a second to feel the texture of that thought for a moment. Explore the dark terrain of the idea on your tongue.

Environmental thinking is not comfortable, nice or reassuring. As environmentalists, regardless of any scientific, spiritual or other form of reasoning, we are bringing a world of massive uncertainty to peoples attention.

There holds in this position of Shestov an intensely anarchistic quality. If we consider philosophy to be an exploration of interpretations of truth with the role of philosopher's being to upset people by encouraging people to explore uncertainty, with the uncertainty that environmental thought brings, much of what we do as environmentalists is working towards upsetting most people's dispositions. This fits a discordian chaos magick practice called guerrilla ontology, where practitioners use a variety of rhetoric and psychic nomadic techniques to challenge

dogmas, pre-conceived ideas and authoritarian ideologies – this is best known in Robert Anton Wilson’s “operation mind fuck”.

There seems here to me to be a space for environmentalists and anarchists to explore. If environmental thinking includes this quality of exploring the absurdist space of uncertainty, perhaps intensifying uncertainty is our best means of accelerating environmental thinking.

Something else Shestov states, to expand upon this –

“Really, everything we see is mysterious and incomprehensible. A tiny midge and a huge elephant, a caressing breeze and a blizzard, a young tree and a rocky mountain – what are all these? What are they, why are they? We incessantly ask ourselves, but we may not speak out.”

There is a weird, dark and mystical quality to environmental thought, as an aesthetic. Many pagan and magic practices embrace this aesthetic quality of weird incomprehensibility and unreasonable desire. The American mountaineer and explorer Muir stated “The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness” – and with this thought, we might remember that the universe isn’t somewhere ordinary and comfortable, full of light and easy to navigate through, with stable unchanging bodies; it is weirdly dark, full of dark matter with no-Things, mysterious, incomprehensive and greater than our human limitations.

But how do we wander through this darkness? What is the point of continuing on through the dark, when there is little to no light anywhere? Is it possible to live through uncertainty?

I have attempted to consider these questions and articulate an absurd – perhaps some-what ridiculous – answer.

I wrote a short story called Mesodma, about one of the mammalian creatures who lived through the mass extinction event that killed off most of the dinosaurs. With the skies blackened from the meteor’s impact, the world would have been intensely dark, both visually and psychically. In my story, the mesodma who is “our friend” wanders through this darkness without anything that could be considered a “reason”, but out of a primal irrational desire for life. They embrace the darkness, become stronger for it, they mate, all with no point to do so. There is no comfortable conclusion to the story, as it just ends with “our friend” dying, after a life of struggle.

This might not seem sensible. This is not stating that there is some point to this experience we call life. It is just stating that we simply do it, regardless of the struggles and suffering that go with being alive.

And there you have it, I hope. If you have received this as I had intended, then you will have a feeling of absurdity. And here we are, ending where we began, as we began at the end. In many ways, we have gone no-where, achieved nothing, the effort was pointless and that is just it. We live out our freedom, as limited creatures, immersed in uncertainty, in the darkness of the world that offers no reason. If we desire life and have an experience of integrity, then we will rebel, because, as Camus stated, I rebel, therefore we exist. And I will finish this with one last Camus quote, this time from an essay by him titled Create Dangerously – “That’s just it and yet that’s not it; the world is nothing and the world is everything – this is the tireless cry of every true artist, the cry that keeps him on his feet with eyes ever open and that, every once in a while, awakens for all in this world asleep the fleeting and insistent image of a reality we recognise without ever having known it.”

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