It is a paradox that at the same time as the public consciousness of problems concerning our relationship to nature is growing rapidly a number of scholars work to either eliminate the very concept of nature or declare it obsolete. For an immediate consideration, the elimination of this concept seems to be bad news for environmentalism. How could we even express our concerns about disastrous changes of our natural environment if nature as a concept is abandoned? Yet, some of the advocates of the abandonment consider themselves to be spokespersons for the protection of the environment. They even consider themselves to advise a more consistent and effective post-natural environmentalism.

To be sure, the concept of nature is difficult to make exact sense of. Is nature the non-human or does it include humans? Is nature the material world 'outside' or is it present in our own 'core'? Is nature the harmonic backdrop for our activities or does it represent a possible threat to our existence? Is the natural good or is it indifferent to human suffering? The attempts to cancel the concept of nature has a long history in European science and philosophy (Spaemann 1994). Correspondingly, philosophy of nature has played an exposed role in philosophy (Böhme 1992), probably because philosophy of nature represented an attempt to re-involve the subject in the process of investigating nature and because philosophy of nature represented a challenge to the monopoly of natural science.

The embarrassing side of the attack on the concept of nature or on nature itself, is that it seems to render a concept like "the Anthropocene" and the idea of anthropogenic changes in nature without meaning. If nature does not exist and its concept is without meaning how could we even formulate the problem of an environment that, due to anthropogenic causes, in its development deviates from its natural course? Without an idea of natural variations of the climate and the natural evolution of the species how could we identify if the present change is man-made or not?

In this paper I will discuss philosopher Steven Vogel's "postnatural" environmental philosophy. In his *Against Nature. The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (Vogel 1996) Vogel launched his project. The book gave an account of the ambiguous attitude to 'nature' among 'critical' philosophers such as Lukács, Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas, and Marcuse, of which, however, Lukács – rightly interpreted – seems to be closest to Vogel's own view. Vogel also acknowledges a strong influence from Bruno Latour's attack on the nature-society-dichotomy and from Jacques Derrida's postmodernism.

Vogel interprets Lukács as an early constructionist. In Lukács' very influential *History and Class Consciousness* (*Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein)* from 1923 he advances the theory that the classical priority of contemplation in epistemology has misled philosophers to believe that nature exists independently of the knowing subject. By failing to realize that knowledge is the result of an activity on the side of the subject, bourgeois philosophers have contributed to the reification of nature. To support his interpretation Vogel quotes the famous words from Lukacs' book: "Nature is a social category" (Vogel 1996: 20).

In the same book, however, Lukács rejects Friedrich Engel's "dialectics of nature", claiming that the method of dialectics should be restricted to the social sphere and not be extended to natural science. In this way, Vogel claims, Lukács defends a dualism between the social and the natural and thus indirectly awards independence of nature from the social and ends up with an incoherent theory (Vogel 1996: 20).

Whereas some scholars estimate Lukács' dissolution of the boundary between the natural and the social to be fatal to Lukács' epistemology, Vogel goes the opposite way and claims that Lukács' approval of a nature-society-dualism is what makes Lukács' theory incoherent. Relieved from this dualism and the independency of nature, Lukacs' theory could develop Marxism into a theory that helps us see reality as the result of our own activity, i.e. of our own labor, rather than being independently existing. Vogel quotes Lukács to support his interpretation: "Reality is not, it becomes" (Vogel 1996: 34).

The belief that things, reality and nature exist independently of our making is a "reification" of them and, according to Vogel, exactly what Marx described as "alienation". The improved theory of Lukács, Vogel claims, helps us see that the overcoming of this alienation consists in realizing that nothing in the material reality, not even nature, exists non-mediated by human construction and labor (Vogel 1996: 35).

In his *Thinking like a Mall. Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature (Vogel 2015)* Vogel develops these ideas.

## Ambivalence in the concept of nature

Vogel claims that the ambivalence in the concept of nature is not limited to Critical Theory, but as well present in common environmental discourse. His allegation is that we will get a better understanding of the man-environment-relation if we drop the idea of 'nature'. The concept is responsible for some antinomies in the environmental discourse. Bill McKibben's book *The End of Nature* (1990) gives a good lead to the antinomies to which Vogel refers.

McKibben mourns over the modern absence of nature untouched by human activity. Today you can find traces of human activity everywhere, even at the remotest places such as at the seabed or deep down in glaciers, but also in the air, we breathe. And since nature in McKibben's eye is its very "separation from human society" and independence of human beings, he concludes that nature has ended. "Nature's independence *is* its meaning: without it there is nothing but us" (McKibben 1990: 54). The attraction of the idea of nature, McKibben continues, is that it gives "permanence – the sense that we are part of something with roots stretching back nearly forever … A kind of immortality … some sense of a more enduring role" (67-68). The only remedy for changing our fatal actions, according to McKibben and a large number of other environmentalists, is that we should rediscover our role in nature.

Vogel swiftly points out that there are two different concepts of nature in play in McKibben's book. One is representing nature as the opposition to human activity and culture. It goes back to Aristotle's *physis–techne*-dichotomy. The other concept of nature is a comprehensive concept that includes the complete physical world and is opposed to the super-natural. The first one excludes human beings from nature, whereas the second includes human beings.

Vogel's reaction to this ambiguous concept is to ask how one can imagine being a part of nature if one is worried by the end of non-human nature. If "nature" means "nonhuman", then the "end of nature" through human action can neither be criticized nor prevented. It makes no meaning for an environmental theory to say that. But if "nature" is understood as "the all", it makes just as little meaning to say that humans can destroy nature. Furthermore, protecting nature is without sense on both meanings. If "nature" were the non-human, protection of nature would humanize nature, i.e. dissolve nature. And if "nature" includes human beings as well as non-human nature, protection of nature would mean to protect it against the super-natural, which is not what environmentalists are

concerned about. Besides, if humans are part of nature on line with all other creatures, why would only the impact on the environment from one single species, human beings, be considered destructive by environmentalists? Moreover, why should we only demand an ecological conduct from human beings and not from other animals, say from carnivores or from grasshoppers when they exercise 'destructive' conduct?

Either way the meaning of "nature" does not make sense, so further clearing of the meaning of 'nature' would not help, Vogel concludes (Vogel 2015: 25). The only way to provide environmentalism with a sound basis is to drop the concept of nature and rather devote our time to our relationship to the environment in general, irrespective of its status relative to the classical natural-artificial-dichotomy.

## What is a "social construction"?

Our conception of nature, says Vogel, reflects facts about the social order, habits, mores, and worldviews, because these seem to structure our perceptions of our surroundings. The view varies historically and socially and a specific historical period can apparently display different, even contradictory conceptions of nature as we saw in Bill McKibben's case. McKibben's view is influenced by the concept of "wilderness" that has played a key role in American environmentalism since the days of Emerson and Thoreau. Steven Vogel's claim is that wilderness was not something that was found, but rather an idea that was derived from the social world itself (34).

The point of declaring something a social construct is to say, it is not what it is of necessity, or – Vogel quotes Ian Hacking – it is "not determined by the nature of things" (38). Rather, it is contingent and could have been different if social conditions had been different.

At this point Vogel discusses a counterargument against social constructionism. By declaring something not natural, the argument says, one indirectly defends the concept of nature. By debunking a specific nature for being socially constructed, one unknowingly confirms that nature and the social forms a genuine dualism, implying that non-constructed nature is a reality. If one can dismantle an entity's status by demonstrating it is not genuine

natural, something else must be genuine natural. At least it must *mean* something to be natural, even if nothing in the world is natural. Therefore, to say that nature is socially constructed seems to be a contradiction.

Vogel's answer to this objection is to change his main thesis from saying, that nature is a social construction to saying that it is the very distinction between nature and the social that is socially constructed (41).

The task for environmentalism, he declares, will then be to show that the distinction between what exist independently of human beings and what is made by human beings is untenable. Things can very well exist independently of us, but there is nothing in our environment, that we have not "had a hand in producing" in some sense or other. In addition, by "producing" (or by "constructing") Vogel means literally *making* or *building:*

*The world is not something we find ourselves in; it is something we have helped to make. But at the same time it is something that helps to make us: we are who we are because of the environment that we inhabit. The environment is socially constructed; society is environmentally constructed* (Vogel 2015: 44).

What is central for Vogel is that human beings are present in the world and continuously change it and are changed by it due to their very existence. This means that we are intertwined with the environment and that it has been so as long as human beings have existed. Accordingly, if the active influence we have in building the environment implies that what we considered "nature" has disappeared, this happened when man came into being some 200.000 years ago.

For human beings the idea of a non-built world is without sense, and a post-naturalistic environmental philosophy should address the social processes that have built our environment. Too, it should address the problem of alienation- or reification, that is: it should find an explanation for why great parts of the environment to us *seems to be 'natural'*, i.e. seems unconstructed.

**The practice turn in the history of epistemology**

Vogel regards his campaign against nature in the context of the *practice turn* that was initiated by Francis Bacon and has been pursued further by modern theories of science. Bacon fought the antique ideal of contemplative knowledge in favor of an operative type of knowledge for which "nature free and at large" was less interesting than "nature under constraint and vexed ... forced out of her natural state" (Bacon 1957: 29). Immanuel Kant takes up the lead from Bacon, but whereas the latter stressed the concrete, physical practice of modifying nature ("by art and the hand of man" (29)), Kant intellectualizes this activity: "reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design" (Kant 1998: 109). Later G.W.F. Hegel historicizes and socializes Kant's theory of knowledge and gives the term "labor" a central position, but it rests upon the young Karl Marx to reopen Bacon's practice turn by interpreting "labor" as a physical, social practice. Steven Vogel quotes the 8th Feuerbach-thesis from Marx and makes it a credo for his post-naturalistic environmentalism:

"All mysteries which mislead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice" (Vogel 2015: 51).

This thesis inspires Vogel to write:

*To say that we can come to know the world only insofar as we constitute it – which is to say, only insofar as we prestructure it – is to say that we know it because we build it, through the actual processes of labor, of physical acting and making, that are fundamental to who we are. It is only to the extent that we are actively involved in transforming the world that it can come to be known by us* (51).

A consequence of this is that there is no distinction between the world we experience and the real world. To believe that the world is unaffected by our experience of it is to relapse into believing experience is passive and theoretical (57). In fact Vogel totalizes practice when he makes "practices ...our way of being-in-the-world" (56).

**The wooden house**

To be is to change through our actions and it is of no use to reserve an idea of a "material substratum" that exists prior to our actions and which our actions supposedly are actions upon. To assume the existence of something prior to our actions – something 'natural', as it were – would be a similar move like Kant did when he insisted on the independent existence of a "thing in itself". Such a concept of a natural or material substratum makes no sense, Vogel maintains. He recognizes the temptation to think this way, but he insists that not only is such substratum or material without any meaning, it simply does not exist.

Vogel takes his own wooden house as an illustration. The wood that was used for the construction of the house did not exist as a natural material before the construction, Vogel claims. The wooden shingles or beams come from trees that were cut by teams of lumberjacks and were originally planted by foresters forming a social practice in an ordered society. And the young seedlings that were planted themselves were the offspring of trees that were cultivated and not of nature. Hence, the material wood is marked by human activity all the way back.

Vogel rejects the logic of going back in time to find the natural material, the "original wood", that was cut from trees that were not the product of human labor or construction. "Trees are built of other trees", he claims and turns down what he calls the "logic of deferral, searching backward in time for som *Ur*-tree" (60).

Vogel underpins his case by developing his version of materialism. The traditional distinction between matter and practice is flawed, he claims. Matter is not something external to practice, rather "*matter is always practical*" (italics in original, 62), and would not be matter were it not the matter of a particular social practice. Accordingly, to refer to entities like "raw materials" or "natural ressources" makes no sense (63).

Vogel claims he is presenting a *new type of materialism* in which the idea of practice is taken seriously as physical labor or as *material practice.* And to prevent anybody from slipping back into interpreting "material" as some sort of noumenal substance he stresses that "material" only functions adjectival in the compound "material practice". Practices always takes place in a "real material world" (63) and to think otherwise would be to forget

what Marx made out of Hegel's concept "labor".

## Can we really build without nature?

So far Vogel has successfully demonstrated that it is hard to point out any entity – a landscape, a species, a thing – and declare it natural. It is a fact that the world of today, at least the sub-lunar terrestrial world, is everywhere marked by antropogenic impact. And it is incontestable that if cognition is a practice there is no cognition of anything beyond practice, i.e. no cognition of anything unaffected, unconstructed or unbuilt like nature is assumed to be. Even when this is admitted, Vogel's examination of the practice of building a house seems unplausible.

Vogel is certainly right to dismiss the possibility of tracing the origin of shingles and beams back to some "ur-tree", and he is right to establish that the building timber we use today is the product of organised forest management. But who can deny that the material wood and the species tree have come to exist without the aid of any social practice? In fact wooden material and trees have existed since the Late Devonian some 360 million years ago, ages before human beings emerged. This is exactly why wood is considered to be "natural". And one could tell the same story about other natural resources. Sandstone, for instance, is a "natural" building material because it was constituted way before any social practice was established to exploit it.

One also wonder how Vogel would assess sciences like geology and evolutionary biology. He could rightly point out that these sciences are human inventions that did not originate naturally. And he could correctly claim that the stratification of geological layers or the chronology of organic evolution are pieced together from scattered findings and as such a construction. Vogel does not mention these sciences, but it is hard to believe that he would question geology or evolutionary theory as such, or that he would deny that what they refer to are natural entities.

One can dispute whether the onset of the Anthropocene is 1784 (James Watt), 1610 (local minimum of CO2 in the atmosphere), 1945 (radioactive waist all over the world), or even a

few millennia after the Neolithic Revolution. But the whole idea of naming a geological epoch "Anthropocene" is to establish that the Earth's geology, ecosystems and climate no longer exclusively varies according to nature, but as well are due to significant human impact.

Environmental philosophy should certainly not support a nostalgic search for the natural for nature's sake. Neither should it endorse a puristic idea of nature as the untouched or endorse a strong man-nature-dichotomy. But a viable environmentalism should be able to acknowledge the former existence of a pre-anthropogenic, unconstructed world, normally denoted "nature". And it should, at the same time, acknowledge that nature does not end with the rise of human culture and society. Only if environmentalism is able to acknowledge that there is nature before and after anthropogenic impacts, it is possible to determine which of our actions that has or will change nature to a degree that threatens our survival.[1]

## Limits to the artificiality of artifacts

By failing to see the present existence of nature Vogel surprisingly seems to share Bill McKibben's puritanistic view on nature. However, Vogel has other reasons to believe nature has ended than has McKibben. Vogel's reasons are derived from his epistemology and its endorsement of an activistic interpretation of cognition that seems to wipe out any independence in the object of cognition. All such objects, he believes, are social constructions, i.e. are artifacts.

Vogel dedicates a whole chapter to artifacts in *Thinking like a Mall.* Surprisingly, in this chapter he employs the idea that artifacts always "exceed" their relation to human construction. And he even names this excess "nature". Most frequently, however, he writes the word "nature" within quotation marks like when he states, that any artifact "always does have a 'nature of its own'" (Vogel 2015: 104). Why re-introduce a concept he has already abandoned because he wrote it off as too ambiguous?

The motive for Vogel's analysis of artifacts is to produce an answer to a classical objection

against social constructivism, namely that social constructivism – when rejecting the reality of nature – seems to cancel all limits, whether empirical or normative, to what constructions a society might wish to realize. This objection *de facto* depicts social constructivism as a kind of philosophical idealism. Of course Vogel has to produce a good answer to defend his own account of social constructivism to be a kind of "new materialism". His argument is that there are both empirical and normative constraints to what can and should be built. The first can be identified through an analysis of "builtness", the second through an analysis of sociality.

Any building, Vogel says, encounters at some point recalcitrance, resistance or simply "hardness" in its practice. This hardness exceeds the intentions of the constructor and produces unanticipated effects, sometimes harmless effects, and sometimes detrimental effects like global warming, extinction of animals or chemical pollution of subsoil water:

*The truth is that every artifact we build produces unanticipated effects, which means that every artifact has more to it than the producers intended – but to say this is to see that what an artifact is, its 'nature', always exceeds its relation to human intention. (And so it always does have a 'nature of its own'). This is so because every artifact is real, and not simply an idea in someone's head* (104).

It is its nature that makes an artifact real because "nature" here is perceived as a "force … operating independently of humans" (109). Actually, we very often rely on this independent force in the material, in fact, we can never build or act without the aid of these forces, Vogel realizes. To use a hammer and a nail is to rely on, say, gravitational forces and cohesive forces working in and on the material. The same applies when we write a software program. Very often we are not aware of or, maybe, do not even know these forces, so "building an artifact requires black boxes all the way down" (113).  In this way Vogel is ready to admit that his key term, practice, is powerless had it not been for independent forces:

*There could be no practices at all without the operation of forces that are beyond the ken of those who engage in them. In that sense,* nothing we do could be done without *(what here might be called) 'nature'* (115).

It seems that the terms Vogel earlier used for debunking nature – terms like "building",

"constructing", "practice" – now all turns out to presuppose nature! To secure their reality Vogel resorts to the term "nature". And even if he warns us not to interpret the independence, wildness or "otherness" of natural forces as being their complete isolation from us, to save his materialism he needs their independence from our acting powers.

This goes as well for the practice of cognition, even if Vogel does not explicetely concede it in the present context. It is not possible to construct a cognition that is more than just an "idea in someone's mind" without the aid of forces or realities *outside* the construction.

Vogel admits that he seems to deviate from his original program for a postnaturalistic environmental theory by now allowing nature a role in his theory. He assures us that nature only "plays a kind of cautionary role" or "nominal" role in his theory, and that he only sanctions the word because it reminds "us of the limits of our abilities and the need to be careful and modest about our attemots to transform the world" (125). He apparently finds a kind of consolation in the thought that "nature" is the sort of concept as Jacques Derrida's "différance" (127) or Theodor Adorno's "non-identity" (123) are, i.e. concepts that "cannot be spoken of" (127).

At this point it is tempting to contrast Vogel's problems with artifacts with Aristotle's easiness to recognize nature's continued independence in artifacts. In the second book of his *Physics* Aristotle famously quotes his predecessor Antiphon's parable to illustrate the role of nature in artifacts:

*[T]he nature of a bed is the wood, and of a statue the bronze. As proof of this Antiphon remarks that, if you were to bury a bed, and in rotting it sent up a shoot, it would not grow into a bed but into wood. Therefore, the artificial arrangement in it, the result of craftsmanship, belongs to it only accidentally: its substance is the other, which of course persists continuously through these changes* (*Physics,* I93a9-I7).[2]

**Conclusion**

Vogel's tentative conversion to postmodernism does not hide that he fails to eliminate the

concept of nature in his environmental philosophy. He needs nature's independence and "otherness" to save the title "materialism" for his theory, but he also needs nature's dependence on practice to save the title "social constructionism". He can hardly have both.

Is there a moral to draw from Steven Vogels attack on nature that ends up recruiting nature to back up the attack? Will attempts to argue against nature always end in a *circulus vitiosus?* Is it impossible to formulate a coherent theory that ends nature?

At least a number of environmental or ecological writers commit performative contradictions, like when they in the same context declares the concept of nature void of meaning *and* rejects the idea of our difference from nature. Andreas Malm has showed such contradictions in prominent environmentalists (Malm 2018). And it is an open question if not Bruno Latour commits the same type of contradiction when he, after years of fighting the idea of nature, registers a new concept (*le Terrestre*) that more or less plays the role of the old concept (Latour 2017).

Some writers seem to realise that a coherent environmental theory demands the rehabilitation of the concept of nature. Kate Soper, Simon Hailwood, Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg (Hornborg 2015) are among the proponents. The German philosopher Gernot Böhme, however, is of special interest as he kind of works from the same point of departure as Steven Vogel, but in the opposite direction. Both are educated in the tradition of Critical Theory and both have committed themselves to liberate themselves from the ambivalent attitude to nature, that marks Critical Theory. Whereas Vogel has pursued this supported by a pragmatic, constructivistic epistemology, Böhme has defended a variety of the classical contemplative idea of experience, namely what he calls a "pathic experience". Based on this he has developed an epistemology of the felt body that has lead to a realist philosophy of nature and an "ecological aesthetics" (Böhme 2019; Böhme 2010; Frølund 2018).

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## Endnotes

[1] See Soper (1995) and Hailwood (2015) for similar positions.

[2] Vogel is, of course, familiar with Aristotle's text (Vogel 2015: 256), but he makes no comparison with his own.

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