Is "Nature" Out of the Woods? Defending the Relevance of "Nature" in Our Ecological Crisis

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Abstract

This essay examines whether environmental philosophy should retain or abandon a commitment to "nature," in light of widespread human influence on the planet. Classic moral arguments in environmental ethics, like those of Taylor (1986) and Katz (1997), sought to improve our environmental practices by defending nature's intrinsic value. However, contrastive "postnaturalist" arguments, from McKibben (1989) and Vogel (2015), maintain that nature is already dead, and that accepting this reality is key to improving our environmental practices. In this essay, I evaluate Vogel's claim that environmental philosophy should move beyond the concept of "nature." Vogel's criticism of Taylor and Katz's arguments suggests we have good reason to abandon concern for "nature," since moral defences of nature imply problematic artifice-nature distinctions. However, drawing on Plumwood (2005), I argue that highlighting, rather than abandoning, the concept of "nature" is needed to combat anthropocentric "backgrounding" of nature's agency – the dominant thinking underlying our ecological crisis. I draw on Hailwood (2012) to reconceive a monist account of the "natural world," one that acknowledges humanity's continuity with nature and actively "reworks" anthropocentric narratives. The defended "natural world" account provides environmental philosophy with a more robust ethical framework than either classic moral arguments or "postnaturalist" abandonment of "nature."

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§ 0. Introduction

We often think of nature positively. We enjoy practices such as "going bush" or "returning to nature." In these cases, we imagine nature as existing somewhere outside the human domain, beyond our towns and cities. But does thinking of nature in this way mask an unfortunate truth? Human activity has and continues to radically alter the planet. Approximately ninety-five per cent of Earth's landmass has been modified by human industry.[2] Our pollution is not only warming the atmosphere but raising ocean temperatures and altering weather patterns globally,[3] likely resulting in widespread transformation of ecosystems. In *The End of Nature* (1989), McKibben proposed: if "nature" is defined as that which is independent of human influence, but we have affected every patch of air, ocean and land through widespread anthropogenic climate change, then nature no longer exists.[4] We are living in an "ecological crisis."[5] And how we ought to protect nature, if it still exists, remains unclear.

In environmental philosophy, how we should conceptualise "nature" has been the subject of extensive discussion. Early environmental ethicists Leopold (1949) and Routley (1973) argued that we need to improve our moral "relations to the natural environment."[6] Taylor (1986) and Katz (1997) expanded these arguments, characterising the properties of natural entities that make them worthy of our moral consideration. "Nature," in environmental philosophy, has since come to mean the nonhuman sphere that is separate and in need of protection from the human sphere.[7] Importantly, the moral arguments from Taylor and Katz share a classic, conceptual approach: thinking about the *intrinsic value of nature* will encourage more thoughtful and ethical treatment of the planet. An alternative approach in environmental philosophy – also aimed at improving our treatment of the planet – has been to move beyond a concern for "nature." Expanding upon McKibben's argument, in *Thinking like a Mall* (2015) Vogel proposed that recognising the entire planet has become "non-natural" confronts us with the consequences of our actions, thereby holding us accountable for the ecological crisis. According to Vogel, *accepting that nature no longer exists* is the more compelling approach for improving our ethical treatment of the planet.

The contrastive approaches of Taylor and Katz, and McKibben and Vogel, pose an unresolved tension. Do we have good reason to uphold a commitment to "nature,"

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[2] Christina M. Kennedy et al., 'Managing the middle: A shift in conservation priorities based on the global human modification gradient', *Global Change Biology* 25, no. 3 (2019): 811–826.

[3] Karina von Schuckmann et al., 'Heat stored in the Earth system: where does the energy go?' *Earth Systems Science Data* 12, no. 3 (2020): 2013–2041.

[4] Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1989, 60.

[5] Lynn White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,' *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.

[6] Routley, Richard, 'Is there a need for a new, an environmental ethic?' *Proceedings of the 15th World Congress of Philosophy*, Sophia: Sophia Press, 1973, 205.

[7] Val Plumwood, and Timothy Heyd eds. 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' *Recognizing the Autonomy of Nature*, (2005): 25.

and to continue defending the moral status of natural things? Or, has the concept of nature become "old hat,"[8] an outdated and problematic concept in our ecological crisis?

In this essay, I will evaluate Vogel's claim that environmental philosophy ought to abandon the concept of and commitment to "nature." To accomplish this, I will examine Vogel's critique of Taylor and Katz's moral defences of nature. Thereafter, I examine Vogel's "postnaturalist"[9] argument that, because we cannot adequately characterise and defend "nature," environmental philosophy ought to prioritise an alternative conceptual and ethical focus: a responsibility to fix our "environment." While I support Vogel's critique of Taylor and Katz's moral arguments, I present two objections to Vogel's postnaturalist argument. Firstly, I argue that Vogel's postnaturalist approach does not significantly shift or improve our ethical focus, since concern for the environment cannot come without some concept of "nature." Secondly, after drawing on Plumwood's (2005) call to reconceptualise problematic, dualist conceptions of "nature," I argue that abandoning the "nature" concept does more harm than good.

Ultimately, I defend the position that environmental philosophy has good reason to retain – but also to "rework"[10] – our concept of nature. After drawing on Hailwood's (2012) framework of alienations and natures, I defend a reconceived, monist concept of "natural world." Such an account drives strong ethical concern by reworking problematic "nature" conceptions, as per Plumwood, and acknowledging the ontological continuity of human artifice and nature, as per Vogel.

§ 1. Moral Considerability

A classic approach in environmental ethics has been to defend the intrinsic value of nature.[11] In this vein, Taylor and Katz argued that nature has intrinsic properties worthy of moral concern. I outline their "moral considerability"[12] arguments below before examining Vogel's critique thereof.

Taylor supposed that, in nature, all living things are "teleological centers": they possess their own set of internally derived goals, e.g. to survive, to reproduce.[13] Once we understand what is beneficial or harmful to an organism's internal goals, we can appreciate that the organism has a sense of its "own wellbeing" or its "own good,"

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[8] Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium: FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, London: Routledge, 1997, quoted in Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 43.

[9] Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2015, 164.

[10] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 48.

[11] Andrew Brennan, Norva Y. S. Lo, and Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, eds. (2002) 'Environmental Ethics', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

[12] Vogel, Thinking like a Mall, 144.

[13] Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, 119.

and we know how to act (morally) right by the organism.[14] Therefore, things in nature have some *intrinsic teleology* that make them morally considerable objects. Katz characterised "nature" somewhat differently. According to Katz, nature stands necessarily in opposition to human "artifacts," e.g. cars, skyscrapers, which are the product of human *intention*.[15] Unlike artifacts, *unintended* natural things have their own *autonomy*, and we act (morally) right when we preserve nature's autonomy.[16]

According to Vogel, these moral considerability arguments outline essentially "the difference between those items in the world to which we owe some sort of moral concern and those to which we don't."[17] For Katz, morally considerable natural objects are those things which are *unintended* and in possession of their *own autonomy*. For Taylor, morally considerable natural objects are those with an *intrinsic teleology* and a sense of their *own good*. While such moral considerability arguments helpfully establish why we should care about nature, they imply a sharp and problematic boundary between "natural" and "artificial" objects.

In the following sections, I summarise Vogel's three objections to Katz and Taylor's moral considerability arguments: (1) sharp moral and ontological boundaries separating "nature" from "artifice" inadequately characterise many critical examples, (2) *intention* is as much a property of nature as it is of artifacts, (3) *intrinsic teleology*, or a thing's *own good*, is as much a property of artifice as it is of nature.

1.1 Moral Considerability: Objection 1

Under Vogel's first objection, moral considerability arguments enforce sharp boundaries around nature, which fail, in practice, because referents of the term "nature" are difficult to determine.

Domesticated animals are one set of objects that eludes the natural–artificial dichotomisation. According to Katz, domesticated animals are artifacts with "no nature of their own" and have "no place in an environmental ethic since they are not natural entities."[18] However, as argued by Vogel, domesticated animals appear to qualify as "natural" by Taylor and Katz's own logic.[19] For example, humans sometimes keep dogs around for security purposes. In a threatening situation, like a home invasion, a dog might bark in such a way that serves its "own wellbeing," reflecting something an *intrinsic teleology*, while simultaneously alerting its owner and carrying out the *extrinsic* goals its owner had intended for it. The same can be said for other domesticated animals; bees develop honey for their own hive, sheep grow wool for their own bodies, despite humans rearing these animals also for their

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[14] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 121-124.

[15] Eric Katz, *Nature As Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Community*, London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1997, 122.

[16] Katz, *Nature As Subject*, xxv.

[17] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 144.

[18] Katz, *Nature As Subject*, 128-129.

[19] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 151.

extrinsic purpose.[20] By Taylor's logic, if domesticated animals can be said to possess an *intrinsic teleology*, what is stopping us from including domesticated animals in the group of morally considerable "natural" objects?

Not only can we understand domesticated animals as having their own *teleology*, as per Taylor, but they can also be said to possess *autonomy*, as per Katz. Consider the ancient breed of Herdwick sheep, endemic to England's Lake District. Herdwick shepherding requires the practice of "hefting," whereby farmers' pasture boundaries, or "heafs," are guided by the sheep, who inherit the knowledge of heaf boundaries generationally.[21] Don't the Herdwick sheep possess some degree of human-independent *autonomy*, something like a "nature of their own"? And don't the Herdwick sheep, like the pet dog, have some *intrinsic teleology*, and their *own wellbeing*, on par with wild "natural" animals?

The implications of Taylor and Katz's moral considerability arguments are unclear. Are we to include domesticated animals in the group of morally considerable "natural" objects, since they all share fundamental properties? Such an approach might be counterproductive for environmentalism, given that the pertinent ecological concern is the loss of un-domesticated life, i.e. species whose numbers are in decline, those that are not supported by human industry. The alternative is, as Katz argued, to redraw the boundary of "natural" to include only the moral patients of interest, e.g. *autonomous* wild animals, trees, ecosystems, while excluding exceptions, e.g. *autonomous* domesticated animals with "no place in an environmental ethic." However, as Vogel identified, this pursuit of a consistent moral-ontological boundary around "nature" follows an endless logic of deferral, whereby:

> … each attempt to define nature falls prey to counterexamples that lead the definer to complain "no that's not what I meant," and then to redefine the term yet again, in an ongoing dialectic that leaves one wondering at the end whether any clear sense can be made of the term at all.[22]

To illustrate Vogel's point, consider cases of urban adaptation, e.g. *Geospiza fortis*, or the Darwin finch. Urban populations of Darwin finches have developed distinct beak shapes, relative to their wilder non-urban cousins, an adaptation linked to their diet of fountain water and human food scraps.[23] *Geospiza fortis* is one of many species undergoing human-induced rapid evolutionary change.[24] Are we to call these urban-adapted organisms "natural"? It would be erroneous – and arguably deceitful – to call urban-adapted species "natural," since their evolutionary change is the direct product of human influence. And yet, if Darwin finch populations began to

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[20] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 151.

[21] Catherine Parry, 'Herdwick tales: breed and belonging in the English Lake District,' *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 24, no. 4 (2020): 409.

[22] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 9.

[23] Menno Schilthuizen, *Darwin Comes to Town: How the Urban Jungle Drives Evolution*, New York: Picador, 2018, 177–178.

[24] Schilthuizen, *Darwin Comes to Town*, 178.

decline, it would be unreasonable to feel more concern for the "natural" wild finch above its urban cousin. They both possess an equivalent *intrinsic teleology*, an equivalent sense of their *own good* and *own autonomy*. So, what role does the concept "nature" play in determining how we would conserve such species? Consider an additional example: captive-breeding programs. Conservationists have been breeding Tasmanian Devils in captivity since 2005, precisely because there was concern for the species' dwindling numbers.[25] Generations of captive-born Tasmanian Devils cannot strictly be called "natural" – their existence is the sole product of "artificial" human intervention – and yet we feel strong moral concern for these Devils regardless.

The critical point made by Vogel is that, by following the morally considerability approach in practice, one runs into possibly countless edge cases. In these examples, one must redraw the moral-ontological "natural" boundary to include non-natural objects of concern, e.g. captive-bred or urban-adapted species, while excluding qualifying "natural" objects, e.g. Herdwick sheep. Following this approach to its end, one arrives at a list of morally considerable objects which defy a commonsense understanding of "natural." The concept of "nature" is therefore "too ambiguous, too confusing, too likely to issue in antimonies"[26] to define a consistent boundary around morally considerable objects.

1.2 Moral Considerability: Objection 2

Vogel's second objection to moral considerability arguments, namely Katz's, is that delineating artifacts as fundamentally distinct from nature, on the basis of human *intentions*, reinforces problematic, anthropocentric thinking.

As Vogel claimed, we make an arbitrary distinction when we declare the products of *intended* human action "artificial" or "non-natural."[27] Just as beavers create dams, dogs bury bones, and birds construct nests with some degree of intention, humans also act with intention. So, what distinguishes human "artifacts," in a way that is ontologically special, from animals' products? Under the moral considerability approach, separating artifacts from nature because they were humanly *intended* implies that artifacts are special only because of their affiliation with human "rational/mental/conscious capacities."[28]

There are two problems with this approach. Firstly, there is limited evidence to support an artifact-nature distinction on the grounds of a sharp human-nonhuman consciousness distinction. There is a growing consensus in the cognitive neuroscience community that nonhuman animals possess characteristics of

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[25] Tamara Keeley, Ritky Kiara, and Tracey Russell, 'A Retrospective Examination of Factors Associated With Breeding Success of Tasmanian Devils in Captivity (2006 to 2012),' *Journal of Zoo and Aquarium Research* 11, no. 1 (2023): 211.

[26] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 9.

[27] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 19.

[28] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 22–23.

consciousness.[29][30] Rhesus monkeys, dolphins and rats exhibit behaviours consistent with "mental monitoring," or the metacognitive ability to consider the accuracy of their own thoughts;[31] corvids demonstrate behaviours consistent with mental monitoring and mental time travel.[32][33] We have reason to suspect that the kind of conscious intentions guiding human behaviour also guides that of nonhuman animals. After all, human consciousness itself emerged from nature, and treating human artifacts as fundamentally non-natural mistakenly overlooks the natural origins of intentions.[34][35] Animals' artifacts, e.g. a beaver's dam, therefore ought not to be assumed as unconsciously created – or *unintended* – in a way fundamentally distinct from our own consciously *intended* artifacts.

Secondly, Vogel identified that treating artifacts as ontologically special, or fundamentally nonnatural, simply because they were *intended* by humans, implies an anthropocentric bias. In environmental philosophy, there is a strong impetus to overcome chauvinistic, anthropocentric thinking. In a foundational essay, historian White (1967) attributed our present ecological crisis to a deep-rooted hegemonic conception of humanity's dualist separation from nature. According to White, several technological and ideological advancements throughout Western history have informed and perpetuated dominant thinking that humanity exists separate from and above nature.[36] Plumwood argued that, in the modern West, the hegemonic human-nature dualism fosters an "anthropocentric culture," where humanity's perceived "hyperseparation" from nature continues to justify and normalise our mistreatment of the natural world.[37] Katz's arbitrary separation of artifacts from nature is consistent with such "traditional triumphalist anthropocentrism."[38] According to Vogel, Katz's artifice-nature distinction implies that:

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[29] Phillip Low, and Jaak Pankseep et al., eds., 'The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness,' *Proceedings of the Francis Crick Memorial Conference*, Cambridge University, 2012, 1–2.

[30] Jonathan Birch et al., 'How Should We Study Animal Consciousness Scientifically?' *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 29, no. 3-4 (2022): 8–28.

[31] Kristen Andrews, *The Animal Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition*, London & New York: Routledge, 2020, 99.

[32] Andreas Nieder et al., 'A neural correlate of sensory consciousness in a corvid bird,' *Science* 369 (2020): 1626–1629.

[33] Nicola Clayton, Anthony Dickinson, 'Episodic-like memory during cache recovery by scrub jays,' *Nature* 395 (1998): 272–274.

[34] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 21.

[35] Max Velmans, 'The Evolution of Consciousness.' *Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2012): 117–138.

[36] The advancements include: advent aggressive agricultural practices 7th century onwards; widespread uptake of anthropocentric Christian dogma in the second millennium – the "most anthropocentric religion the world has seen," justifying a "dualism of man and nature" – all of which has permeated across into modern scientific and technological practice 18th century onwards. See White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,' 1203–1207.

[37] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 33.

[38] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 23.

> … humans are viewed as metaphysically distinctive, as uniquely capable of transforming the ontological status of those things with which we have to do, as constructing a world of "artifice" that is utterly unlike the world of "nature", as possessing extraordinary characteristics (in particular those associated with mind and conscious agency) that render us singular among all living creatures.[39]

Given how powerfully the human-nature dualism operates in the background, and how heavily implicated this hegemonic dualism is in our present ecological crisis, anthropocentric separations of humanity from nature ought to be avoided. Even subtle traces of anthropocentrism, such as Katz's implication that "rational/mental/conscious capacities" imbue objects with a unique ontological status, run the risk of supporting rather than disrupting the dominant human-nature dualism. Katz's characterisation of nature as *unintended*, in a way that is fundamentally distinct from humans' *intended* artifacts, therefore succumbs to an ill-justified and anthropocentric separation.

1.3 Moral Considerability: Objection 3

Vogel's third objection to Taylor and Katz's arguments is that properties of *intrinsic teleology*, or a thing's *own good*, cannot adequately delineate the set of natural objects. When Taylor argued that all living things have moral status because they have a "good of their own," he demonstrated that knowledge of an organism informs our understanding of its needs and its internal goals, or *intrinsic teleology*.[40] After understanding what harms and benefits an organism, we can take its "standpoint."[41] Even non-sentient organisms, e.g. butterflies, possess some internal goal to survive, some *intrinsic teleology* or something of their *own good*.[42] Compellingly, Vogel inverted Taylor's approach and demonstrated that, by the same logic, we can take the standpoint of artifacts. To illustrate this point, Vogel drew parallels between Taylor's butterfly and the City Center Mall in Columbus, Ohio:

> Like the butterfly, it [the Mall] developed through several stages: design, construction, the initial leasing of retail spaces, the transformation of the interior in preparation for the public opening, and then something like a "healthy adulthood" as it came into full operation. … Like the butterfly, that is, the mall grew and developed, and it responded to its environment.[43]

Vogel articulated further their comparable complexities. The Mall relied on a delicately interwoven web of innumerable agents and processes, including the fluctuating economy, businesses, business-owners, employees, customers, physical

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[39] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 23–24.

[40] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 118.

[41] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 67.

[42] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 67.

[43] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 154.

infrastructure, weather, and so forth.[44] By understanding the Mall's complexity, one can appreciate the Mall's own standpoint:

> Learning these sorts of things about a mall, it would seem, would just as in the case of the butterfly permit us to make better judgments about what is in the mall's interest or what is contrary to it, what promotes its welfare or is detrimental to it. Thus again it should be possible to take the mall's standpoint and … see what sorts of actions are good for the mall (the hundreds of thousands of customers who patronized it during the first heady years of its success, say) and what sort are bad for it (the smashing of it by a wrecking ball, say).[45]

As for the non-sentient butterfly, appreciating the complexity of the non-sentient Mall allows us to appreciate its standpoint and, in ways that are not unreasonable, appreciate its *own good*. For these reasons, Vogel concluded that, since the Mall could be said to suffer or benefit under certain conditions, it has some intrinsic goals, or some "teleological character."[46] One might object that the Mall's teleological character is different to the butterfly's, since the Mall was *intended*, whereas the butterfly possesses an *unintended, intrinsic teleology*. However, as Vogel argued, if being created by human intention privileges an object, or its teleological character, in any way that fundamentally separates it from nature, then we succumb to the same problem of anthropocentric bias and imbuing human artifacts with arbitrary significance,[47] that which was addressed under the previous objection.

1.4 Vogel's Objects: Summary

No matter how hard one tries, nature cannot be extricated – fundamentally, or in an ontologically significant way – from human artifice. By following the moral considerability approach, one must redraw the moral concern boundary around countless edge cases. Furthermore, characterising natural objects by their defining properties leads to two, major inconsistencies: *intention* cannot consistently separate artifacts from nature, since intentions themselves exist in nature and treating intended artifacts as special supports dualist anthropocentrism; *intrinsic teleology*, and the capacity for a thing's *own good*, can apply as much to artifacts as nature, since taking something's standpoint is merely a case of understanding enough about that thing.

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[44] To appreciate Vogel's argument, it is worth reading his full description of the City Center Mall's complexity; see Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 129–137. Note that Vogel does not hope to inspire the same joy or care for the City Center Mall as one feels for the butterfly. He uses the Mall merely to refute the definitive ontological and moral boundaries argued by Taylor and Katz. Vogel specifically expressed that he does not like the Mall; see Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 162.

[45] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 155.

[46] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 156.

[47] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 156–157.

The important sequitur to Vogel's argument is that, although there is strong overlap in the properties we attribute to natural and artificial objects, we shouldn't be concerned with artifacts as we are plants and animals. Even if the City Center Mall has its *own good*, just like the butterfly, it would be absurd to conserve or protect the Mall like we might the butterfly. Rather, by *modus tollens*, because such moral implications are untenable, we ought to reject the moral considerability approach altogether.[48]

For the reasons summarised above, I conclude, in line with Vogel, that moral considerability arguments are inadequate. In the following section, I examine Vogel's postnaturalist argument: environmental philosophy ought to prioritise concern for the "environment" over "nature."

§ 2. Vogel's Postnaturalism

According to Vogel: "No place is natural any longer, and so the entire environment has become in a certain sense a built environment."[49] By conceding that our recklessness has effectively ended nature, accepting nature's end impels a responsibility to improve our practices:

> The environment itself is an artifact that we make through our practices, and hence one for which we are responsible and about which we ought to care. If the artifacts that surround us … make life worse for us and for the other creatures that inhabit the world with us … this is (in part) our doing, and our fault. And so it is also our responsibility to fix.[50]

A responsibility to fix the environment has an unambiguous, practical force, which contrasts strongly with moral considerability attempts to characterise "natural" moral patients. However, I object to Vogel's postnaturalist approach on two accounts. Firstly, Vogel's commitment to improve the non-natural "environment" cannot be severed from a concern for and concept of "nature." Secondly, Vogel's abandonment of the "nature" concept altogether fails to problematise the anthropocentric human-nature dualism, which is a crucial project for environmental philosophy.

2.1 Vogel's Postnaturalism: Objection 1

Under my first objection, I argue that following Vogel's postnaturalist approach to its logical end reveals an implied commitment to "nature." According to Vogel, we ought to "fix" the environment. But to what end are we fixing it? Why are we fixing it? In Vogel's words, we ought to fix the environment that makes "life worse for us

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[48] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 162–163.
[49] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 2.
[50] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 164–165.

and for the other creatures."[51] And yet, asking what these "other creatures" are sounds exactly like asking how we ought to define our nonhuman moral patients. Whether we call them "other creatures" or "nonhuman plants and animals" or "nature," at their core, these terms refer to nonhuman entities that are owed some moral consideration. To clarify how we ought to fix the environment, we must ask how we are harming the nonhuman or human-independent parts of the world, such is the definition of "nature." Under Vogel's account, as under Taylor and Katz', we remain unsure about what parts of nonhuman nature we ought to care about.

A proponent of Vogel's postnaturalism might avoid the above objection, since they accept a strict, McKibben-ian definition of "nature": that which is *purely* humanly independent (and therefore no longer in existence today). So, although Vogel's morally considerable objects in the "non-natural" environment might, contradictorily, resonate with a commonsense understanding of "nature," there is no contradiction here for the postnaturalist. For the postnaturalist, the "nature" concept is redundant because nature is, assumedly, already dead. I argue that such postnaturalist thinking succumbs to a different problem, explored in the following section.

2.2 Vogel's Postnaturalism: Objection 2

Under my second objection, I argue that Vogel's postnaturalist abandonment of the "nature" concept, including his McKibben-ian definition of "nature" as dead, supports rather than addresses the hegemonic human-nature dualism.

According to Plumwood, a critical problem, stemming from the anthropocentric human-nature dualism, is the "forgetting and backgrounding"[52] of nature. By conceiving of hyperseparated nature as somewhere out there, outside the human sphere, outside our towns and cities, we remove nature from our immediate scope of concern. Especially for those of us living increasingly urbanised lives, highlighting the "concept and experience of nature" is needed to counter dominant narratives that human culture and civilisation are all there is, all that is agent, all that matters.[53] It is essential, therefore, to continue appreciating and highlighting the concept of "nature" rather than conceding its disappearance.

By acknowledging the whole world has become one "built environment," Vogel's approach risks "prioritizing culture over nature," what Plumwood might call a problematic "reductionist measure" for dissolving the human-nature dualism.[54] Such reductionist measures quietly support our self-immersion in an anthropocentric sphere, perpetuating dominant narratives that human proliferation is all that matters.[55] Vogel's motion to think of the world as entirely "nonnatural" and

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[51] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 34.
[52] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 36.
[53] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 44.
[54] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 44.
[55] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 44.

humanised implies a subtle yet problematic anthropocentric privileging, like that of Katz's artifice-nature distinction. Vogel's postnaturalism therefore risks perpetuating rather than disrupting nature's backgrounding.

Even the postnaturalist's definition of "nature" as *purely* nonhuman is consistent with the problematic, hyperseparation of human from nature:

> In the hyperseparated picture, it appears that only "pure nature" is nature and that nature must be a realm totally separate from the human. The nature skeptic then objects that [it] is impossible to find (especially nowadays) forms of the nonhuman that do not carry some human influence …[56]

Plumwood instead argued that to be other, and to appreciate otherness, does not necessitate pure otherness: "… why should we have to abandon the claim that there is another that is nature just because it often carries some human influence?"[57] Appreciating that human industry has, as McKibben suggested, impacted every patch of the planet does not necessitate the eradication of nature. Rather, we ought to reject definitions of nature as purely independent or hyperseparated from humanity. We can – and should – accept that nature as a nonhuman, independent force or agent still exists if we are to disrupt the dominant human-nature dualism.

2.3 Vogel's Postnaturalism: Summary

At this point, we appear to be in a catch-22. We had good reason to explore alternatives to Taylor and Katz's moral considerability arguments, since the term "nature" is too ontologically slippery to determine "natural" moral patients. Although Vogel's postnaturalist approach appeared to resolve this issue by shifting the focus onto the human "environment," such an approach risks supporting rather than disrupting the dominant hyperseparation of humanity from nature.

Impelling ethical concern for nature appears difficult to reconcile with the term's ontological fuzziness. However, I argue that we can reimagine nature in such a way that drives ethical concern for nature without compromising on the "nature" concept's ontological complexity. Plumwood suggested two ways of reconceiving "nature": recognising the "hybridity and continuity" between humanity and nature,[58] and reconceptualising the nature pole in the human-nature dualism as the dominant, larger or inclusive term.[59] Consistent with Plumwood's suggestions, I propose one reconceptualisation of "nature" in the following section.

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[56] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 41.

[57] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 41.

[58] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 44

[59] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 46

§ 3. Natural World

To reconceptualise "nature," I draw on Hailwood's natural world framework. According to Hailwood, "nature" can be understood as three, loose, overlapping categories: the natural world, inclusive of human and nonhuman domains; the nonhuman domain; and the humanised domain, an implied sense given that both human and nonhuman domains constitute the broader natural world.[60]

Along the lines of Hailwood's framework, the natural world conception that I defend is "monist," as opposed to "pluralist," in the sense that appreciation of nature's fundamental metaphysical oneness (human and nonhuman) comes before other ontological, moral or ethical concerns.[61] This account of monist "natural world" has two strengths: firstly, the full spectrum of nature's ontological complexity, including the nature-artifice overlap, is accounted for; secondly, the account yields a nuanced dialectic for guiding ethical practices. I expand on these strengths below.

3.1 Natural World: Fuzzy Categories

An important conclusion drawn by Vogel, as outlined in section §1, was that there is a fundamental overlap between natural and artificial objects.[62] Aligning with this finding, Hailwood purported that the substituent human and nonhuman domains of the "natural world" framework should be understood as "intertwined and continuous."[63] I maintain that the proposed monist, natural world concept recognises a *continuum* of naturalness.

Domesticated animals, urban-adapted species, and endangered captive-bred animals are all restored ontological status as fundamentally "natural," albeit existing along a human-to-nonhuman continuum. As for the more "non-natural" examples, e.g. cars, skyscrapers, it might seem difficult to conceive of these as "natural." However, I argue that classifying all artifacts as fundamentally "natural" is the most consistent approach. We consider constructions of animals as natural; humans are also animals, so why aren't our products also, on a fundamental level, the same kind of natural? As Vogel claimed, viewing human technology and artifacts as an extension of natural, evolutionary processes, the same processes which led beavers to build dams and birds to build nests, is entirely reasonable.[64] A key strength of the monist natural world concept is that the hegemonic human-nature (artifice-nature) dualism is actively reworked in two ways: "nature" is championed as the dominant pole; the artifice-nature dualism is reimagined as a continuum, with "nature" and "artifice" separated in a *graded* rather than *hyper-separated* fashion.

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[60] Simon Hailwood, 'Alienations and natures,' *Environmental Politics* 21, no. 6 (2012): 885–886.

[61] Jonathan Schaffer, 'Monism: The Priority of the Whole,' *Philosophical Review* 119, no. 1 (2010): 31.

[62] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 2.

[63] Hailwood, 'Alienations and natures,' 889.

[64] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 17.

3.2 Natural World: Overcoming Alienation

The second strength of the monist natural world concept is the ethical concern it impels. If environmental philosophy is to reconceptualise "nature," we have the difficult task of both reimagining ourselves as within nature – to combat the hegemonic dualism – while recognising the agency, difference and separation – in a *graded*, non-hyperseparated fashion – of nonhuman nature. To a greater extent than Taylor, Katz or Vogel's arguments, Hailwood's framework captures this complex dialectic.

According to Hailwood, by reconceiving "nature" as both a nonhuman domain and an umbrella natural world concept, we can derive two ethical concerns: embracing some degree of alienation from the nonhuman domain, and overcoming alienation from the natural world.[65] Firstly, recognising our alienation from the non-human domain entails: "recognition of … our 'separation' from nature in the sense that non-human entities and processes do not embody human will and are not set up to serve human interests or ideals."[66] Maintaining some degree of separation between human and nonhuman is an important conceptual starting point, as it ensures that one does not subsume the other. However, simultaneously, we need to overcome alienation from the natural world by appreciating "humanity's embeddedness within wider ecological realities."[67] Importantly, such an ethical focus directly combats, rather than supports, our anthropocentric tendency to view humanity as above or outside nature.

More than any other account of nature discussed so far, I argue that this dialectic, derived from the monist natural world concept, and simultaneously embracing and overcoming alienation from nature, encourages the *most impactful ethical practice*. Under natural world monism, we can appreciate some human-nonhuman distinction while appreciating fundamental oneness. For example, under the "natural world" account, we can derive nuanced ethical concern for urban-adapted species; we can appreciate their independence and agency, while acknowledging their continuity with the human sphere. We can therefore conceive of our relationship with nonhuman species as *symbiotic* or *co-agent*, i.e. two distinct but equally agent parties. As a result, our practices are guided toward cross-species *mutually beneficial* outcomes.

§ 4. Conclusion

We might think about nature as somewhere out there, beyond our towns and cities. Or we might think that nature no longer exists. Such conceptions of nature, I argue,

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[65] Hailwood explores a third ethical concern, overcoming alienation from our own humanised domain. Although an important project, this concern falls beyond the scope of my essay. See Hailwood, 'Alienations and natures,' 884.

[66] Hailwood, 'Alienations and natures,' 897.

[67] Hailwood, 'Alienations and natures,' 897.

do more harm than good. By adopting a monist concept of nature, we keep the concept and experience of nature alive. The "natural world" account champions humanity's ontological inextricability from nature and sharpens our ethical focus around a *co-agent* human-nonhuman model, therefore driving stronger consideration for nature in our ecological crisis.

According to Evernden: "We call people environmentalists because what they are finally moved to defend is what we call environment. But, at bottom, their action is a defence of cosmos …"[68] This essay defends a monist concept of nature, i.e. the natural world, one that is consistent with the environmentalist's impulse to protect the natural whole.

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[68] Evernden, *The Natural Alien*, 124.

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