Steven Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature* MIT Press. 2015.

The tree, which moves some to tears of joy, is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way.-William Blake

Thinking Like a Mall embodies Steven Vogel's thirty year critique of the concept of nature. While Vogel's work here (and in the past—his first essay on this topic appeared in a 1986 special issue of the journal *Social Theory and Practice* which I guest edited), strikes me as fundamentally flawed, the flaws are significant for those of us who (like Vogel) believe Marxism is essential for understanding the environmental crisis.

Vogel's main target is the idea that "nature" should ever be understood as an ontologically independent entity or sphere of existence separate from human action. Such an entity has never existed, or if it ever did, with the evolutionary advent of humanity nature has "always already" been affected by us. Thus any environmentalism aimed at "protecting", "saving" or "finding wisdom in" a nature distinct from human beings is fundamentally flawed. Further, since humans are a product of evolution and subject to the same physical laws as everything else, there is no way to draw a line between humans and some other realm called "nature," and therefore nothing other than a universal "reality" for environmentalists to study, conserve, and protect.

Further, the widespread environmental fetishizing of a humanly-untouched nature has pernicious political consequences: it ignores how many 'nature preserves' were created by expelling indigenous groups; causes activists to focus all their attention on rainforests or whales and ignore the built environment; induces an apolitical passivity towards our responsibility for our entire environment; and fails to see that the problem is not alienation from some (actually) non-existent 'nature' but the mystifications and powerlessness that result when capitalism reduces us to unconnected individuals.

The ultimate environmental point, argues Vogel, is not to "leave nature alone" but to take responsibility how our practices can have beautiful or ugly, healthy or toxic environmental effects. It is in free, democratic, rational reasoning that we should decide how to treat our environment, not through subservience to a mute nature. Hopefully, he argues, such reasoning

will take into account the "wildness" which colors both the human and the non-human: the way animals, plants, ecosystems, the human body *and* human artifacts have characteristics that escape human understanding and control.

While this summary of a much longer and more complex philosophical argument leaves out a good deal, it also reveals a number of problems. First, there is Vogel's premise that "Environmentalism, both as theory and as practice, has traditionally been concerned above all with *nature*." (1). This is surely true of many environmentalists, but also surely false for many others. Indeed the inclusive care for both non-human and the human has been a dominant strain in environmental "theory and practice" at least since the rise of the environmental justice movement and the advent of "eco-justice" within religious environmentalism. Many large-scale environmental organizations define themselves in terms of their desire to protect "life" rather than "nature." The Principles of Environmental Justice move seamlessly from a concern with the "sacredness of Mother Nature" to the right of the most socially vulnerable not to be poisoned. Theoretically, there are social ecology, ecofeminism, and eco-socialism. Even Bill McKibben, whom Vogel repeatedly criticizes as being devoted solely to a lost "nature," has written several books discussing the environmental significance of topics as "built" and human-centered as public transportation in Curitiba, Brazil, farmers' markets in the United States, and public education in Kerala, India.

Vogel seems strangely blind to a central meaning of "nature" that is less about "never being touched by people" and more about offering an alternative to human society. Trout, trees, and bacteria differ from us at least insofar as their behavior is not in part constituted by historical or cultural self-understanding, complicated beliefs, psychological repression, or neurosis.

It is ironic that Vogel stresses the lack of a significant human-nature distinction *until* he turns to the moral/political structures of group discourse through which we are to determine the proper environmental course. Then nature's inability to speak becomes enormously important. We can learn *about* nature, but we can only learn *from* humans, since only humans are capable of rational, reason-giving-and-offering dialogue.

If we define "nature" as non-human life and the forces/entities which make life possible, then Vogel is surely right that nature does not talk as humans do. Yet neither does it manifest any of the self and other-destructive characteristics of human personality and culture (from imperialism to reality TV to consumerism). Could that not be a reason to seek it out, protect it,

and learn from it? Could this difference warrant making some kind of categorical distinction between nature and humanity?

Using Marx, Vogel detects a fetishism of "nature" structurally akin to the capitalism-induced alienation from labor and fetishizing of commodities—treating our product (the human shaped world) as something given or untouchable. Yet, as Marx indicated in his critique of religion, a belief can be conceptually or empirically mistaken (or, I would add, perhaps a little confused and sometimes contradictory) and still serve a profound social need. In the case of nature, what is offered is the idea that some beings are not as morally muddled, emotionally lost, and interpersonally brutal as people are. That is why we can learn from them.

But, Vogel will reply, other organisms don't offer reasons for what they do, and therefore we cannot learn from them. This retort, repeated often, misses a key point. Moral deliberation in particular and human communication in general involves many other things besides assertions and reasons. There are, for a start, expressions of feeling, exhortations, empathy, story-telling, poetry, and song. We learn through argument, but also from experience. And we might well learn as much about how to behave environmentally from spending a week in a forest (or, as McKibben suggests, twenty-four hours on a small mountain) as from reading the best environmental philosopher. At least, our disposition to be convinced by this or that environmental position is likely to be deeply shaped by the living beings to which we deeply connected.

Drawing on Marx and Habermas, Vogel offers a very limited (and culturally male) model of human existence: we make stuff happen (materially based social practices) and we have arguments about those practices. Left out here, for a start, are contemplation, celebration, self-examination, and emotional care. Recourse to the non-human, to nature, can be an essential part of all those; e.g., celebration of the turn of the seasons, gratitude for the non-human sources of life, contact with animals or plants that is emotionally (and at times physically) healing. Trees (even ones imported from China about which Marx mocked Feuerbach) give shade, soil health, beauty, flowers, fruit, and homes for birds without the kind of often enormously painful self-consciousness and self-obsession that mark human life. Trees, and all the rest of nature, thus "speak" to us of the possibility of something other than our normal egos. In just that sense, even without language, they *are* (what I would call) spiritual teachers.

Concerned about the possibly oppressive priestly or shamanic authority of those who claim to get lessons from trees, Vogel explicitly rejects such a line of reasoning. Yet without at least some alternative to the current ego-structures our culture induces, any attempt to do what Vogel wants—discuss rationally and effectively protect our environment—is doomed to failure.. Without the development of virtues like self-awareness, gratitude, and compassion, neither our linguistic nor our technological powers will be enough to keep us from polluting ourselves—and many others—to death. The role of nature in helping us develop such virtues should not be forgotten.