**Quietism**

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Standard response to climate crisis: *moral activism* –ie large-scale projects of collective action aimed at radical transformation of society/economy/the world. So standard, in fact, that it might seem difficult to imagine any alternative - eg saving the global environment must be ‘the central organising principle of the world community’ (Al Gore).

Comments on moral activism:

1. It is entrenched in environmental ethics and eco-movements.
2. It is continuous with wider cultural and moral trends (rhetoric of ‘action’, ‘causes’ etc).
3. It is supported by modern moral theories – most focused on large-scale transformation of the world and strong sense that *nothing less will do*.

But we should worry when one way of thinking gets entrenched to the point that it starts to conceal alternatives. Confronted with complex situations, we need all options on the table.

One alternative style of moral practice – *quietism*. Not one thing, of course, but a range of related attitudes and ways of thinking and acting. (Some kinds of quietism have a bad rap – eg quietism-as-pessimistic-defeatism – but these are *specific* and *extreme* forms of quietism).

Why take quietism seriously, given that many environmental activists see it as a non-starter?

1. Not all environmental activists *do* reject (kinds of) quietism – even if they are minority voices against the mainstream rhetoric of radicalism and activism.
2. Quietism is not abandonment of concern or action – even if it involves rejection of, and reticence about, certain *kinds* of concern and *certain* kinds of action.

eg Rupert Read: accept the ‘dire emerging reality of the ecological emergency’ and admit ‘[this] civilization is finished’. No radical action can change *that* outcome.

1. Many ‘green’ philosophies are quietist – eg Buddhism and Daoism, despite the activist ethos of some of their modern admirers (consider the quietist mood of the *Metta Sutta*).

A critic says that quietism is unacceptable: nothing less then radical action will do! Well…

1. Quietists urge action, but want us to be more realistic about what we could accomplish. Encouraging unrealistic hopes sets us up for failure and can feed ‘ecological grief’.

eg those who (absurdly) present entomophagy as ‘simple and obvious’ (*The Insect Cookbook*) or talk of the ‘mild inconvenience’ of going vegan (Pearce).

1. Activist determination to launch big, radical projects may be part of the problem – our self-aggrandising desires to control / reshape the natural world (the German philosopher Heidegger connected our ‘gigantism’ to our ‘devastation of the natural world’).

A lot of harm in the world is caused by inept attempts to improve things – big projects on the grand scale build in serious risks of backfires and unintended consequences.

So, we do better to think of quietism, not as pessimism/giving up/indifference, but in terms of a soberer and more modest realism about our moral situation. And if things do indeed so badly, we may all find ourselves being forced to take seriously quietist strategies.

IJK