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TOWARD A DIALECTICAL ACCOUNT OF NATURE

By

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Bachelor of Arts, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA, 2020

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Philosophy

Toward a Dialectical Account of Nature

Chairperson: Christopher Preston

The protection of nature has been a central aim of environmentalism for well over a century. However, the concept of nature has been subjected to abundant critiques in recent literature, threatening the conceptual tenability of this goal. In this paper, I discuss why I find the concept of nature too valuable to dismiss and offer an account of nature that I believe remedies existent critiques. In Chapter 1, I recount arguments for the protection of nature and illustrate their dualistic underpinnings. In Chapter 2, I discuss issues with dualistic accounts of nature and demonstrate why Steven Vogel's monistic alternative is unsatisfactory. In Chapter 3, I propose a dialectical account of nature and explore what an environmental ethic might look like within this framework.

## **Toward a Dialectical Account of Nature**

The protection of nature has been a central aim of environmentalism for well over a century. Countless environmentalists have proposed a variety of ways to achieve this goal, the volume of which emphasizes its vital importance. Despite the long history of this environmental aim, however, the conceptual footing it stands on has been called into question. The idea of “nature” has been subjected to such abundant critiques that the objective of protecting nature has verged on becoming conceptually untenable. Nevertheless, I believe that “nature,” as well as the goal of protecting it, is valuable enough to attempt to save rather than to dismiss. The concept of nature expresses something in which we find immense value within the world around us. Retaining it helps us recognize what this value is as well as guide us when making decisions about how to act ethically in relation to our environment.

If this central environmental aim of protecting nature is to remain tenable, however, a few steps must be taken. First, I must clarify what the concept of “nature” has traditionally signified and identify what environmentalists have found valuable about it. From there, I can explain both why it has been deemed worthy of protection as well as what potential flaws critics may see in the concept of “nature.” Second, I must examine these critiques of “nature” and of the objective of protecting it. While I agree with many of these, I do not find their conclusion of dismissing the concept of nature altogether satisfactory. Thus, it is also pertinent that I address their critiques of “nature” with an equally critical lens. This conceptual analysis is crucial because it helps to determine whether the concept of nature is coherent enough to guide us in our environmental practices and, if not, understand how “nature” could be reframed in a more suitable way. I conclude by offering a philosophical perspective that retains what we find valuable about nature but

dispatches existent critiques. In doing so, I hope to enable the protection of nature to remain a philosophically sound environmental objective.

## **Chapter 1: Arguments for the Protection of Nature**

The protection of nature has been the historical objective of the environmental movement. This objective and its conceptual foundation have been fiercely critiqued in more recent literature, opening up the question of whether it continues to be tenable.

In this chapter, I focus on examining claims that nature can be protected by ensuring its wildness, independence, and autonomy. Here, wildness, independence, and autonomy, although distinct, are similar and interrelated concepts, and they represent the essential characteristics of what a protected nature looks like. The subsidiary goals of this objective, or why proponents of arguments with this structure find these concepts to be important, are many, so I focus on two popular and interrelated rationales. First, there is a common sentiment that protecting nature's wildness, independence, or autonomy, safeguards something essential to what nature is; thus, by protecting the essential characteristic, nature is consequently protected as well. Second, many environmentalists have thought that ensuring these essential qualities helps to preserve or restore ecological health. These arguments have been used to justify environmental practices that advocate for the separation of humans and nature. In the first section of this chapter, I provide a conceptual analysis of these types of arguments as well as an array of perspectives that feature this argument structure, exemplify these rationales, and support this form of environmental practice. The purpose of this exploration is to identify both what proponents of these arguments find valuable as well as what aspects of their arguments warrant critique.

### ***1.1 Examples of Arguments for the Protection of Nature***

In his book *The End of Nature*, Bill McKibben provides a clear perspective of the idea of nature as essentially independent from humans. In this work, McKibben is concerned with how human action has not only harmed nature but entirely destroyed it. He states, “By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the destruction of nature McKibben is bearing witness to takes place entirely by robbing nature of that essential feature: its independence from “humanness,” or the “human sphere.” Nature, according to him, is “*defined [by] its separation from human society,*” and we have failed to protect it by compromising its ability to remain separate. Nature has been made extinct through the global scale of our human touch. Although he cannot, therefore, make an argument for the protection of nature, McKibben’s book is rife with mourning for the loss of a nature he finds so valuable.

Environmental philosopher Eric Katz holds a similar perspective to McKibben. In his paper, “The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature,” Katz expresses a worry that attempts to protect nature through ecological restoration are fundamentally flawed because they turn nature into “nothing more than an artifact.”<sup>2</sup> For him, “natur[e] is defined as being independent of the actions of humanity.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the human construction and intervention involved in restoration robs nature of its essential characteristic – it strips nature of its natural independence and supplants it with man-made artifactuality. Reintroducing a keystone species to its appropriate ecosystem would be, in his view, much less natural, thanks to the intervention, than leaving it be. According to his perspective, Yellowstone National Park would therefore fall under the category of an artifact in spite of the ecological benefits reintroducing wolves has had on the area.

Despite this claim, Katz does point out that this idea of nature as entirely independent or separate from the “human sphere” is, in some ways, problematic – humans *are* a product of evolution, and our effects on the world are pervasive.<sup>4</sup> So, he provides an alternative definition: “The ‘natural’ then is a term we use to designate objects and processes that exist as far as possible from human manipulation and control. Natural entities are autonomous in ways that human-created artifacts are not.”<sup>5</sup> Here, autonomy means more than just independence – it signifies something more akin to allowing the world to be constructed not just by us, but by other natural entities. The complex marine communities supported by coral reefs are demonstrative of this sentiment.<sup>6</sup> Protecting nature then means letting nature have this constructive autonomy, to allow some natural processes or objects to remain wild and “free.”<sup>7</sup> Evolutionary forces, not human intervention, are what Katz believes do (and should) drive nature.

In his book “Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction,” Dale Jamieson identifies some of the key elements of the “natural” which people commonly value. Many of these reasons overlap with what both McKibben and Katz argue is valuable about nature and what is worth protecting. The first element he identifies is akin to both Katz’s and McKibben’s views: “something is natural to the extent that it is not a product of human influence.”<sup>8</sup> What is valuable, here, is nature’s independence from humanness. Similar to this, Jamieson suggests “that we value what is natural because we value nature’s autonomy. [...] what we value in nature is that she ‘does her own thing’ and is largely indifferent to us.”<sup>9</sup> This is a sentiment commonly shared by environmentalists when seeking to protect nature through some feature they find essential to it, and it is an argument that McKibben and Katz both come close to making as well.

Jamieson continues to make a point about autonomy and wildness that reflects a perspective similar to Katz’s. “At its most extreme, nature’s autonomy is expressed in wildness.



[...] What is wild is not dominated by others; it is free from external control. Thoreau characterized what is wild as that which is self-willed.”<sup>10</sup> This self-willed, free character attributed to wild nature bolsters the notion of nature’s independence being an essential feature. This is reflected further in another example Jamieson provides:

The contemporary poet, Gary Snyder, tells us that some definitions of ‘wild’ “come very close to how the Chinese define the term ‘Dao’, the way of Great Nature . . . eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing . . . independent . . . unmediated . . . self-willed.”

What Jamieson points out by quoting Snyder, however, appears to indicate that it is not only nature’s autonomy, wildness, and independence which is valued, but also nature’s capacity to create, construct, and generate complex existences. It is important to note, nonetheless, that this generative, “self-organizing” quality still refers to nature as *one* object, as *one* system, which preserves the sense of self-enclosure vital to the notions of independence and autonomy previously discussed.

Furthermore, this generative and self-enclosed character of nature seems to underpin the claim many environmentalists make that leaving nature to its own devices results in healthy, functioning ecological networks. Leaving nature alone is, according to this claim, believed to support the “biological structure that [...] breathes life into ecosystems.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, maintaining ecological health through non-interventionist practices has frequently guided efforts to protect nature, with the value of healthy ecosystems providing normative structure to environmentalism.

This normative import is prominently exemplified by the value of healthy ecosystems recognized in wilderness conservation efforts. In their paper, “European Perceptions of Wilderness,” Thomas Kirchhoff and Vera Vicenzotti provide a helpful analysis of the ecological value wilderness acquired in environmental thought in the 1960s. In their section “*Wilderness as*

*an area of natural ecological conditions,”* they state that what people often value as “natural” and wish to protect

can have basically two connotations [...]: (i) *naturalness* in which the order or system that has emerged historically through nature’s ability to self-organise has not been changed by humans: the area is in an ecologically pristine state; and (ii) *wildness* in which existing natural processes in a place are unaffected by human activities.<sup>12</sup>

Sometimes, they point out, these connotations are also combined to produce the following:

Wilderness is cherished for its naturalness because it is assumed that nature’s self-organisation leads to a unique harmonious ecological order with a specific range of biodiversity. Human changes are regarded as disturbances that threaten a pristine, perfect order whose complexity transcends human capacities.<sup>13</sup>

In this combined view, naturalness contributes the notion of a functional ecological “order” that is “in a constant condition of self-transformation.”<sup>14</sup> Wildness, according to the definition they provide, conveys the idea that human influence on such a system in some way fundamentally disturbs it. Put differently, the idea is that the harmonious ecological structure “nature” produces on its own is compromised by human interaction – because humans are seen as *outside* of nature, the healthy and functional ecosystems nature forms are thought, here, to be damaged by humans. Something seen as both essential and exclusive to nature in this view, then, is its capacity to produce healthy ecosystems. Wilderness, with its independence and autonomy from humankind, therefore holds immense ecological value in this perspective. By “let[ting] nature take its course” in wilderness, this perspective argues that “the ‘balance of nature’”<sup>15</sup> and the ecological health it produces can be maintained. Ecological health, we will see later, has a vital role to play in the solution I offer as well, albeit without the notion of a necessary separation of humans and nature.

In the Wilderness Act of 1964, a similar perspective to that described by Kirchhoff and Vicenzotti is put forth. The aim of this Act is to preserve wilderness areas, and a worry analogous to that of McKibben is expressed in its opening lines, which also clarify its objective:

In order to assure that in an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for the preservation and protection in their natural conditions, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.<sup>16</sup>

Although the Wilderness Act aims to protect wilderness (or nature) for predominantly anthropocentric reasons – such as its recreational, “educational, scenic, [and] historical value”<sup>17</sup> – the Act’s appeal to the ecological benefits of an undisturbed nature is also implicit in its idea of wilderness. Here, the ecological value of wilderness supplies crucial normative import for why the protection of wilderness *specifically* is vital to environmentalism.

Wilderness, according to this act, is famously defined as follows:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean [...] an area of undeveloped Federal land [...] which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which [...] generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable [...].<sup>18</sup>

While the first quote articulates the risk a human-dominated landscape poses to nature, the second one alludes to how we can mitigate this risk: protecting untouched areas where the processes of nature are in the ascendent and where the destructive actions of humankind are absent. Here, as Kirchoff and Vicenzotti likewise pointed out, the ecological value of wilderness is still underpinned by the idea of it being separate from and uninfluenced by humans and their actions. Because the notion of ecological health this perspective employs is contingent upon nature being independent and autonomous from humans, the ecological value wilderness holds is contingent upon this separation as well. These qualities of independence and autonomy are the necessary preconditions for what Kirchoff and Vicenzotti term a functional and “harmonious ecological order,” and, according to this line of thought, ecological health seems to be almost *guaranteed* just

by leaving nature alone. This outcome is the case, at least, for sites whose ecological or evolutionary history is considered intact – *not* for heavily impacted yet peopleless spaces like nuclear testing grounds.

The conceptual underpinnings of the Wilderness Act of 1964 are recapitulated in the more contemporary rewilding movement, although they are not held to the same extremity, and their non-interventionist leanings may be dissipating in some rewilding perspectives. As Andrea Gammon explains, rewilding was originally conceived of as a form of ecological restoration wherein ecosystems negatively impacted by humans are mended by reintroducing missing species to areas they historically occupied for the purpose of restoring ecological processes.<sup>19</sup> While traditional ecological restoration efforts encouraged ongoing management of restored areas, proponents of rewilding argue for a nearly hands-off approach. Although they support the active reintroduction of species through human intervention (effectively making the “rewilded” areas “artifacts” according to Katz), the objective of rewilding is the restoration of the land’s capacity for being “self-willed.”<sup>20</sup> The idea here is that adding the missing species of an ecosystem back and *then* leaving it alone will not only restore ecological health but also, consequently, that ecosystem’s wildness and naturalness. The ecological benefits brought about by the trophic cascade following the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone exemplifies this way of thinking.<sup>21</sup> While the American Wilderness Act of 1964 sought to preserve wilderness areas, rewilding suggests that we can, in a sense, rebuild the wildness of a natural area, as long as we keep our intervention to the minimal initial steps of species reintroduction.

## ***1.2 Conceptual Analysis***

Through the previous examples, I have attempted to provide instances where environmental thinkers have claimed that the protection of nature can be achieved through safeguarding its wildness, independence, and autonomy. These examples have fallen under two interrelated categories – first, arguments that seek to protect nature purely through the protection of some essential characteristic and, second, those that seek to preserve or restore ecological health through one of these essential characteristics. Often, the latter type of argument also assumes that nature is fundamentally “self-organizing,” or that there is what Kirchoff calls a “natural order,”<sup>22</sup> or ecological state created only by nonhuman forces. These latter arguments, like the first type, are similarly dependent on the notion that there are essential characteristics of nature that are important to protect. Unlike the first type, however, their appeal to an essential aspect of nature is not always so explicit.

To make better sense of these arguments, and to clarify why they are so often critiqued, I will take some time to explore the concept of nature which underpins them. Although each specific example I have enumerated belongs to a unique perspective, they share important conceptual roots that lead them all to cognize nature in a particular way – as fundamentally separate from humans. This “separation of humans and nature,” as it is often referred to, is also known as a “human-nature dualism.” This prevalent conception of nature has its origin, largely, in European ideas of wilderness and nature that predate modern environmentalism.

Dualistic perspectives separate the world into two distinct, mutually exclusive categories. These two “spheres” are understood to be independent of each other, which can take on a literal or physical significance in addition to its conceptual one. Each side of the dualism is mutually exclusive, and they are often conceptually pinned against each other as opposites (i.e., they are defined in contradistinction to each other). The demarcation between spheres of a dualism allows

each side to be posited as a conceptual “object” to which certain “essential” characteristics can be attributed. The separation between each conceptual category of a dualism, in other words, provides the self-enclosure necessary to delineate and relegate certain features to one side or the other. Since, as Val Plumwood indicates, these spheres are typically defined in contradistinction to each other,<sup>23</sup> these essential characteristics are understood to belong only to one side of the dualism.<sup>24</sup>

To understand the conceptual roots of this dualistic account of nature, I will now explore major themes of early European ideas of wilderness and nature. Importantly, wilderness is often understood to be archetypal of nature – i.e., it is nature in its purest form – and it therefore says a lot about what people think nature truly is. The purpose of this exploration is to show both the demarcation between humans and nature in this historical perspective as well as the influence it had on what contemporary environmentalists consider “essential” features of nature.

Charles Warren provides an overview of these European ideas in his article “Wildness.” As he recounts, the term “wilderness” was originally “[d]erived from the Anglo-Saxon *wildeor*, a term for wild or savage beasts.”<sup>25</sup> Later, however, it also became associated with the landscapes these wild animals inhabited.<sup>26</sup> Crucially, wilderness (and nature) was not viewed, at this earlier time, as worthy of protection. Unlike in more recent times, wilderness initially had a very negative connotation and was a place to be feared and tamed rather than revered and protected. In fact, the “subjugation of nature” was “almost synonymous” with civilization at that time.<sup>27</sup> While civilization was where all things were “orderly and good,”<sup>28</sup> the wilderness was understood to be a dangerous place full of active existential risks, such as wild beasts. These perceived dangers of wilderness caused it to be understood as antithetical to the safety and security of civilization. While on one hand, wilderness was defined concretely by referring to feral animals and the landscapes they inhabited, it was therefore also defined in contradistinction to civilization, or the “human”

sphere. This is important conceptually because it demonstrates the origins of a dualistic account of nature.

Additionally, this points out that nature was conceptualized in two ways by early Europeans: as a negative object as well as a positive one. Both, however, are inseparable from a human-nature dualism. On the one hand, nature and wilderness were posited as negative objects: their very existence was defined as conditional upon being *other than* the human realm. As ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood explains, “Defined in relation to the human or as an absence of the human, nature has a conceptual status that leaves it entirely dependent for its meaning on the ‘primary’ human term.”<sup>29</sup> By defining these terms – wilderness and nature – in contradistinction to humanity and civilization, they automatically referred to all that is *not* human, spatially as well as conceptually. This means that, conceived of negatively, both “nature” and “wilderness” are concepts with an empty content – they exist purely by virtue of being *outside* of the conceptual category “human” – and the essential characteristics attributed to them are merely the “negative [form of] qualities”<sup>30</sup> attributed to civilization. This negative conception of nature most explicitly demarcates the two spheres of the human-nature dualism and, therefore, provides the conceptual basis *for* the dualism. The perspective of Bill McKibben, the Wilderness Act of 1964, and Jamieson’s identification of autonomy as a central natural value all favor this negative conception of nature. In other words, they favor seeing nature as, first and foremost, “nonhuman.”

On the other hand, nature and wilderness were also conceptualized as positive objects. As I noted earlier, the term that predated wilderness, *wildeor*, referred to feral animals as well as to their habitats. This concretizes the concept of nature by pointing toward what particular things it actually refers to rather than simply positing it in contradistinction to the human sphere. Whereas the negative conception of nature has an empty content (i.e., merely nonhuman), the positive

conception of nature refers to all specific things such as bears, wolves, and forests that are understood to be *within* the conceptual category “nonhuman.” This is not to say that these particular parts of nature cannot be conceived of independently of this designation, but that they are understood to constitute what nature *physically* or *concretely* is by virtue of being within the conceptual category of (nonhuman) nature. This is true for things such as muskrats, reeds, and marshes. We understand them *as nature* or *as natural* because they are “nonhuman.” Conceiving of nature as a positive dualistic object is exemplified most explicitly within certain rewilding perspectives and can also be found in Kirchhoff and Vicenzotti’s analysis of the ecological value of wilderness.

In either case, negative or positive, nature in a dualistic perspective is always a “thing” outside of us to which certain characteristics, features, and concrete elements can be attributed. It is, therefore, something that we can discuss and direct our actions towards. However, because dualistic perspectives posit nature as *outside* of the human realm, this conceptual separation of humans and nature immediately delimits what kinds of actual environmental practices are acceptable (or even conceptually possible). Because humans and nature are mutually exclusive categories, practices that involve human intervention in nature are ultimately untenable because the only conceivable result would be to rob nature of its most central element – its nonhumanness, or independence from the human sphere. This conceptual foundation is why intensely dualistic environmental thinkers, like McKibben and Katz, as well as movements, like the American Wilderness movement, cannot logically support arguments for the protection of nature that include any human influence on the landscape. Environmental perspectives that subscribe to a human-nature dualism yet do not, like the rewilding movement, believe nature needs to be *entirely* untouched may permit a certain degree or kind of human activity, but they still contend that human



intervention must be mindfully managed so as not to disturb the relative naturalness of a place. Compare how natural the network of trails snaking across the surface of Centralia, PA, where an old mining fire still rages on underground, seems when contrasted with the vast Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern Alaska. Those who subscribe to a less extreme form of a human-nature dualism, like proponents of rewilding, may argue that the higher degree of naturalness the ANWR seems to have poses a stronger limit on what human actions would be appropriate there compared to in Centralia.

While preserving the separation of humans and nature is a key element of what protecting nature means for dualistic thinkers, this separation also conceptually underpins the other essential features of nature – independence, autonomy, and wildness – that they find important. While these features are all conceptually underpinned by a demarcation between humans and nature, the latter two characteristics also importantly draw our attention to the notion of nature being lively, dynamic, and constructive itself. In other words, wildness helps us acknowledge how the nonhuman parts of the world – like rivers, salmon, and grizzly bears – have the capacity to generate complex, flourishing ecosystems all around us.

Since these features define what nature *is*, in a dualistic account, protecting them is equivalent to protecting nature (and vice versa). Nature would not *be nature* if these characteristics were lost or absent. Because they are understood as fundamental, these features supply both support and motivation to the specific way dualists argue nature should be protected. Preserving these features is the *route* through which nature is protected while they are also what is *valuable* about nature.

In this chapter, I have drawn our attention to specific examples of arguments for the protection of nature which incite essential features of nature as both a route towards its protection

as well as something valuable in themselves. I have attempted to demonstrate how a dualistic framework, with its roots in early European ideas of wilderness and nature, underpins the concept of nature these arguments contain as well as supplies the essential features environmentalists seek to protect. In the next chapter, I will cover the main critiques put forth against a dualistic conception of nature.

## **Chapter 2: Critiquing the Dualistic Idea of Nature**

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate why accounts of nature which conceptually rely on a human-nature dualism are untenable despite their long history. To explain why this is the case, I provide an overview of the major critiques leveled against this philosophical framework. Because the purpose of this paper is to prove that protecting nature is still a viable option, it is important that, in the first half of the chapter, I clarify which aspects of dualistic accounts of nature are indefensible.

In the second half of this chapter, I focus particularly on Steven Vogel's postnatural perspective in his book *Thinking like a Mall*. In this work, he provides a detailed critical analysis of dualistic understandings of nature, which he follows with his own *monistic* conception of the environment. Since his solution to dualism is to remove the idea of nature altogether, I demonstrate why I find his perspective to be ultimately unsatisfactory.

### ***2.1 Issues with a Dualistic Account of Nature***

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, arguments for the protection of nature have often featured a dualistic framework, most frequently one that relies specifically on a human-nature dualism. One of the most common critiques of this dualism is that it, and therefore this idea

of nature, is factually mistaken. Positing nature as everything that is nonhuman (i.e., as a negative object) assumes some distinction between humans and nature that seems arbitrary or unjustified.<sup>31</sup> Humans are part and parcel of nature; they do not belong in some other “unnatural” category. To say otherwise, the argument goes, would be to ignore that humans are subject to the same natural forces (such as evolution) as other “natural” beings.<sup>32</sup> Claiming that essential features can be attributed to each sphere *on the basis of* and *delineated by* a human-nature dualism therefore turns out to be less acceptable than dualists believe. Because the attribution of these characteristics conceptually depends on the separation of humans and nature, demonstrating that the separation *itself* is untenable indicates that a new basis upon which these characteristics can be ascribed is required.

The human-nature dualism is also criticized for being socially constructed. What people often mean by claiming that the dualistic conception of nature is socially constructed is that it is not universal across all cultures – it is culturally relative. The human-nature dualism contained in the arguments I discussed in Chapter 1 are, largely, the product of Western thought, with roots in European ideas of wilderness and nature. The “wilderness” concept present in American thought, such as in the Wilderness Act of 1964, has come under attack for projecting this conception of nature onto a land where this sort of dualism was not, before European colonization, a prevalent view. In applying these non-interventionist ideas in practice, numerous Native Americans were forcibly removed from their homelands,<sup>33</sup> even though the naturalness of the areas they inhabited was not understood to be compromised by their residence. This effectively erased their cultural history as inhabitants of that land while simultaneously dehumanizing them.<sup>34</sup> Significant social justice issues persist today as a result.

Another multi-part critique of the human-nature dualism is related to the supposed “unnaturalness” of humans, their actions, and their artifacts. The notion that such a divide between the natural and the artificial exists has, despite its popularity in environmental thought, been found to be problematic by a number of environmental philosophers for a variety of reasons. One problem commonly pointed out is that humans are, in fact, natural beings. Like everything else in nature, humans are subject to natural processes like evolution. Steven Vogel writes, “And yet a question worth asking here is how humans could come to have this special ability to tear things out of their natural state. After all, aren’t humans themselves natural? There’s something oddly pre-Darwinian about the idea that human action removes objects from nature.”<sup>35</sup> The “nature” that we are inseparable from, however, is a different conception of nature than the one that typically holds center stage in dualistic accounts. In Vogel’s critique, nature means “totality,” while in dualistic accounts, nature means “everything that is not human.” Vogel draws on John Stuart Mill for further explanation.

First, according to Mill, “it [nature] means all the powers existing in either the outer or the inner world and everything which takes place by means of those powers.”<sup>36</sup> Vogel helpfully interprets Mill’s definition into more modern and environmentally relevant language: “Nature” (with a capital ‘N’) is “the totality of the physical world subject to the ordinary forces described by physics and chemistry and biology.”<sup>37</sup> When arguing that humans *are*, necessarily, “natural,” Vogel is relying on this idea of ‘N’ature. The second way of understanding nature, according to Mill, is more in line with what dualistic conceptions of nature often espouse. “In another sense, it means, not everything which happens, but only what takes place without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional agency, of man.”<sup>38</sup> Vogel likewise provides a reworded version of

this definition: “nature” (with a lowercase ‘n’)<sup>1</sup> is “the nonhuman world,” where “the contrast term [to nature] is not ‘supernatural’ but rather ‘artificial.’”<sup>39</sup>

To claim that humans, their actions, and their artifacts somehow “transcend nature,” then, really means a few different things. Even though the natural-artificial distinction is typically promoted by those who subscribe to a human-‘n’ature dualism, the nature that these artifacts are transcending is not always ‘n’ature. First, philosophers such as Bill McKibben argue that human action “ends nature” by destroying what is fundamental to ‘n’ature – its independence and nonhumanness. Artifacts, within this understanding, transcend ‘n’ature by leaving the “natural” sphere of the dualism and, consequently, by decreasing the portion of the world that is nonhuman (or, separate from that which is human). Second, however, Vogel indicates that there is a mistaken view which holds that “the reason that (some) human products are called artificial is that human beings are (in part) supernatural,” i.e., “*outside Nature*.”<sup>40</sup> Humans, in other words, have some characteristic that causes them, as well as their actions and artifacts, to escape the “natural order.” While some dualistic arguments allude to this being the case, Vogel is confident that us, our actions, and our artifacts are all very much within the “natural order,” i.e., within ‘N’ature.

Dualistic arguments that support the idea that artifacts transcend nature will often conflate these two manners of transcendence into one phenomenon, wherein an artifact transcends both ‘n’ature and ‘N’ature simultaneously. Vogel describes this in more detail by highlighting the assumption that underpins this conflation:

When thinkers such as McKibben or Katz distinguish nature from the human, [...] this is not because it is possible to discover *in the world* some ontologically significant difference between those things human beings have transformed and those they have not. Rather this dualistic conception of nature begins by *assuming* the existence of such a difference—begins, that is, by assuming that humans are

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<sup>1</sup> I will retain the distinction between ‘N’ature and ‘n’ature for the remainder of the paper. The word “nature” (written as all lowercase without ‘’) will refer to nature as a general concept rather than either of these two specific meanings.

distinct from nature, typically because of their rational/mental/conscious capacities—and then uses that assumption to justify the claim that that which humans have made or done (the ‘artificial’) can be ontologically distinguished from the ‘natural.’”<sup>41</sup>

His point is, more precisely, that the claim that intentionality causes an artifact to transcend nature is not only that this intentionality is human (rather than natural in the nonhuman sense) but also because that perspective “treats intentional actions as though they took place outside the ordinary world of Nature.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, it assumes that the “rational/mental/conscious capacities” of humans are *supernatural* (transcend ‘N’ature) in addition to belonging to the human sphere of the human-‘n’ature dualism. While no dualistic thinkers actually argue that humans exist outside of ‘N’ature (totality), Vogel demonstrates through his critique how absurd it is to think that human artifacts *do* transcend ‘N’ature merely by virtue of being the product of human thought or action.

There are two other critiques of the natural-artificial divide implicit in dualistic accounts of nature. The first is, more or less, a response to Bill McKibben’s *End of Nature* argument. This critique draws our attention to both the naturalness of humans as well as the history of human interaction with the landscape. In *The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*, William Cronon states, “In fact, everything we know about environmental history suggests that people have been manipulating the natural world on various scales for as long as we have a record of their passing.” Humans have always, in other words, had an impact on nature. Vogel concurs with this critique, indicating that it is not only the natural-artificial divide but also the entire human-nature dualism which is untenable:

Positing nature as something separate and ontologically distinct from the human makes no sense, not merely because we human beings are ourselves natural but also because—as is true of all other natural organisms—our position in the world is fundamentally active and transformative, and so the ‘nature’ (or rather the environment) we inhabit is always one we have already helped form.<sup>43</sup>

The world is, in this sense, “always already humanized”<sup>44</sup> – thus, McKibben’s claim that nature has ended is irrelevant because, if it is true that human action makes the landscape into an “unnatural” artifact, nonhuman ‘n’ature has *never* physically existed concurrently with humanity. Vogel points out that it would be, moreover, arbitrary to assign a particular species a conceptual distinction from nature since every species has this same active and transformative relationship to their environment. Cronon uses the concrete (rather than conceptual) portion of this line of thinking<sup>45</sup> to demonstrate how the idea of wilderness captured in the Wilderness Act of 1964 is flawed: “The removal of Indians to create an ‘uninhabited wilderness’—uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place—reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is.”<sup>46</sup> The wilderness, or “nature,” that dualistic accounts of nature revere for its essential separateness, independence, and untrammelled quality is a socially constructed idea based on a myth about human history.<sup>47</sup>

Related to this second critique of the natural-artificial interpretation of the human-nature dualism is a concern over where a dualistic account of nature leaves us when deciding what constitutes proper environmental practice. Cronon articulates this adjacent point:

if nature dies because we enter it then the only way to save nature is to kill ourselves. The absurdity of this proposition flows from the underlying dualism it expresses. Not only does it ascribe greater power to humanity than<sup>2</sup> we in fact possess [...] but in the end it offers us little more than a self-defeating counsel of despair. The tautology gives us no way out: if wild nature is the only thing worth saving, and if our mere presence destroys it, then the sole solution to our own unnaturalness, the only way to protect sacred wilderness from profane humanity, would seem to be suicide. It is not a proposition that seems likely to produce very positive or practical results.<sup>48</sup>

This is a major issue for dualistic arguments for the protection of nature because it effectively nullifies the possibility of human protection of nature. Nature cannot be anything but destroyed by

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<sup>2</sup> This may be a typo and reads more clearly as “than.”

us. Even though dualistic accounts posit nature as an object and they can, therefore, *discuss* it as something they are capable of acting towards (and potentially protecting), the fundamental separation and independence that underpins both the dualism and the destruction of ‘n’ature makes its protection impossible. One could argue that leaving nature alone and allowing its processes to dominate is a suitable enough option. Yet, there are many ways in which our lives intertwine not only with(in) ‘N’ature, but also with ‘n’ature, making this option fairly impractical for us when carried out absolutely. We could not, for example, nourish ourselves without coming into contact with nature. By ascribing to this dualistic conception of nature, “We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, *honorable* human place in nature might actually look like.”<sup>49</sup> Any hope of an interventionist environmental ethic is virtually nullified, as humans must keep themselves separate and contained. Even those who subscribe to a softer human-nature dualism, such as rewilding proponents, see the preservation of an area’s naturalness (or degree thereof) as conditional upon limited intervention, relegating the proper human place to outside of nature once again.

The third critique of the natural-artificial divide is essentially the inverse of the last: not only have humans always impacted *nature*, but ‘n’ature’s nonhuman processes are always at play within our *own* actions. As I described in the first chapter, these (nonhuman) natural processes are believed, according to a dualistic perspective, to comprise nature’s autonomy, or *wildness*. While dualists highlight how these forces operate independently of and *separate from* the human sphere, Vogel emphasizes how much our own actions depend upon them. The nonhuman processes that comprise our environment are always affecting us, our actions, and our artifacts, just like we are always affecting it. *Our own actions* are inseparable from nature, or the “nonhuman.”



Vogel takes this critique another step, which is foundational for his own philosophy: we not only always utilize nonhuman processes in our actions (whether intentionally or unintentionally), but they also actively impact our actions in ways we do not, and cannot, always plan for. This inseparability, unpredictability, and unknowability – rather than absolute separation or autonomy – is what underpins Vogel’s non-dualistic conception of wildness. “[W]e set (some) of them in motion, and then we find ourselves absolutely at their mercy. In doing so, we find ourselves in the presence of the wild.”<sup>50</sup> He continues:

if we begin to think even more carefully, we might come to see that the wild is always there in *all* our acts, and in all our artifacts. If the notion of wildness refers to the operation of forces in an object or organism that operate unpredictably and beyond the grasp of any human actor, then this moment of wildness arises in every artifact, not just in restorations.<sup>51</sup>

This new definition of wildness is crucial to my argument for two reasons. First, it appears to resolve the main issues with the dualistic conception of wildness by overcoming the separation of humans and nature and conveying that nonhuman contributions to our actions and artifacts are “the condition of the possibility of the building itself.”<sup>52</sup> However, while I agree with Vogel that nonhuman processes are fundamentally intertwined with our own actions, I disagree with certain fundamental aspects of his position. These disagreements of mine hold for other monistic perspectives as well, such as in deep ecologist Freya Mathew’s account of the ecological self.<sup>53</sup>

The lack of both conceptual and material distinction inherent to monistic accounts of the environment and of wildness leave us in a similarly challenging position as dualism does when deciding how to act ethically towards our environment. Moreover, my goal in this paper is to clarify why the concept of nature and the objective of protecting it is important for environmentalism. Because Vogel disagrees so strongly with the separation of humans and nature that he *only* emphasizes their *inseparability*, his solution is to get rid of the concept of nature

altogether – his philosophy is, in other words, “postnatural.” This poses an obvious conceptual problem for me to overcome, and it is therefore imperative that I demonstrate why I find his philosophical solution to the issues with dualistic environmental perspectives unsatisfactory.

## ***2.2 Critique of Vogel***

In his book *Thinking like a Mall*, Vogel proposes a “postnatural” philosophy wherein he unifies reality under the term the “built environment” rather than “nature.” According to him, the “built environment” is something which we all perpetually co-constitute and from which all parts of reality are, therefore, inseparable. Although his philosophy is a move forward from the radical separation of humans and nature found in dualism, I argue that the lack of distinction his monistic account of reality affords is conceptually unhelpful for understanding the world around us. By eliminating the possibility for nature to be something we can act towards, and thus protect or destroy, we are left in a position that is just as impractical as dualism for understanding what constitutes an ethical relationship with the environment. This is the reason I believe his improvements to environmental thinking are insufficient and, ultimately, unsatisfactory.

Vogel is both a monistic thinker as well as a social constructivist. He is monistic because, rather than seeing the world as fundamentally split into two separate spheres as is characteristic of dualism, he argues that reality is one inseparable whole. Additionally, while he is a social constructivist, he clarifies that his conception of social constructivism is different from most typical accounts of it. This distinction is in keeping with his monistic, rather than dualistic, outlook. While social construction often pins human construction against the “natural,” such as in the natural-artificial divide I discussed earlier, Vogel finds this assumption arbitrary and nonsensical.<sup>54</sup> All of ‘N’ature, or the “built environment,” is constructed, wild, human, and nonhuman

simultaneously. Moreover, humans are not the only part of nature that produces what we might describe as artifacts – beavers build dams, birds weave nests, and wolves dig dens. Any way you look at it, according to Vogel, humans and ‘n’ature are fundamentally intertwined and mutually implicated in the active constitution of reality.

Vogel’s conception of wildness does a lot of work for his argument here. If the defining characteristic of the environment is its “builtness” (or artifactuality), and if “builtness” necessarily includes “wildness” (understood as “the operation of forces in an object or organism that operate unpredictably and beyond the grasp of any human actor”), it seems logical to conclude that wildness permeates the whole world. I personally do not take issue with this particular sentiment. However, I think Vogel has swung too far by doing away with the concept of nature altogether. The “built environment” – which is equivalent to “totality” and, therefore, ‘N’ature – collapses into one unified whole, where any major conceptual (or actual) distinction between parts of the whole becomes a philosophical challenge. It is much harder to make sense of how, or more importantly *why*, the welfare of elephants, manatees, and wombats is environmentally important and can be treated as such. One’s reasoning would be much more arbitrary than if you could say that helping an endangered species in some way protects *nature* and the complex organization of things *within* nature.

Despite how muddy the inseparability of the “built environment” makes Vogel’s philosophy, his idea of “wildness” still harbors a distinction between, essentially, humans and ‘n’ature. A majority of these unpredictable, unknowable, and uncontrollable things *are*, in fact, *nonhuman*. By taking away the categorical name for nonhuman processes, autonomy, and wildness – which are unified under the heading of “nature” in dualistic accounts – Vogel both flattens the dualism and conceals an implicit distinction within his own philosophy. By taking away the

concept of “nature” and the nonhuman signification it has, Vogel is left with little philosophical room to discuss such a distinction, and his idea of wildness therefore becomes extremely nebulous.

One could argue that Vogel retains this (more or less) nonhuman-human distinction within his argument for wildness because it is easier to make the point that they are intertwined if he posits them as two categories and not because he actually believes them to be two categories in a real (concrete) sense. That he does not explicitly acknowledge that he makes this distinction but, rather, overemphasizes their unity within the “built environment” is unsatisfactory in two ways.

First, by not sufficiently emphasizing the nonhuman (‘n’ature) as a conceptual category, everything nonhuman takes on a mystical or quasi-noumenal quality, and the degree to which nonhuman autonomy can be recognized is severely compromised (even as Vogel’s wildness claims to highlight it). Because of this, it also makes it much harder to articulate how we should act ethically in relation with our environment – in other words, with the nonhuman things that comprise the rest of ‘N’ature. How are we to acknowledge the value of quiet oceans for the communication of sea animals or the importance of riparian buffers along streams leading into the Chesapeake Bay? For Vogel, since ‘n’ature is no longer something we can interact with (in the same way it is conceptually objectified in dualism), there is no obvious thing environmentalism can protect. Nor can we use the idea of nature to understand *how* we might protect it (or why, even), since it is not something we can look to beyond ourselves for any semblance of moral guidance.<sup>3</sup> These two points – not being able to protect nature or to look to nature for guidance – are both things Vogel sees as either a strength or a necessity for his idea of a good environmental philosophy; nonetheless, I personally believe they are detrimental.

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<sup>3</sup> More will be said about this later, with a brief word on the naturalistic fallacy.

While dualism posits a conceptual separation between humans and nature, conflating it with and enforcing it as an *actual* one, Vogel's monistic account uses the *actual* intertwinement of humans and nonhumans ('n'ature) to eliminate the possibility for any significant *conceptual* distinction between them. Neither of these stances, in my opinion, are sufficient on their own to properly cognize reality or provide us with the tools to generate an appropriate environmental ethic.

William Cronon makes a similar point:

On the one hand, one of my own most important environmental ethics is that people should always be conscious that they are part of the natural world, inextricably tied to the ecological systems that sustain their lives. Any way of looking at nature that encourages us to believe we are separate from nature—as wilderness tends to do—is likely to reinforce environmentally irresponsible behavior. On the other hand, I think it is no less crucial for us to recognize and honor nonhuman nature as a world we did not create, a world with its own independent, nonhuman reasons for being as it is. The autonomy of nonhuman nature seems to me an indispensable corrective to human arrogance.<sup>55</sup>

In this quote, Cronon essentially indicates that there is conceptual value in both 'N'ature and 'n'ature. Focusing only on 'n'ature, like in dualistic perspectives, results in a failure to recognize how fundamentally interdependent and co-constructive humans and the rest of nature are. It is unsatisfactory, in other words, because it eliminates a conceptual pathway through which this intertwinement can be conceptualized and articulated; thus, an environmental philosophy that contains only 'n'ature also leaves us devoid of the tools necessary to generate an ethic where humans interact responsibly *with* nature. Focusing only on 'N'ature, like in a monistic perspective, results in an inability to conceptualize and articulate the nonhuman part of the environment beyond us that we are in constant interaction with and which itself contains a generative or constructive quality. As such, we are left in a challenging position when trying to decide how to act ethically towards the rest of nature – since nature is not posited as something beyond us, we can neither act

*toward* nature nor cognize it as something with particular features we should account for in our ethical practices.

One could argue that Vogel does, in his conception of wildness, account for a distinction between humans and nonhumans in a way that fulfills Cronon's requirements. Yet, Vogel explicitly acknowledges that we should not interpret his ideas to "mea[n] that there is an irreducible element of 'otherness' in the world."<sup>56</sup> He means *only* – and with considerable resoluteness – "that humans and what is here called 'nature' are inseparable."<sup>57</sup> I think Vogel is right to emphasize how interpenetrative human and nonhuman existences and processes are and, in that way, how positing a strong distinction between them is flawed. However, demonstrating that humans and nonhumans are fundamentally inseparable does not preclude us from cognizing nonhumans as, in some sense, beyond that which is immediately human and as something we *interact* with as well as necessarily *act* with. Even if we recognize that nonhuman processes are implicit in our actions (and even in our own bodies<sup>58</sup>), a distinction is conceptually useful for mapping the world, acknowledging the "autonomy" of nonhumans, and generating an environmental ethic that allows us to act *towards* (the rest of) nonhuman "nature."

There is thus a different and, in my opinion, better solution to moving away from the human-nature dualism than the monistic perspective Vogel suggests: a dialectical account of nature. While I will describe what this means in the following chapter, it is enough for now to know that a dialectical account of nature permits both the useful distinction of dualism and the important unity of monism. Understanding nature within a dialectical framework provides us with the tools to cognize nature as something we can protect despite our fundamental embeddedness within it and to properly bring the longstanding environmental objective of protecting nature to fruition.

In this chapter, I sought to demonstrate why both dualistic and monistic accounts of nature are insufficient for appropriately cognizing nature as well as for underpinning an environmental ethic. I first presented critiques of the dualistic perspectives that typically underpin arguments for the protection of nature, following this with my own critique of Vogel's monistic solution to the conceptual issues contained in these dualistic accounts. I demonstrated why neither a dualistic nor monistic account of nature is sufficient and argued that a dialectical one is better equipped for environmental thought and ethics. In the following chapter, I attempt to resolve these issues with dualism and monism by positing a dialectical account of nature.

### **Chapter 3: Toward a Dialectical Account of Nature**

In this chapter, I argue for a dialectical account of nature which I believe resolves the issues with both monistic and dualistic accounts of nature. Although both dualistic and monistic accounts of nature have shortcomings, they each draw our attention to what conceptual elements are valuable to include when articulating an idea of nature. A dialectical framework, I argue, is capable of capturing these important features without running into the conceptual problems of other philosophical stances. Thus, it is through this dialectical framework that I think nature is best cognized and through which the environmental objective of protecting nature can be most aptly defended.

In the first section of this chapter, I posit a twofold idea of nature which allows us to conceive of humans and nature as both interrelated and conceptually distinct. I discuss how dialectical relationships between all things in nature are the condition of possibility for existence, autonomy, and ecological health. The second section of this chapter explains what protecting nature looks like in a dialectical framework. I posit ecological health as a normative standard for

environmental practice and argue for the cultivation of what philosopher Nancy Snow terms “existential humility.”

### ***3.1 On Nature***

The most appropriate way, I think, to understand nature and to conceptualize what protecting it looks like is to reformulate the concept of nature within a dialectical framework. A dialectic can be defined as “any situation in which two (or more) things interact with each other to produce something which combines aspects of both but is nonetheless different from either of the original interactors and therefore genuinely novel.”<sup>59</sup> In the context of this paper, a dialectic refers specifically to the interactive, co-constitutive relationships between things in nature. This is a metaphysical stance, not a claim about how the world appears to us when coming from a particular epistemological perspective. This is different from how dialectical philosophers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Theodor W. Adorno understand dialectics as capturing the notion that ideas are always a product of the relationships between them and the social context from which they originate. While I am sympathetic to the perspectives of Hegel and Adorno, this is not what I am attempting to capture by arguing for a dialectical account of nature.

However, one could argue that this dialectical approach to nature is itself a product of the dialectical method described by Hegel or Adorno. By analyzing and piecing together important fundamentals from both dualistic and monistic accounts of nature, the dialectical perspective I am about to articulate allows us, I believe, to retain the benefits of both while eradicating the conceptual issues those frameworks contain, all the while positing a new (albeit derivative) framework. This dialectical account is one that, in other words, mediates the perspectives of dualism and monism – it provides the distinction between humans and nature that monism lacks

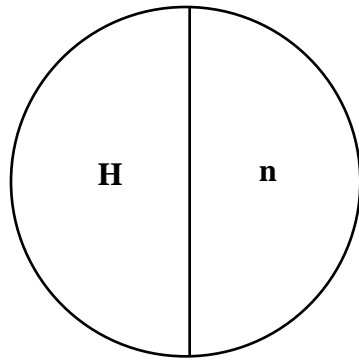


without falling into the absoluteness and essentiality of dualistic separation. However, the dialectical process that I am using to generate this particular conception of nature is different from the way in which this conception of nature *itself* is a dialectical one.

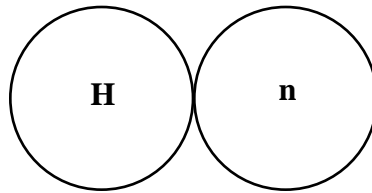
Because the idea of nature I put forth in this section is dialectical (i.e., it understands nature itself as inherently co-constitutive and co-generative), a twofold definition of nature *itself* is necessary. This is because “nature,” in a dialectical framework, needs to represent both “the whole of nature” as well as “the rest of nature” when articulating how a particular thing in nature is in a co-constitutive relationship with that which it is not. For this twofold definition of nature, I reframe the two concepts of nature given by Mill. These two concepts are ‘N’ature (totality) and ‘n’ature (the part of the world not produced by human action or intentionality).

In this dialectical framework, ‘N’ature can still be understood as totality, yet it means, more specifically, the “whole” of reality within which a dialectic takes place. This implies two important points about the inseparability of things in ‘N’ature. First, all things in ‘N’ature are part of ‘N’ature categorically. Second, all things in ‘N’ature actively co-constitute the world. Each individual part of ‘N’ature is co-constituted by other parts of ‘N’ature. This means that ‘N’ature itself is also concretized by the co-constructive activities of things in ‘N’ature. The nose of a moose, for example, exists in its specific and highly adapted form because it is appropriate for the environmental factors to which moose are exposed. At the same time, the specific ecosystem a particular moose lives in is shaped by the behavioral patterns of that very moose, which then continues to shape the existence of that moose as well as all other things in that area. This co-constitutive way of thinking can be extended to account for all individual things in ‘N’ature as well as the whole of ‘N’ature itself.

**Dualistic Account of Nature**  
(expressed two ways)



*Dualism 1*



*Dualism 2*

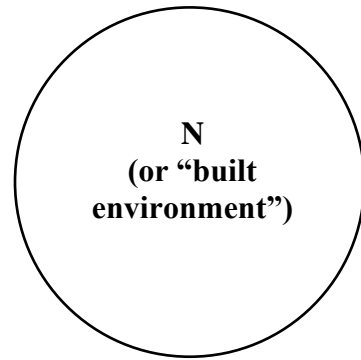
**Where:**

H = humans

n = dualistic 'n'ature

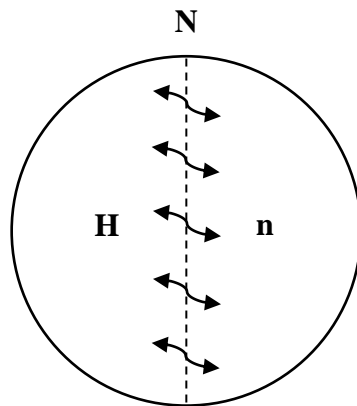
N = 'N'ature or totality  
(including humans)

**Monistic Account of Nature**



*Monism*

*Note: Dualism is expressed in two ways because, while humans and nature are typically seen as fundamentally separate (Dualism 2), Vogel importantly notes that certain dualistic perspectives implicitly assume that both humans and nature are part of 'N'ature (Dualism 1).*



*Dialectical*

**Dialectical Account of Nature**  
(from the human perspective)

**Where:**

H = humans

n = dialectical 'n'ature

N = dialectical 'N'ature

↔ = co-constitutive relationships

⋮ = permeable because of ↔

The concept of 'n'ature, in this dialectical framework, still refers to all parts of 'N'ature that are not human. This is because, since *we* are always coming from a human perspective, it is easiest to understand the co-constitutive relationship between ourselves and the rest of 'N'ature as between us and nonhuman 'n'ature. This dialectical conception of 'n'ature is not meant to imply an actual or absolute separation between humans and nonhuman 'n'ature. Rather, because 'n'ature

is defined as nonhuman *merely* because that is the rest of ‘N’ature *for us*,<sup>4</sup> it is intended to highlight both the co-constitutive nature of reality (‘N’ature) as well as that ‘N’ature has distinct parts.

This is crucial because, despite the importance of emphasizing ‘N’ature’s interrelatedness, it is also useful to retain some distinction, at least philosophically. Thus, although we always come to bear on our surroundings, it is important to have a concept that cognizes our environment as, in some way, distinct from us and as comprised of all that is *not* us (i.e., nonhuman). Even though, as Vogel points out, the nonhuman parts of the world are inseparably interrelated with the human one, I believe it is crucial to emphasize just as intently that they are, to a degree, “beyond” that which is human (whether by kind or degree). The world could not be *co*-constituted if there were not distinct parts which interact and, through their interaction, constitute the world. Both unity and distinction are fundamental conceptual underpinnings of co-constitution; it makes little sense if either notion is lost.

By viewing our own relationship with the rest of ‘N’ature as such, we can come to recognize that this type of relationship is the same for all other parts of reality, from infinitesimally small to large scales and from biotic to abiotic. Leaving any piece of reality out from this dialectic would posit something outside of the “whole” which the dialectic both concretely produces and conceptually relies on.

Moreover, it is important to note that, despite the identity that is attributed to something by positing a distinction, what (conceptually) constitutes a distinct entity is, in some sense, a matter of perspective. Thus, what ‘n’ature conceptually signifies (since it is something defined by what it is not, even as it represents a category of concrete things) is also dependent on perspective. For example, from the perspective of a wolf, the rest of ‘N’ature would be “non-wolf ‘n’ature” and,

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<sup>4</sup> Coming from the general human perspective, not from the perspective of a specific person.

from the perspective of a piece of granite, the rest of ‘N’ature would be “non-granite ‘n’ature.” Thus, a twofold, dialectical conception of nature retains the unity monism attributes to reality while simultaneously conveying the distinction posited, yet unmediated, by dualism. There is no fundamental separation between something and the rest of ‘N’ature, nor is nature posited as *essentially nonhuman*.

The concept of an organism-environment dialectic<sup>5</sup> helps to explain this further. Interestingly, this is a concept that Vogel himself alludes to, yet he dresses it in a name that emphasizes the inseparability of organism and environment *over and above* their distinction, which is in keeping with his larger philosophy. He states,

the environment *comes to be what it is through that activity*: the organism ‘constitutes’ it, or we might say it ‘constructs’ it. (But it is not just the environment that comes to be what it is through these practices of construction: so too does the organism itself. [...]). There is no such thing as an organism separate from an environment, but by the same token there is no such thing as an environment that is not the environment *of* an organism: both ‘environment’ and ‘organism’ are relational terms. And the relation between them involves activity and change: they are both dynamic terms as well. ‘Constitution’ is a form of practice, of activity, not a form of theory—it means *construction*.<sup>60</sup>

A few important points can be drawn from the concept of an organism-environment dialectic. First, the identity of an organism (or its environment, as well as the particular *parts* of that environment) is constituted both by itself and its environment. In other words, its specific existence is concretely co-constituted through the dialectical relationships inherent within ‘N’ature. The previous example of a moose and its relationship with the ecosystem it is part of exemplifies this. Second, the autonomy attributed to the existence of a particular thing is likewise dependent upon, or emergent from, these co-constitutive relationships. Many animals, for example, depend on the bacteria in their gut for the very digestion that keeps them alive and active. If these relationships are the

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<sup>5</sup> Niche construction theory (NCT) is an interesting ecological concept which captures this same idea.

existential condition of possibility for the thing *as such*, they must be, therefore, the condition of possibility for its autonomy as well. What I mean by autonomy is the basic notion that an object can be recognized both as an individual entity discernable from its surroundings as well as capable of affecting things in the world.<sup>6</sup> This may cause us to recognize something as “self-willed” or constructive, even as the object’s relationships to other things in the world are what make this possible.

This, at first glance, sounds very paradoxical. Autonomy is traditionally (such as in dualistic accounts of nature) conceived of as necessitating independence, in that the self-enclosure of an individual provides an entity to which autonomy can be easily attributed. However, any autonomy that really exists *necessarily* exists within ‘N’ature, which itself is comprised of countless interrelated processes. Since these processes in ‘N’ature are necessarily intertwined, it is impossible to argue for any absolute separation between an autonomous entity and its surroundings. Not only are these interrelated processes the condition of possibility for the concrete existence of an entity, but it is only through this interrelationship with its surroundings that it can be given the perceptible contrast necessary to *appear* as an entity to which autonomy can then be attributed. A river, for example, can be easily cognized as an entity for the way it shapes the land and nourishes its inhabitants despite its amorphous watery contents, its shared boundaries with other parts of Earth’s hydrological system, and its identity’s concrete dependence on fish, plants, and sediment.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, like I mentioned above, what constitutes an entity is, to some degree, a matter of perspective. It depends both on the relationship the perceiver has to the object as well as which relationships that perceiver determines are appropriate for delineating that object from its

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<sup>6</sup> Whether actively or passively, although this distinction may sometimes be arbitrary, inapplicable, or perspectival.

surroundings.<sup>7</sup> Yet, even with this dependence on the perspective of the perceiver, the entity must itself have some perceptible differentiation between it and the backdrop which it is always within and related to. Often, this differentiation is cognized, within the idea of autonomy, as that entity acting upon its surroundings – how it *itself* actively constitutes reality. Its autonomy, then, only emerges as perceptible by virtue of this co-constitutive relationship. “Since no part [of reality] ever exists in total isolation from other parts but is instead interrelated with them, a part can never be understood in isolation from the relations it has with other parts.”<sup>62</sup>

Despite how contradictory this conception of autonomy sounds, the emergence of autonomy out of relationships is a point commonly endorsed by environmentalists, albeit with a slightly different phrasing. It is not atypical for environmentalists to point out that ecological relationships make possible the continued existence and flourishing of things in nature and claim that, through these ecological relationships, nature’s autonomy can be supported and ensured. Andrea Gammon, in her discussion of rewilding, states that “rewilding tries to convey an ecosystem back to a state where it can sustain itself”<sup>63</sup> or “to a state of health and functionality”<sup>64</sup> through “the restoration of autonomous biotic and abiotic agents and processes”<sup>65</sup> that are “thought to continue [the rewilding] in perpetuity”<sup>66</sup> *through* non-human autonomy while simultaneously *increasing* non-human autonomy. The goal is, for many rewilding proponents, to help reestablish a “more dynamic and self-regulating natural world.”<sup>67</sup>

Curiously, this notion is often put forth by environmental thinkers that hold a more extreme dualistic perspective when arguing for the connection between wildness (nature’s autonomy) and ecological health (or the “natural order”) as well. This is clear in Kirchhoff and Vicenzotti’s

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to say the demarcation of things in reality, nor its structure, are entirely up for free determination. I will soon discuss the constraints we have in this respect.

analysis of the ecological value of wilderness circa the 1960s: the “natural processes” that constitute “nature’s ability to self-organise” and produce “a unique harmonious ecological order” are dependent upon and, furthermore, support the continued existence of nature’s autonomy (or “wildness,” understood dualistically).<sup>68</sup> Because dualists posit an absolute separation between humans and nature, however, humans are conceptually left out of the natural (ecological) order which dualists value. Like Vogel points out, some dualistic thinkers implicitly hold a second definition of nature as totality; yet, because they subscribe to dualism, they cannot give the notion of fundamental interrelationship precedence, in their idea of reality, above their commitment to separation.

A dialectical account of nature allows for this unity while also retaining, therefore, one of the most important features of dualistic arguments for the protection of nature: the value of wildness. Because ‘n’ature represents the rest of ‘N’ature that is not (from our perspective) human and, furthermore, because we are always coming from a human perspective when talking about environmental concerns, wildness can maintain its longstanding signification of nonhuman autonomy. Because the concept of autonomy, as I have attempted to demonstrate, does *not* require absolute separation or independence but, rather, relationships from which an entity can be reasonably *discerned*, the link to autonomy that underpins the common understanding of wildness does not need to be broken either. Richard Evanoff makes a similar point:

Rather than see the human-nature relationship in dualistic terms (which places the two sides in opposition to each other) or in monistic terms (which simply collapses the natural into the human or vice versa), a dialectical position is presented which sees humanity and nature as simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the other, while each maintaining a measure of autonomy.<sup>69</sup>

In sum, by arguing that, in a dialectic, reality is fundamentally co-constituted, autonomy (wildness) can still be attributed to ‘n’ature (whether in a general sense or as attributed to particular parts of

'n'ature). We can still be awed by a torrential storm or recognize life flourishing without perceptible human intervention and call that "wildness." By still attributing autonomy to 'n'ature, Cronon's worry that the nonhuman contributions to the structure of our world might not be appreciated or respected can be remedied.

The contributions nonhumans make towards actively co-constituting our reality can, given this understanding of autonomy, continue to be recognized as producing what dualists might call a valuable "natural order," although it is one that we also have a hand in. This should not imply that there is some essential concrete form of 'N'ature, however, but that 'N'ature is in a constant state of active becoming which generates ecosystems with unique, concrete structures. In keeping with this sentiment, M.A. Leibold et al. state<sup>8</sup> that "natural communities are assembled through a variety of processes that result in non-random community structure. Community structure consists of the identity, traits and abundances of species in a community. [...] assembly is driven by the internal ecological dynamics of communities and by external drivers."<sup>70</sup>

Accordingly, I argue that ecological health can remain a valid normative standard for environmentalism despite its philosophical challenges and tendency to elude both precise definition and easy quantifiability. The structure of ecosystems and the changes this structure undergoes over time affords an opportunity to learn about and reasonably discern what constitutes a functional ecosystem. As Leibold, et al. indicate, "cascading changes caused by [dynamic] community assembly alter both the species richness and species composition of ecosystems with consequences for their function."<sup>71</sup> While ecological health evades clear and straightforward conceptualization, I believe it is an important metaphor for environmental ethics and an idea

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<sup>8</sup> Leibold, et al. refer to this as the "CAFE" approach (Community Assembly and the Functioning of Ecosystems).



worthy of exploration, although that task is beyond the scope of this paper. For now, it is sufficient to allude to community structure and ecosystem function as described by Leibold, et al.

By positing ecological health in this way, we can acknowledge that certain things may support the functioning of an existing ecosystem while recognizing that ecosystems change over time. It would not, for example, make much sense to use the age of the dinosaurs as a temporally specific standard indicative of present ecological health. Yet, it would be beneficial to understand what particular concrete interrelationships comprise an ecosystem at the present moment and draw on both past and theoretical knowledge to ascertain what environmental practices may support its continued functioning. There are numerous measures that can be useful when seeking to determine whether an ecosystem is healthy or functional<sup>72</sup> – such as stability, biodiversity, and disease prevalence<sup>73</sup> – and, although they often require human judgement, they also encourage us to pay attention to and prioritize the nonhuman parts of our world. Striving for what the metaphor of ecological health represents allows us to account for our own needs as well as that of nonhumans while never losing sight of the amazing complexity of co-constituted, wild ‘N’ature.

As such, I think the best way to argue for the protection of nature is to understand nature within a dialectical framework. It allows both the unity of monism as well as the distinction of dualism and, therefore, resolves many of their respective conceptual issues. Several of the most valuable features of nature in both philosophical perspectives – wildness, autonomy, self-organization, co-construction, and ecological health – can still be regarded as important aspects of nature worthy of respect and admiration. Additionally, ecological health, which is often posited as a normative standard in dualistic accounts, can still be and, I argue, should be understood as such within a dialectical framework. In the following section, I describe what protecting nature would

look like in a dialectical framework and how the normative standard of ecological health can be a helpful guide for ethical environmental decision-making.

### ***3.2 Environmental Ethics in a Dialectical Framework***

The aim of this paper has, in sum, been to revalidate the longstanding environmental objective of protecting nature in the face of recent trenchant critiques. This required a conceptual analysis of nature as well as an understanding of the *value* of nature. The remaining step, then, is to propose how I think we can most successfully protect what we value about it. This requires positing a normative standard to guide our actions, for which I propose ecological health. In this section, I will defend why I consider this an appropriate normative standard in light of a dialectical account of nature.

Protecting nature, in a dialectical perspective, must mean protecting ‘N’ature. Yet, as Vogel points out, “if ‘nature’ means the totality of the world subject to ordinary physical and biological processes, then working to protect it seems pointless, since in truth nothing humans can do could harm it.”<sup>74</sup> Moreover, since ‘N’ature means, simply, “everything in existence,” no *essential* structure can be drawn from the term alone and used as a normative guide. However, breaking nature into separate parts with essential features which we then protect from afar, like in dualism, has clearly been proven to not be a suitable approach either. Thus, the most appropriate method for an environmental ethic seems to be to understand nature as ‘N’ature, first and foremost, and to posit a normative standard *for* it. By interacting with ‘n’ature, we then have the potential to actualize this normative standard and protect the qualities of ‘N’ature we find valuable.

Many environmentalists choose to look *only* to nature for this normative standard (rather than acknowledge it is dually informed by the human perspective) since it is, at the end of the day *nature* they are concerned about protecting. Vogel explains:

For if the moral value of an action is *not* to be determined anthropocentrically [...], then there needs to be some external, nonhuman standard by which the determination is to be made. And the obvious candidate for that standard is nature. Whether it be the consequences for individual natural entities that are considered or for species or for ecosystemic functioning or for ‘biodiversity’ or simply for nature as a whole, antianthropocentric environmental thinking hopes to be able to answer the normative question by appealing to nature instead of to human beings.<sup>75</sup>

This, however, is an infamously precarious philosophical move, one that both I and Vogel disagree with. Although this appeal to nature is intuitively attractive, it is known as the *naturalistic fallacy*. “*Ought* cannot be derived from *is*; a descriptive account of a state of affairs tells us nothing about the value of that state; evaluative terms like good and bad and right and wrong function in accordance with a different grammar than do the sorts of terms with which we describe the characteristics of nature.”<sup>76</sup> Because descriptions do not have normative authority, a “completely” external standard (like nature) actually requires the authority to be given *by humans*, even as it claims not to. That particular descriptive content, in other words, needs to be posited as valuable. Additionally, because our descriptions of nature are, to some extent, always colored by our own perspectives, yet because, on the other hand, using nature as an external standard implies that this is not the case, this valued descriptive characteristic is often concealed behind ideas of what nature truly is. This points to a second danger – “presuppositions about what Nature *ought to be* [are...] hidden as presuppositions about what Nature is *really* or *authentically* or *in essence*”<sup>77</sup> which run the risk of being “merely an expression of our own social context and our own social prejudices.”<sup>78</sup> The supposed authority of nature as an external normative standard, then, is not truly as solid or

value-neutral as this type of perspective hopes, as it turns out not to be devoid of human input after all.

Because of this, some environmental philosophers, like Vogel, turn *solely* to humans for positing a normative standard. For him, there is no other option since “nature” does not even exist in his philosophy. Moreover, since our actions and “building” are always intertwined with the actions of nonhumans, there is *nothing* truly external to turn to, only us and the environment we are complicit in building. Vogel does make a substantial effort to indicate that we should be humble and have self-knowledge when it comes to positing an anthropocentric normative standard. Yet, there is very little preventing us from then positing *any* normative standard – because there is no longer any external thing (like dualistic ‘n’ature) to turn to, nothing can be used to justify what delineates a “bad” from a “good” environmental practice besides a purely human reason.

For this reason, a wholly anthropocentric normative standard seems as untenable as a wholly anti-anthropocentric one. Without the moderating force of an external standard, an anthropocentric environmental ethic runs the risk of treating nature with inadequate respect. Nevertheless, I recognize that whatever normative standard environmentalism holds is *always* posited by us. Thus, to retain the benefits of both while avoiding their shortcomings, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that a normative standard for an environmental ethic be generated through and informed by both humans and ‘n’ature. I am not personally convinced by either the anthropocentric or anti-anthropocentric positions that it is ever the case that we even *can* appeal to anything other than both humans and ‘n’ature simultaneously – input from either seems to be shuttled in under the radar in each case. Thus, I think looking to humans and (the rest of) nature is the most satisfactory answer.

In a dialectical framework,

The ethical question can be recast, then, not to ask how nature should be managed or preserved, but rather to ask what forms of culture can be created which allow both for human flourishing and for the flourishing of nonhuman forms of life. Asking the question in this way reconciles the anthropocentric/conservationist with the ecocentric/preservationist streams of environmental ethics.<sup>79</sup>

Interestingly, Vogel asks a similar question in his own discussion of environmental ethics, yet he does not frame it within a dialectic. The sort of environmental ethic I am proposing, contrary to Vogel, “acknowledges the various ways in which each [humans and ‘n’ature] is dependent upon the other, while simultaneously providing each with an appropriate measure of autonomy.”<sup>80</sup> By recognizing that dialectical relationships are the condition of possibility for existence and, furthermore, by positing ecological health as a normative standard, both the interests of humans and ‘n’ature as well as their interconnection can be recognized and accounted for.

Although I advise that we look to both humans and ‘n’ature, this is not to claim that nature can “speak” or tell us what an environmental ethic should look like absolutely. Nor is it to suggest that our own perspective is ever free of our own human concepts and values. Rather, I am suggesting that it is important we pay as much attention to the concerns of things in ‘n’ature as we do our own concerns, and that, by observing and learning about parts of ‘n’ature, we may be able to carry this out more effectively. Richard Evanoff puts forth a perspective that communicates what looking to nature for a normative standard should mean. He states: “Knowledge, values, and ethics, cannot be ‘read out of the world’, but are rather a product of constructive activity at both the personal and the social levels. These constructions are nonetheless constrained by how things actually stand in the world.”<sup>81</sup>

By understanding environmental ethics in this way, we (humans) are always the producers of our ethical systems. Nevertheless, this perspective also allows for a semblance of an external standard as well from which, moreover, we can conclude

that we are not free to ‘socially construct’ nature in any way we like. While some constructions will increase the prospect for long-term human flourishing, others will diminish it. Moreover, how humans interact with the natural environment can either enhance or diminish the prospects for the long-term flourishing of nonhuman lifeforms.<sup>82</sup>

Although this allows us to have a semblance of an external standard, we should not, therefore, assume our understanding of it is completely congruous with reality. Evanoff consequently points out another element key for its implementation: “because we can never know how all the parts of a given whole actually fit together, and perhaps not even how far the limits of the whole extend, we can in principle never have absolute knowledge of the whole.”<sup>83</sup> For an appropriate environmental ethic, then, we must “recogniz[e] the extent to which our view of the world is always limited and incomplete, and thus subject to revision in light of new experiences.”<sup>84</sup> Despite the potential limitations of our human perspective, however, we need to be cognizant of when we *can* glean something relatively certain from the world. If our practices obviously “conflict with how the world actually is,” then they “can be regarded as ‘bad’ in the minimal sense that they are maladaptive.”<sup>85</sup> Ecological health, for example, contains measures that may help us make these determinations. From this we can learn how to better shape our environmental practices.

William Cronon argues for a similar point. “Learning to honor the wild—learning to remember and acknowledge the autonomy of the other—means striving for critical self-consciousness in all of our actions.”<sup>86</sup> An argument for self-consciousness, or “self-knowledge,”<sup>87</sup> as well as for humility can be found in Vogel’s philosophy as well,<sup>88</sup> and it is key to the principle of “existential humility” which philosopher Nancy Snow proposes. This type of humility, she argues, can occur when we recognize that our intellectual capacities are insufficient for comprehending the vast complexity of our universe or when our attention is drawn to the limitations and finitude of the human condition.<sup>89</sup> We should, I believe, always retain this sense of

humility in our environmental ethics and practices. Humility helps us remember to revise our actions when confronted by their shortcomings, and it offers us the motivation to protect nature as best we can by encouraging “an appreciation of the value of the reality that extends beyond [our] circumstances or transcends limitations imposed by the human condition.”<sup>90</sup> If we create a technology that ends up wreaking havoc on the environment – like agricultural fertilizers and the damage they do to watersheds – it is pertinent that we reexamine how our actions affect the world around us, even if our intentions may be good – like increasing food productivity and availability. The autonomy of ‘n’ature, which we are always in co-constructive, dialectical relationship with, may, to a certain extent, be unpredictable and unknowable, and we may realize our own actions are short-sighted – but it is through this opportunity to learn about the world beyond us, as well as ourselves, which we may, I argue, identify the most appropriate environmental practices and most successfully protect nature.

## **Conclusion**

The protection of nature has been a longstanding goal of environmentalism and has underwritten much of environmental practice, from wilderness conservation efforts to the more modern rewilding movement. Like all things we seek to protect, this is because “nature” is something environmentalists find valuable. However, this protective aim has been highly criticized because it often relies on a human-nature dualism. Although many of these critiques are well justified, the concept of nature seems undeniably valuable. In the face of climate change and other environmental problems, such as the loss of countless species, the idea of nature not only gives us a focal point to direct our actions towards, but it also gives a name to what we wish to protect.

Being able to think and communicate about nature in this way is crucial for environmental ethics and practice.

In this paper, I have attempted to revalidate the objective of protecting nature by reformulating the concept of nature within a dialectical framework. This perspective allows the value of nature to be retained while eliminating many of the practical and conceptual issues with both dualistic and monistic accounts of nature. This dialectical conception of nature also seems, to me, more capable of underpinning an environmental ethic. It allows us to cognize our unity with nature while recognizing that we ourselves are a distinct *part* of nature, the rest of which we are in perpetual, co-constitutive interrelationship with. This not only renews the plausibility of the protection of nature, but it also provides an opportunity to develop novel environmental practices and reevaluate those we currently implement. It is my hope that, by holding this idea of nature and philosophically informing an environmental ethic with it, we may be better equipped to protect nature. While this dialectical account of nature supports an interventionist environmental ethic, I believe that it is absolutely crucial we exercise humility and a willingness to learn from our actions.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*. (London, England: Bloomsbury, 2003), 60.
- <sup>2</sup> Eric Katz, "The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature," in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003), 392.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 396.
- <sup>6</sup> Christian Wild, et al., "Climate change impedes scleractinian corals as primary reef ecosystem engineers," *Marine and Freshwater Research* 62, no. 2 (2011): 205, <https://doi.org/10.1071/MF10254>.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Dale Jamieson, *Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 163.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Kevin McCann, "Protecting Biostructure," *Nature*, March 1, 2007, 29.
- <sup>12</sup> Thomas Kirchoff, et al., "A Historical and Systematic Survey of European Perceptions of Wilderness," *Environmental Values* 23, no. 4 (2014): 455, <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327114x13947900181590>.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> U.S., Congress, *The Wilderness Act*, Public Law 88-577, 88<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., [https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/fseprd645666.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd645666.pdf), sec. 2.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Andrea R. Gammon, "The Many Meanings of Rewilding: An Introduction and the Case for a Broad Conceptualisation," *Environmental Values* 27, no. 4 (2018): 333-34, <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327118x15251686827705>.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.
- <sup>21</sup> Daniel Fortin, et al., "Wolves Influence Elk Movements: Behavior Shapes a Trophic Cascade in Yellowstone National Park," *Ecology (Durham)* 86, no. 5 (2005): 1321, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3450894>.
- <sup>22</sup> Kirchoff, et al., 455.
- <sup>23</sup> Val Plumwood, "Paths Beyond Human-Centeredness: Lessons from Liberation Struggles," in *An Invitation to Environmental Philosophy*, ed. David Abram and Anthony Weston (Oxford University Press, 1999), 90.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.
- <sup>25</sup> Charles Warren, "Wildness," in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, ed. Audrey Kobayashi, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. vol. 14 (Netherlands: Elsevier, 2020), 281.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> Jack Turner, "In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World," in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 617.
- <sup>29</sup> Plumwood, "Paths Beyond Human-Centeredness," 90.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.
- <sup>31</sup> Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 22-23.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>33</sup> It is important to note that there were many other reasons Native Americans were displaced from their homelands (such as through broken treaties, war, settlement, and a centuries' long strategy of assimilation and cultural genocide) or why their populations were otherwise decimated (such as from exposure to disease), although this is a complex and complicated history beyond the scope of this paper.
- <sup>34</sup> William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 15-16, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3985059>.
- <sup>35</sup> Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 11.
- <sup>36</sup> John Stuart Mill, "On Nature," in *Three Essays on Religion* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1874), 8.
- <sup>37</sup> Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 12.

- <sup>38</sup> Mill, “On Nature,” 8.
- <sup>39</sup> Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 12.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 21.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 22-23.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 20.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 43.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 119.
- <sup>45</sup> For more information on the myth of uninhabited American wilderness, see “The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492” by William M. Denevan. Although William Cronon’s article “The Trouble with Wilderness” is heavily discussed in environmental philosophy literature, Denevan’s article both predates and informs Cronon’s piece.
- <sup>46</sup> Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” 15-16.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 16.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 19.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 17.
- <sup>50</sup> Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 112.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup> See the book *The Ecological Self* by Freya Mathews for another example of a monistic account of nature.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 39.
- <sup>55</sup> Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” 22.
- <sup>56</sup> Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 115.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> Gut microbiota are an example of nonhumans internal to and interactive with our own bodies. See “Understanding the Gut Microbiota” by Gerald W. Tannock for more information.
- <sup>59</sup> Richard Evanoff, “Reconciling Realism and Constructivism in Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Values* 14, no. 1 (2005): 71, doi:10.3197/0963271053306113.
- <sup>60</sup> Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 54.
- <sup>61</sup> See “Gravel-bed river floodplains are the ecological nexus of glaciated mountain landscapes” by F. Richard Hauer, et al. for more information on the structure and ecological importance of rivers.
- <sup>62</sup> Evanoff, “Reconciling Realism and Constructivism,” 71.
- <sup>63</sup> Gammon, “The Many Meanings of Rewilding,” 340.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., 339.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., 340-41.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., 340.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup> Kirchhoff, et al., “A Historical and Systematic Survey,” 455.
- <sup>69</sup> Evanoff, “Reconciling Realism and Constructivism,” 63.
- <sup>70</sup> Katherine H. Bannar-Martin, et al., “Integrating community assembly and biodiversity to better understand ecosystem function: the Community Assembly and the Functioning of Ecosystems (CAFE) approach,” *Ecology Letters* 21, no. 2 (2018): 169, doi:10.1111/ele.12895.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>72</sup> See David Rapport’s essay, “What Constitutes Ecosystem Health” for more details, citation listed in the following endnote.
- <sup>73</sup> David J. Rapport, “What Constitutes Ecosystem Health?,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 33, no. 1 (1989): 123-24, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pbm.1990.0004>.
- <sup>74</sup> Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 13.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., 27.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid., 28.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibid., 29.
- <sup>79</sup> Evanoff, “Reconciling Realism and Constructivism,” 76.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid., 78.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid., 62.
- <sup>82</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>86</sup> Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” 25.

<sup>87</sup> Nancy E. Snow, “Humility,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 29, no. 2 (1995): 211, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01079834>.

<sup>88</sup> See Chapter 4, “The Nature of Artifacts,” in Vogel’s book *Thinking like a Mall*.

<sup>89</sup> Snow, “Humility,” 206.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 208.

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