Existentialism is an Environmentalism: Sartre and Wilderness

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"Others, who try to prove their existence is necessary, when man's appearance on earth is merely contingent, I will call bastards." - Jean-Paul Sartre

Despite, or perhaps in part due to its imperfections, Existentialism is a Humanism stands as a powerful introduction towards 20th C. existentialist thought. In the lecture, Sartre describes the human condition in primarily negative terms; individuals lack an internal essence beyond what is created by their commitments while nothing in the world speaks as to guide one's choices. One of Sartre's goals for the lecture was to connect these negative claims with his positive advocacy of committed responsibility for one's actions. Particularly, he advocates a humanist project of promoting people's ability to make free decisions and to realize themselves through the pursuit of goals that reach beyond their own selves.

The aim of this paper is to initiate a reading of Sartrean existentialism for the environmentalist. Ultimately, this paper suggests that a non-anthropocentric conservationist theme can be found in Sartre's description of the human condition and his advocacy of willing freedom. By encountering reasons for why commitment to freedom matters, while also denying the possibility of antecedent structure of value required to justify a special ethical status of humans, an environmentalist reading of Existentialism is a Humanism can modify Sartre's position toward the conclusion that the avoidance of self-deception requires a concern for environmental stewardship and the conservation of
wildlife and wild lands through exercising a restrained non-imposition of our will upon the freedom of others, human and non-human alike.

There is very little work relating the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre to environmentalism and conservationism. And it is perhaps understandable that those compelled by glacier lilies, white pine, and wolves might overlook the Parisian urbanite whose primary examples tend to focus upon waiting for absent friends in bars and cafes. Although there are exceptive passages within Sartre's work - which this paper will highlight - Sartre's writing tends to focus upon anthropocentric and humanist concerns. And it would be a misrepresentation of Sartre to read him as a natural fit for environmentalism; for example, his emphasis upon human subjectivity could easily irritate the more naturalistically minded conservationist. However, Sartre's phenomenological methodology also recognizes the fundamental status of "the environment" and its irredubibly subject independent dimension as a fundamental component of the human condition. This particular environmentalist reading of Sartre will begin on this common ground.

**Existence Precedes Essence**

Sartre claims that the cogito is the sole point of departure for the views expressed in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (EH).ii Phenomenology and a broadly Cartesian methodology form the starting points for most of Sartre's initial work, although Sartre's conclusions radically diverge from those of Descartes, especially regarding the possibility of a clear distinction between mind and world and the existence of a deity. "Existentialism," Sartre writes, "is merely an attempt to draw all of the conclusions inferred by a consistently atheistic point of view."iii And so, it is important to distinguish between Descartes'
conclusion and the broadly Cartesian methodology employed by Sartre. Specifically, Sartre's two remarks on the human condition and the ethical implications he attempts to draw from his observations grow from a phenomenological analysis of choice.

When the phenomenological lens is utilized for introspective reflection, Sartre arrives to the preclusion of any pre-conscious mental feature that can simultaneously allow for both the subjective appearance of a choice to appear, as such, whilst also providing definitive guidance for any given decision. Thus, the first existentialist observation on the human condition is merely that nothing in our mind makes our decisions for us. For the purpose of clarifying Sartre's advocacy towards freedom willing freedom, reflective phenomenology should be seen as dealing with what Sartre characterizes as "despair," the precondition that inquiry - conducted under a Cartesian methodology - limit itself to "reckoning only with those things that depend on our will, or on the set of probabilities that enable action."iv While sociobiology and other sciences have taught us that there are certain pre-conscious aspects of every individual that influence one's thoughts, feelings, and actions in ways we do not control, these influences are irrelevant to questions about the phenomenology of choice.

In *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre argues for his transparency of consciousness claim, that it is impossible, via introspection, to encounter any aspect of consciousness that could potentially form a basis of freely willed personality that inclines a person towards any given pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior.v If we reflect on our conscious experience of anything and attempt to abstract away whatever it is we are conscious of then we are left with nothing, according to Sartre. Consciousness, and everything we encounter upon serious reflection, is dependent upon ourselves as first encountering the raw materials for
intentional objects as existing in the world. Unlike Descartes, Sartre's inquiry does not lead to a disembodied dualism, but rather what Mark Rowlands has characterized as a "radical reversal of idealism."vi According to Sartre, introspection shows that our minds are constituted by our surroundings.

Even something as central to choice as "the will" is for Sartre, and encountered in the world. The will towards certain actions appear to us as the luring possibilities and demands of situations. We do not see within ourselves, for instance, a will to save Pierre, but rather see Pierre as having-to-be-helped. We encounter our own will and our adopted reasons in the form of environmental affordances. In his public lecture, Sartre takes the transparency claim as more or less given, and presents it as a starting point for existentialism in general, as encapsulated by the slogan, "existence precedes essence."vii

Within application of a Cartesian methodology, Sartre claims that "Existentialism" expresses the doctrine that "every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity."viii While endorsing the establishment of an intrinsic connection subjectivity and environment, an environmentalist reader is still warranted as viewing Sartre's claim as being from a very uncommon ground. Fortunately, there is still space within existentialism to criticize Sartre's limited focus on human subjectivity.

Initially, the cogito only provides one with a disclosure of subjectivity, but does not provide the means for the "human" qualification. In Being and Nothingness, Sartre attempts to address potential problems with solipicism in his section on "the Look," to which Sartre vaguely refers in EH as the cogito's disclosure of others.ix To briefly explain, Sartre claims that our natural reaction to the gaze of others is to experience certain non-solipistic assuming emotions, such as shame, which we naturally act upon. Therefore, for all practical
purposes, we are compelled to act in, and perceive the world, as though we share it with other subjects. However, the environmentalist has room to argue that "the look" can equally be used to describe our encounter with non-human subjectivity. Moreover, because of Sartre's "radical reversal of idealism" it seems most consistent to confess that we find nothing within our own conscious experience to serve as grounds for the exceptionalism of human, versus non-human, sentience. The question lies beyond the scope of Cartesian methodology and the certitude with which Sartre aims to ground his claims.

"Abandonment" is the second key concept in Sartre's existentialist account of the human condition. Sartre affirms Dostoyevsky's statement that, "If God does not exist, everything is permissible" and denies the possibility of encountering any human-independent source of value or ethics. "Abandonment" is the environmental analog of consciousness's "nothingness" and characterizes the experience one has when reflective awareness shows that nothing in the world provides a meter of value that could determine the outcome of any given choice.

While this rejection of non-anthropogenically encountered value may chafe some environmentalists, Sartre’s use of "abandonment" should neither be understood as precluding restraints upon human behavior, i.e. that every action is possible, nor as a rejection of the intrinsic value of nature and the wild. Towards the first point, Sartre emphasizes the importance that constraints upon action have in how we perceive the world. In Being and Nothingness he calls these constraints the "co-efficients of adversity" that facilitate or frustrate the efficacy of our projects, once these projects are adopted. Sartre writes,

In particular the coefficient of adversity in things can not be an argument against our freedom, for it is by us - i.e., by the preliminary positing of an end
- that this coefficient of adversity arises. A particular crag, which manifests a
profound resistance if I wish to displace it, will be, on the contrary, a valuable
aid if I want to climb upon it in order to view the countryside. In itself - if one
can even imagine what a crag can be in itself - it is neutral; that is, it waits to
be illuminated by an end in order to manifest itself as adverse or helpful.xi

Certain environmental considerations, represented above by the crag, matter to our
various projects. Likewise, most anthropocentric arguments for taking such things as
climate change seriously lie in the fact that certain causal systems produce truths that are
inconvenient for the pursuit of incompatible projects. We can freely adopt the combined
project of utilizing current levels of fossil fuel consumption whilst also trying to preserve
the climate stability of the planet, but the coefficients of adversity brought about by how
carbon-dioxide traps heat, doom such projects to failure. The environmental existentialist
can thus claim that while we are free to choose what we will, not addressing climate change
and hoping for a sustainable future makes as much sense as hoping to survive an
unprotected climb up "the Diamond" on Longs Peak while wearing roller skates.

Toward the second point, Sartre's discussion of "abandonment" need not be read as
a rejection of the possibility of intrinsic value within nature. Rather, it can be understood as
emphasizing the indeterminate relationship free-willed agents have toward the encounter
of any value. In EH Sartre says, "even if God were to exist, it would make no difference,"xii
meaning that even if we were to encounter values in the world we still independently
determine our relationship to those values every time we make a choice. Sartre's inclusion
of "abandonment" as part of the human condition should be qualified as meaning that the
only values which motivationally interact with our world-view are precisely those to which
we bind ourselves through acts of commitment.
At this point, there seems to be a contradiction within existentialist philosophy that parallels metaethical debates regarding whether value is a human projection or some sort of quality that is disclosed to us. On one hand, Sartre’s internal reflection places both reasons and evidence of the will as external to the consciousness as it appears to us. However, he also claims that reasons cannot compel us toward any action. While not going too far down a metaethical tangent, Sartre’s discussion of possibilities provides a sketch of an answer,

I operate within a realm of possibilities. But we credit such possibilities only to the strict extent that our action encompasses them. From the moment that the possibilities I am considering cease to be rigorously engaged by my action, I must no longer take interest in them. . .

To reconcile our independence from value with the claim that we encounter reasons for action as environmental affordances, one could say that while we encounter situations as having luring possibilities and demands, when choice is involved there is always just enough hesitation and uncertainty to provide a moment’s questioning of one’s relationship to the perceived demands of the world. In this way, reasons and values are not identifiable as such until they are acted upon with commitment.

To illustrate this point, consider an open landscape or a rugged mountainside. More than any other area, due to its relative lack of pre-designated signs, boardwalks, and other behavioral clues, wilderness areas provide more opportunities for spontaneous exploration than we can pursue at a time; new paths emerge the instant we change route to follow a certain way. Our projects and the environment cooperate to produce affordances whose existence as a value we either choose to see or not. And again, as is the case with global warming, some choices present dead ends. Reading Sartre as describing value as
manifest in endorsed affordances enables one to begin reconciling the issue of whether values are endorsed or projected within his existentialist philosophy.

Using "abandonment" to describe the human condition and declaring that values are disclosed through our commitment to them need not be understood as claiming that humans, as a group, are special fountains of inter-species value. Sartre calls this sort of metaethical anthropocentricism "absurd, for only a dog or a horse would be in a position to form an overall judgment about man and declare that he is amazing, which animals scarcely seem likely to do - at least as far as I know." In fact, Sartre asserts that the worship of humanity, as an end, leads to Fascism. With this non-anthropocentric assurance, we can justifiably read Sartre's emphasis on human subjectivity and abandonment as following from his attempt to remain within the limits of the cogito, rather than from a potentially objectionable slighting of the non-human. Because Sartre is a human, his methods will be anthropogenic, but the values to which existentialism leads one to commit need not, themselves, be anthropocentric. Because Sartre utilizes the cogito as a starting point, his goal is not comparative between humans and animals; rather, he merely seeks to address the way in which he and his intended human audience encounter, internalize, and avow certain values through practice.

Under the environmentalist reading pursued here, it makes sense to speak of value for anything with which it also makes sense to associate with the having of an opportunity. In this way, a broadly Sartrean existentialism takes a step towards environmental ethics that is somewhat parallel to Paul Taylor's basing respect for nature upon respect for centers of autonomous choice. Rather than view "abandonment" as a threat to proclaiming the value of nature and wild places, environmentalist existentialists can utilize
"abandonment" as a blockade against any arguments that attempt to assign an *a priori* privilege to mankind and their ends, where these compete with the well being of the natural world. The existentialist is free to reject any assumption that humans have an ethical right to unduly harm ecosystems for the benefit of man. When a person takes such a position, the environmental existentialist can hold him or her responsible for freely adopting these values.

**The Will to Freedom**

By combining his view of consciousness with the condition of "abandonment" Sartre arrives at basis for the condition he calls "despair" or "anguish." This condition is caused by the recognition that although ultimately unguided, our choices nevertheless express a commitment to that which is chosen. And it is through "despair" that Sartre initiates his Kantian style argument for the normative universalizability of the "will to freedom."

"Despair" signifies the fact that every time we act we project ourselves into the world, affirming some values, rejecting others, and avowing to act upon those affirmed, especially when we make decisions that are pivotal to choosing or own particular form of life. Sartre writes,

Choosing to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose [i.e. project it beyond our own subjectivity as an end for our subjective project], because we can never choose evil. If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for our whole era. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we might have supposed, because it concerns all mankind.xvii

Choosing a particular way of life requires us to proceed as if there is something choice-worthy about going about in such and such a way. Moreover, because our consciousness is
nothing more than consciousness of something, the choice is experienced as being motivated by a commitment to the value of what we choose.

Sartre’s connection between the existentialist slogan, "existence precedes essence" and the universalizing nature of choice is the crux of his argument towards the importance of choosing freedom, and requires clarification. The point Sartre is trying to get at is that even with careful and reflective relativism, we are forced to, at least minimally, experience our choices as being valid for anyone else who has sufficiently similar circumstances to our own. Sartre reference to the phrase "existence precedes essence" is intended to remind us that given the somewhat transparent nature of consciousness, our condition before any choice is, for the most part, generalizable. Individual situations vary enough to relativise certain considerations, i.e. a winter expedition requires one to choose equipment different than is required to float the Lochsa River. However, in other considerations we all start from the same place; for example, we are all on relatively equal footing regarding whether or not we choose to endorse, to an extent relative to our means, environmental and conservationist concerns. No single person is given a particular essence which relativises their personal decision about whether to endorse anthropocentric or eco-centric values in his or her own ethic.

By focusing on the relationship between commitment and self-deception, Sartre presents the demand that we view our choices as potentially universalizable as a hypothetical, rather than a categorical imperative. Sartre says, "in truth, however, one should always ask oneself, "what would happen if everyone did what I am doing?" The only way to evade that disturbing thought is through some kind of bad faith."xviii Sartre's account of "bad faith" is sufficiently discussed elsewhere, and for current purposes only needs a
cursory description.\textsuperscript{xix} In its two primary forms, it either involves taking one's choices to be over-determined by one's concrete situation, or oppositely, denying responsibility for, and a connection to, the concrete situation a person has because of the choices one makes. Sartre's rejection that people have internal essences, which would be required to pre-determine how one makes choices, is why he concludes that any choice under the assumption of privileged circumstances can only occur alongside self deception, or "bad faith."

At first, a conservationist reader of Sartre might be compelled to imagine the hypocrisy of an outdoor-loving real estate developer provides an example of Sartre's claim. For certainly, one imagines, if everyone instigated sub-urban sprawl then our free willed lands would disappear in short order, and who is the developer to assume the privilege to draw profit from closing up land when certainly everyone cannot do so? This line of thinking, however, would force one towards reading absurdities into the existentialist position. Nothing we do, technically speaking, can be simultaneously done by everyone else in the same place and at the time. Just as we cannot all build our own subdivisions, we also cannot all enjoy the solitude of the wilderness together. Yet there is nothing wrong with enjoying the solitude provided by certain landscapes. After all, many of us sometimes sympathize with Sartre's character when he proclaims, "hell is other people."

To make the most sense out of Sartre's position, it seems best to follow Jonathan Webber's suggestion that we read Sartre as primarily concerned with the choices we make toward the adoption of certain character traits and values.\textsuperscript{xx} Values and virtues are not limited resources for which we compete. This restriction of the sense in which we ought
read Sartre's requirement of generalizability follows Sartre's own path in highlighting how the foremost generalizable project is the promotion of freedom.

The anguished thought that our decisions commit us to the value of what is chosen brings Sartre to his humanistic conclusion that self-consistency demands that our choices reflect an endorsement and promotion of people's ability to make free choices and pursue projects beyond themselves, a position Sartre calls "willing freedom."xxi According to Sartre, any adopted disposition towards action that does not involve a commitment to freedom for oneself and others is only rationally possible if a person hides from himself the existentialist aspects of the human condition. To will a project that unduly denies the ability of others to make choices while making free choices oneself is to deceive oneself into thinking that, antecedent to the choice, there is something special about oneself that warrants the privilege. But to assume this privilege is to endorse “bad faith.” However, this also means that to retain consistency with acknowledgement of abandonment, contradicting the will to freedom cannot be judged on ethical grounds; it can only be described as an "intellectual error" and as self-deception.xxii

Willing freedom, for Sartre, entails that we allow others opportunity to exercise their freedom of choice in a concrete manner through our own pursuit of specific concrete situations which afford others this possibility. Given Sartre's phenomenological conclusions, "freedom" is an empty concept without a concrete situation to provide the environmental affordances about which choices can be made. Avowals toward freedom cannot only be towards the abstract notion, but must have situational import.xxiii Furthermore, to "promote" freedom in the abstract while not taking concrete steps would be an example of the second form of "bad faith," that of not taking responsibility for one's
concrete situation and assuming one’s so called "inner will" is un-diminished by one's concrete inactivity.

Now, certainly every action causes some restrictions, some co-effecients of adversity, upon other agents. However, returning to the crag example above, we should distinguish between the free ability to choose some project and the freedom of that project from obstacles. It is promoting the former, a positive freedom to choose, through promotion of concrete means that Sartre advocates. Nevertheless, this further entails certain forms of negative freedom of special relevance to conservation, specifically the securing for others a freedom from our own imposition upon them.

Conquer Yourself Rather than the World

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre emphasizes how "willing freedom" is relevant to humanists and Marxists, presumably due to a freedom to pursue one's own capabilities and also a freedom from alienation and exploitation. But the environmentalist can ask what ecologically relevant implications can be drawn from the acceptance of Sartre’s advocacy of the project of willing freedom on the grounds presented in his lecture. To initiate this inquiry, consider the following environmentally poignant key passage:

[N]o God or greater design can bend the world and its possibilities to my will. In the final analysis, when Descartes said "Conquer yourself rather than the world," he actually meant the same thing: we should act without hope.xxiv

Here, "acting without hope" by no means entails environmental pessimism. Rather, by "acting without hope," Sartre means that we act upon certain possibilities without promise that our place among these possibilities is underwritten by a heavenly system of value. Furthermore, rather than wistfully hoping for a change in the affordances of the world, we
must conquer ourselves by steering our will towards projects to which we can fully commit without hypocrisy, such as the project of freedom.

An existentialist will toward freedom and our embeddedness in a world of possibilities provides ground for an environmental ethic in terms of the preservation of freedom and possibilities in nature. Certainly, there are anthropocentric connections between conservation and human freedom. The preservation of bio-diversity, wildlife, and the wild places where natural history is allowed to proceed on its natural evolutionary course all must be preserved, if not for human survival, than at least in order to retain the possibility of people's having the free choice to explore, learn from, and love these phenomenon. Wilderness advocates have argued along these lines for conservation for a long time by emphasizing the longing some of us feel "for the unharnessed freedom of the big outside" and the importance of preserving opportunities to satiate this desire.xxv Or, moving beyond personal freedom, one might cite Ed Abbey and his recognition of the link between political freedom and wilderness.xxvi

The existentialist position explored here affords moving beyond these anthropocentric reasons by arguing that the preceding of existence over essence, and the condition of abandonment both remove the possibility of merely focusing upon human freedom in our project of willing freedom. Pursuing freedom by adopting self-restraint and a project of non-imposition can be extended beyond the scope of human-to-human interactions. Interference with wildlife, the destruction or altering of the landscape, and interference with the proceedings of evolution are all forms of imposition that are acceptable when necessity pushes such actions beyond the realm of choice. Wilderness
areas are representative of the concrete situations embodying this project of non-imposition.

There are existentialist grounds for arguing that self-willed animals and ecosystems should both be free to pursue the forms of possibilities for which evolution has prepared them. And this means minimizing the reach of human interference with the unfolding of such possibilities, except in instances where human practices have been a co-evolutionary factor for a significant amount of time. The continuation of indigenous communities’ practices, such as the harvesting of camas, Camassia quamash, in Idaho, or the continuation of human interaction with domesticated animals is not necessarily a form of outside interference. Otherwise, imposing one’s will upon a landscape feature, an ecosystem, or an animal in a way that goes against its usual and accustomed history or form of life is an interference with freedom and expression of self-privilege that betray assumptions of bad faith. Such impositions are literally failures to "conquer ourselves rather than the world."

Through advocating a "will to freedom" and the necessity of non-imposition to avoid "bad faith," existentialism implies a "leave no trace" ethic for not only our personal encounters with wilderness areas, but also for societies interactions with our remaining wild places. According to Sartre, "willing freedom" is a project we can adopt without self-deception, conservation is likewise a universalizable project. In fact, the existentialist position adopted here takes a firmer position, allowing one to add that excusing oneself from contributing to the protection of the environment results in both forms of "bad faith." Those who do not actively contribute, within their ability, to environmental protection have either excused themselves from the project of freedom on spurious reasons, or have failed to take responsibility for their concrete situation on the planet.
i ibid. p 40.
ii ibid. p 53.
iv ibid. p 34.
Sartre 2007. p 47.
Sartre 2007. p 47.
Sartre 2007. p 47.
Sartre 2007. p 47.
Sartre 2007. p 47.