

# First Person

Steve Vogel  
philosopher, environmentalist

INTERVIEW BY PAUL PEGHER

*In Professor of Philosophy Steven Vogel's upcoming book Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature, he will pull together a decade of work, much of it characterized by one primary argument: that discussions about the environment should exclude—get this—the notion of “nature.” Needless to say, Vogel's views have stirred much debate among his peers. But as is the habit of philosophers, he strings together a solid, if controversial, line of reasoning. He talked to us about philosophical conflict, the power of democracy, and a world without “nature.”*

**WHEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT NATURE ENDING,** they of course don't mean that the world's going to disappear. They mean that the part of it that hasn't been affected by humans is disappearing. “Nature” for them means everything other than human beings. But that takes us out of nature. Yet at the same time people say we shouldn't be anthropocentric, shouldn't treat humans as special and different from the rest of nature. But if “nature” means everything other than the human—if our actions can “end” nature—that actually seems pretty anthropocentric; somehow, this one species is outside of nature, and the products of its actions are “unnatural” or “artificial.” On the other hand, if we are part of nature, then so is everything we do—pollution, toxic wastes, global warming. So I don't see how “naturalness” is relevant to talk about the human impact on the environment: either everything we do is natural, or nothing is.

**WHAT DOES “ENVIRONMENT” MEAN?** Usually when people talk about the “environment,” they mean the natural environment in the non-human sense—wilderness, say, or something similar. But in fact, the word “environment” just means the stuff that's around us. And if you look at the stuff that's around us right now in this room, for instance, it's all built. For most of us most of the time the environment is a built environment, and not “nature” at all. Environmentalism should deal with the world we actually inhabit, and if “nature” means a world where humans have had no impact, the world we inhabit surely isn't nature.

**ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS ARE SOCIAL PROBLEMS, NOT PROBLEMS ABOUT “NATURE.”** They're about how society organizes itself and how it ought to act in the world. And social problems, I think, are best answered democratically—the community has to decide together what it wants to do and what it wants its environment to be. Those decisions shouldn't get made by something external to it. Like, for example, nature. People say “We have to act in such and such a way because nature requires it.” But nature doesn't require anything. It's we who have to decide how to act.

**MY POSITION IS A LITTLE OUT THERE.** People think my point of view implies that you can't call certain kinds of practices environmentally wrong. They want to be able to say, “Some practices are wrong because they harm nature. And those practices that help nature are right.” And I'm saying we can't use nature to judge our practices. So then they say “Well what's to stop us from paving over the world or putting up plastic trees everywhere?” And my answer finally is a democratic one: I don't think a democratically organized community would choose to do things like that. It's not because nature forbids it, but because we wouldn't want it.

**NOBODY WANTS POLLUTION.** Nobody wants the world to be paved over. Nobody wants ugly landscapes. The problem is, there's currently no way to make communal decisions about what landscapes ought to look like or whether there should be pollution. Instead, each of us is forced to make individual decisions about how to act, without any control over what our fellow citizens do or any real way to discuss it with them. So the effect of each of us acting narrowly for our own self interest is the ugly and dangerous and unhealthy environment we have now that none of us like. I don't think the world's in a bad environmental state because humans are greedy and horrible and want that sort of bad environment. If only we had a democratic way to decide and act cooperatively to build our environment, we'd build a good one, because actually I think we have pretty good taste.

**I GREW UP IN MANHATTAN, AND I HAVE THE SAME EXPERIENCE LOOKING AT THE CITY'S SKYLINE** that people have when they look at the magnificence and enormity of the Rocky Mountains. It just strikes me as remarkable and terrific, and in a way I have to say the skyline is more astonishing, just because it was built by humans; I don't see cities as merely examples of the destruction of nature. No one designed the skyline as such, but when you see it you see the consequences of the efforts and practices of lots of different humans. Environmental philosophy should also pay attention to that sort of environment. The environment isn't only something outside us and separate from us: in a certain sense it also is us, or is an expression of us. I think there's something philosophically interesting about that.

**IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND WHY THE OTHER VIEW SEEMS RIGHT** to the person who's holding it. You can never be sure that you're right. I emphasize this to my students: always look for the person who's disagreeing with you, and know their arguments against you. That's the most important thing to do. It doesn't help you to find the truth if you only talk to people who agree with you. Find someone who can criticize your argument and find its weak points: that's the way to get to the truth.

