Journal of International and Global Studies

Volume 8 | Number 2 Article 18

4-1-2017

Vogel, S. Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature. Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 2015.

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Steven Vogel's philosophical musings in *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature* are a plea to his profession to recognize a "postnatural" world that he claims is forged out of the extinction of nature. He urges his discipline "to develop an environmental philosophy that would acknowledge and maybe even approve of nature's 'end'…" (p. 9). It is a bold plea that recasts the debate on nature within the humanities and challenges the mainstream environmental thinking that has long been committed to the enduring concept of nature. Ironically, Vogel is making this plea at a time when some on the opposite pole are observing the ushering in of a "posthuman" world (Alaimo, 2010; Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Wolf, 2003; Hayles, 1999; Latour, 1999; Pickering, 1995), in which humans have been knocked off the pedestal as the "crown jewel of creation" to become simply one of the world's species, instead of *the* species. Arne Naess (1973) calls this repositioning "species egalitarianism."

Are we in a "postnatural" world, as Vogel believes, or a "posthuman" one? Vogel fervently supports the notion of a postnatural world and is anthropocentric in his description of human-nature relationship. His postnatural world is a world of human ascendance, which some environmental thinkers and philosophers, including Bill McKibben (1989), argue has heralded the very "end of nature." Indeed, some, like McKibben, bemoan this loss, yet it is the notion of the end of nature that animates Vogel's contention to re-found environmental philosophy on the vision of a new world—of 'postnaturalism.' His plea for refounding environmental philosophy rests on five major arguments.

Nature is Dead

First, Vogel says, there is hardly any piece of nature left that does not bear the scars of human impact. This pervasive anthropogenic modification has virtually humanized nature and naturalized humans. Apart from its residence in conventional environmental thinking, Vogel claims, 'nature' has never existed independent of human impact. To him, the notion of nature in its pristine state has been a fiction since the dawn of time. He dismisses Bill McKibben's lament of the end of nature as a lament over something that never existed. He urges his readers to give up on the fiction of pure nature (untouched by humans), arguing that "the *concept* of 'nature' is one that we ought to give up, one whose loss might actually mean an improvement in the quality and rigor of thinking about the human relationship to the environment we inhabit (and which, by inhabiting, we are always already transforming [and] have always already transformed)" (p. 9). In place of the concept of nature, he inserts "environment" (*i.e.*, that which surrounds us) (p. 30). He admits that our "environment is no longer (and maybe never was) a 'natural' one" and concedes that "terms like 'natural' or 'unnatural' are useless under present conditions" (p. 30).

Social Construction of Nature

Second, Vogel regards the human transformation of nature as a social construction. To reach this conclusion, he makes several detours through social constructionism as a perspective, its application to nature, and a critique thereof—critiquing both the perspective and its application. He first clarifies what he believes to be a misapplication of the concept and asserts that nature itself is *not* a social construction. He argues, "If nature is already gone, or if we can make no coherent sense of what 'nature' actually means, then it scarcely seems helpful to call it a social construction" (p. 33). He then declares, "That our ideas about nature are social and have a

history is obvious, and is indeed a commonplace. But [this] does not make nature itself social or a 'construction'" (p. 35). He also dismisses the assertions of those environmentalists who believe what is underway is the "social destruction of nature." Yet again, Vogel counterargues that something that never existed cannot be destroyed. It is then that he presents his understanding of the social construction of the human transformation of nature. In this way, he links his idea of the built environment with social construction and distinguishes the latter from its conventional perspectival usage.

Alienation from Built Environment

Third, Vogel contests the mainstream environmentalist argument (made by McKibben, among others) that modern humans have grown "alienated" from nature. If there is no nature left, he argues, grieving over human alienation from nature is a waste of tears. He then enlists Marx's concept of alienation to further his argument: "We are alienated from the built environment, not from nature" (p. 67). Vogel contests "the unquestioned identification of environment with nature, and the view of the latter as a realm independent of human beings and human practices," describing it as being "itself a symptom of our alienation" (p. 67). Foster and Clark (2016) blame human "alienation" on capitalism, which, as viewed by Marx himself, is responsible for exploiting both 'human labor' and 'external nature,' a distinction that Vogel rejects.[1] Marx, as Foster (2016) argues, viewed "the human relation to nature as a form of social metabolism," which "found itself increasingly in contradiction" with industrial capitalism. Says Foster, "This break with [what Marx called] the 'eternal natural condition underlying human-social existence' demanded a 'restoration' through the rational regulation of the metabolism between humanity and nature" (2016). Vogel, however, steers clear of engaging a capitalism that is responsible for both the immiseration of a wide swath of humanity and the destruction of nature.

Parity between Human Artifacts and Natural Artifacts

Fourth, Vogel defends his proposed substitute for nature—the built environment—by characterizing it as consisting of human artifacts, which he distinguishes from natural artifacts. Indeed, he thinks any search for natural artifacts is illusory, as nature has already seen its end. In a still another turnaround, he sets out to explore commonalities between human artifacts and natural artifacts to show that both are in fact 'natural.' Referring to his concept of constructionism, he notes that the point of constructionism

> is not simply to point out the "artifactuality of nature," [or] the ways in which [the] natural can always be shown to possess something of the mark of human action behind it, but rather . . . to talk about the "nature of artifacts," the way in which the items we have built . . . possess the same sort of ontological independence as the unexamined wilderness, the wild mountain crevasses, the depths of the ocean, the untrammeled other planets that are always maintained in opposition when constructionists express skepticism about "nature." (pp. 168-169)

In conclusion, he declares the merger of both the human and non-human worlds, saying, "There's one world, not two: the real one, in which humans, their natural artifacts, and their artefactual nature all exist together" (p. 170). In this one world, he sees parallels between the human manufacture of an item like a key chain and nature's creation of a beaver's dam or a spider's web. In Vogel's opinion, "The dams of beavers and the web[s] of spiders are presumably natural; why are the dams built by humans or the polyester fabrics weaved by humans not [also] so?" (p. 11). He poses for the reader the following questions: Are humans

separate from nature or part of nature? If it is the latter—as he argues it is—then whatever humans do is 'natural.' As he asserts, "If humans are natural, then their burning of fossil fuels or their use of chlorofluorocarbons would seem to be natural too, [indistinguishable] in terms of naturalness. . . from the activities that other organisms engage in" (p. 11).

"Thinking like a Mall"

Finally, using the groundwork he laid with his preceding arguments, Vogel wants the reader to consider the similarities between the "demise" of nature and the destruction of man-made "ecosystems" like malls.[2] To illustrate his point, he bemoans the demise of City Central Mall in Columbus, Ohio, which he morosely notes was blown up with a wrecking ball to raise on its ruins a public park. Mourning the demise of the mall, he deems a public park an unworthy substitute. He variously calls the mall a "human artifact" and a "built environment," and elevates it to the level of a "natural being." He wonders why we don't find the artifacts of the built environment—like the City Central Mall—worth preserving as we do their natural counterparts. He claims, "The mall, in a way, was an ecosystem, . . . something like the 'land' that Leopold talks of when he presents his land ethic, a 'biotic community,' like the mountain he wants to learn to think like" (p. 157). Vogel even asks his readers to accord "moral consideration" to the mall and other mall-like human architecture and artifacts. He says:

> [I]f living things deserve moral consideration because of their teleological character, or if abiotic natural entities such as rocks deserve protection from human intervention because they possess what [Keekok] Lee calls "trajectories" independent of us, or if biotic communities should be respected and preserved because of their unimaginable complexity and the difficulty we face in "thinking like" their members, then it seems to me that something similar would have to be said about City Center as well. (p.162)

From here, he springboards to the next level of argumentation to claim moral consideration for the mall. In this vein, he wants "to ask what it might mean to think like a mall, or whether thinking like one might help us better understand our environment, at least as well as thinking like a mountain would" (p. 136), though this argument might have been more effective if he had dropped his reliance on the personification of inanimate objects and instead opted to wonder whether thinking *of* a mall as we think of mountains would help us understand the value of our built environment.

The Nirvana of 'Discursive Democracy'

Vogel ends the volume with a call for 'discursive democracy' as a solution to the environmental problems of our time, and more importantly to preserve "the commons," which is what he calls the non-man made environment, emphasizing not its natural or inherent "specialness" but its availability to all humans. His argument for discursive democracy is hardly original, however, as it is largely based on Habermas's (1998a) communicative action theory. Unfortunately, we have already seen the limitations of discursive democracy—which environmental modernization theorists also grandly call "ecological democracy"—in the hijacking of the processes of environmental and social impact assessments by developers and big businesses, and the lip service paid to the outward trappings of these processes, in the form of public hearings and stakeholders' participation in public decision-making. Vogel's concern for the "commons" seems at best faux, given that he argues throughout the book that we have seen the end of nature and equates natural phenomena to "ingenious" human artifacts such as key

chains, automobiles, and shopping malls. His disdain for nature is summed up in the opening chapter of his book, which is entitled "Against Nature."

Vogel's fundamental premise is the that we have seen end of nature, an argument that humanities scholars such as Bill McKibben have also declared to their dismay. Unlike Vogel, who encourages readers to recast and accept nature's demise, McKibben considers the destruction of nature a travesty and calls for humans to cease trampling upon nature and reverse their expanding ecological footprint. Indeed, McKibben's declaration of the end of nature is made with a sigh of regret, while Vogel's acceptance of the end of nature appears to serve as a sigh of relief. Having nature sent to its grave, Vogel urges his readers to preserve the built environment, and regret *its* loss. He writes, "I want to ask quite seriously . . . about why we find the loss of a life, or of a mountain, a matter of regret and yet feel nothing similar about the loss of piece of the built environment" (p.136).

The Problem with 'Naturalizing' Human Behavior

This is a radical argument that Vogel rests on three assumptions: first, that humans are part of nature and, thus, everything that humans do is "natural"; second, that nature is commensurable to human substitutes; and third, that the end of nature is indisputable. McKibben (1998) dismissed the first assumption as a "debater's point, a semantic argument" (p.64), which Vogel perceives as "name calling" (p.11) and asks McKibben to rather engage the argument.

As the naturalizing of human behavior is Vogel's central argument, let's engage it. Vogel's assumption that everything that humans do is "natural" is fraught with dangerous social and environmental implications. Would Vogel excuse his students cheating on an exam because everything that humans do is "natural"? Would he excuse his advisees guilty of plagiarism because everything that humans do is "natural?" Cheating and plagiarism may be considered minor social infractions, but Vogel's assumption of "naturalizing" human behavior has even worse social implications. Would the criminal justice system cease to prosecute the heinous offenses of rape, robberies, and homicides under the assumption that everything that humans do is "natural?" What about racism? Sexism? Homophobia? Violence? Would all these offenses be defended as natural human behaviors?

In terms of environmental implications, this assumption would "naturalize" every single disaster that humans have wrought on nature and, by extension to themselves, such as global climate change, greenhouse gas emissions, fossil fuel extraction, deforestation, species extinction, ocean acidification, and land-air-and-water pollution. According to Vogel's logic, such human transgressions of nature would be regarded as just as "natural" as a beaver's dam or a spider's web. By the same token, it would render environmental enforcement superfluous. Since everything that humans do is "natural" in Vogel's postnatural world, there would be no need for prosecuting polluters, founding organizations like the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), or legislating on behalf of nature, as has been done via the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, or Endangered Species Act.

Vogel's logic of naturalizing human behavior is flawed for having failed to account for a wide variation in human conduct. Beavers and spiders, for instance, are "naturally" wired to build dams and weave webs. They cannot deviate from their instinctual behavior, *i.e.*, their nature. But human behaviors vary across time and space, and across the social categories of race, class, and gender. The homicide rate in Japan, for example, is a fraction of what we observe in the United States. This difference is attributed to social rather than natural factors. Human conduct towards nature similarly varies, and, as such, not all humans are in favor of burning

fossil fuels, for example. There are millions of those who occupy the opposite end of the spectrum and who wish to put a stop to the burning of fossil fuels and keep the remaining two trillion tons of yet-to-be-combusted carbons buried in the ground (IPCC, 2013). Not all humans are enamored of hydraulic fracturing, either. In a similar vein, deforesting by the timber industry is pervasive across the globe, but there are millions of those who are hugging, sitting in, and spiking trees to keep the world forested. So if everything that humans do is "natural," then which of these human behaviors is "natural," burning fossil fuels or keeping them in the ground? Fracking or stopping the fracking? Felling trees or hugging, sitting in, and spiking them to prevent their destruction?

Is Nature Substitutable?

The second assumption that Vogel makes is about nature's substitutability with what he calls the built environment. In this spirit, he elevates a shopping mall to a naturally occurring living and non-living organisms, and even assigns it a "moral considerability." Is nature substitutable? Is there any substitute for a breath of air? A drink of water? The organic matter to grow food? The biosphere to sustain life? Sadly, human solutions, when introduced and substituted for nature's efforts, have often resolved one issue and created many more in the process. Take the example of hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), which were developed to replace ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). Ironically, HCFCs are 1,000 times more potent as a planet-warming pollutant than CO2. Replacing organic matter with artificial fertilization has not only led to poisoning of the soil, but its run-off in mid-western United States has created dead-zones thousands of miles away in the Gulf of Mexico. Hydrocarbons have been developed as an ingenious source of fuel to power the global industrial machine, but their emissions have engendered the biggest-ever threat in global climate change to human survival.

'End of Nature'

Many of Vogel's arguments are built out of his overarching theme of the end of nature, which is a fraught assumption in its own right. If nature has ended, why is the study of natural sciences still thriving (Foster & Clark, 2016)? Elsewhere, Foster (2016) has given a thorough account of nature and its materiality, or what Marx described the "eternal natural condition underlying human social existence" (Foster, 2016). Similarly, McKibben explains what he actually means by the end of nature: "When I say that we have ended nature, I don't mean, obviously, that natural processes have ceased—there is still sunshine and still wind, still growth, still decay. Photosynthesis continues, as does respiration. *But we have ended the thing that has, at least in modern times, defined nature for us—its separation from human society*" (p.64). Hawken (2008) documents millions of environmental organizations operating around the world to save nature and the natural environment, a fact that contradicts Vogel's assertion regarding the end of nature.

Nature exists regardless of human perception or any social construction of it. An empirical measure of nature's existence is the continuation of ecosystem services—services that nature performs, like the pollination of food and fruit crops by butterflies and the natural pest-killing services provided by birds (Carson, 1962)—the ongoing performance of which shows that pronouncing the demise of nature is both premature and exaggerated. The United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security values ecosystem services at $125 trillion a year (Zommers, et al., 2014). To put this astronomical monetary value in perspective, the global economy, which included all human artifacts and the built environment produced in

2015, was valued at just $73.17 trillion (Statista, 2016)—almost half of the value of ecosystem services. Without nature, there cannot be any human artifacts or built environment. Had the end of nature that Vogel so fervently embraces actually taken place, it would have spelled the end of all life on this planet.

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[1] Biologist Edward Wilson (2006; 1984) contests the notion that humans have grown "alienated" from nature, arguing that humans are tied to nature in a biophilic relationship.

[2] In his work, the author personifies both human artifacts (such as malls) and natural artifacts (such as mountains) and encourages the reader to "think like" such inanimate objects. However, given that malls are not demolishing *themselves* (just as mountains are not preserving themselves), it is unclear how encouraging readers to "think like" these entities illustrates his intended message. Vogel should instead entreaty humans to "think of malls the way they think of mountains," attributing the same wonder to man-made ecosystems that is normally attributed to 'natural' ones. Any analogy Vogel may wish to have made between the man-made built environment and the natural environment is weakened due to his reliance on a literary device that becomes incoherent in the context in which it is used.

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