Why “Nature” Has No Place in Environmental Philosophy

Steven Vogel, Ph.D.

Environmentalism, both as theory and as practice, is traditionally concerned above all with nature. Its focus is on protecting nature against the harms generated by human action. The “environment” it wishes to defend is not the built environment of cities, or the technological infrastructure modernity seems to require—although many of us live in urban environments, and the technologies of modernity might be said in a deeper sense to “environ” us all. It is not the nuclear power plants and toxic waste dumps and gridlocked highways surrounding us that environmentalism wants to protect but rather the natural environment—an environment that these things instead are said to threaten. Environmental protection means the protection of nature, and environmental damage means damage to nature. The destruction of something built by humans, like a skyscraper or a dam, does not by itself count as environmental damage. Of course, such destruction may itself have harmful environmental consequences, but this only means consequences that are harmful to nature.

Environmental philosophy reflects this concern. Its central theme is to find an appropriate way to understand and defend the ontological and ethical status of nature. Environmental ethicists who want to expand the reach of moral considerability beyond its traditional limitation to humans speak of the “rights of nature”; they do not, typically, worry about the rights of bridges or of toasters. The “environment” spoken of by environmental philosophers is the natural environment; the built environment—despite the fact that most of us actually live in it—is not usually part of their concern.

Yet to be concerned with the protection of nature, under conditions of modern technological development, is inevitably to worry that it might be too late—that nature might already have ended. This was the famous thesis of Bill McKibben’s 1991 book The End of Nature. The real core of the “environmental” crisis, McKibben claimed, was that nature itself had literally been destroyed. Particularly as the result of large-scale climate changes produced by human technologies, he suggested, we have entered a new historical stage where no square inch of earth can any longer be called “natural.” Human intervention has affected everything, and so everything in the world is different from what it would otherwise, “naturally,” be. No place is natural any longer, every place is artificial, and so the entire environment has become in a certain sense a built environment. “We have changed the atmosphere and so we are changing the weather,” McKibben wrote. “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” (p. 58).

But if nature has ended, then it isn’t clear any longer what environmentalism is supposed to protect. Without nature, an environmental theory or practice oriented toward nature’s protection has nothing left to do: the game is up, and we (and nature) have simply lost. If McKibben is right, defending nature makes no more sense than defending the Holy Roman Empire or rooting for the Brooklyn Dodgers. His argument appears deeply pessimistic (and self-defeating) in its implications; it can only lead to sadness about what has been lost, but not to any positive environmental policies at all. After the end of nature, it seems, there’s not much for environmental thinking to do except to mourn, and perhaps to think about what was lost and why. For nature once ended cannot be restored.

One possible response to this problem, of course, is to deny that McKibben is right: nature, although threatened, is not quite gone, one might say, and environmental philosophy’s role is to protect what’s left of it. There are problems with this response—not the least of which is that he probably is right—but I won’t go into them here. Rather, I would like to consider a different possible response to the pessimism his thesis seems to generate, one that instead of denying nature’s end rather wonders why the end of nature should entail the end of environmental concern. Supposing for the sake of argument that his thesis was unquestionably true, would the fact that nature has ended mean that environmental considerations had suddenly become irrelevant—for example, that further global warming
ought not to be prevented or that the dumping of toxic wastes into waterways is now fine? Wouldn’t one expect a good environmentalist to continue to oppose those processes—and not only for anthropocentric reasons but because of what they do to the environment, “unnatural” though that environment would now turn out to be? If the entire environment has become a built one, wouldn’t we then need to develop an environmentalism of the built environment? Indeed, one might even start to wonder whether the emphasis on the protection of nature could actually be an obstacle, nowadays, to clear environmental thinking. If most or all of the world that is “envious” us is not natural, then shouldn’t it be the built environment, and not nature, that is the focus of our environmental concern? Mightn’t worry about nature seem more like a diversion from the central issues? Such considerations, perhaps surprisingly, suggest that environmental thought need not be oriented toward the protection of nature and that instead there might be a role for environmental philosophy after the end of nature.

Of course, at this point a key question—which is the question underlying the issues discussed in this volume—will obviously be what is meant by nature? When McKibben says that nature has ended, it’s clear what he has in mind: nature means the world independent of human beings and human action. The “natural” temperature of a location, for example, is the temperature it would be if no human beings had affected it; conversely, if its temperature is the consequence of humans burning fossil fuels, then it is not natural. Yet there is an obvious problem with defining the natural as that which is other than the human: for aren’t humans themselves natural? There’s something oddly pre-Darwinian about the idea that human action removes objects from nature and makes them unnatural. The human species and its behaviors presumably evolved through the same sorts of biological processes as other species. If this is so, it is unclear why the consequences of those behaviors deserve to be called “unnatural.” If humans are natural, then their burning fossil fuels would seem to be natural too, hard to distinguish in terms of naturalness (though doubtless more consequential for the environment) from the activities other animals or plants or microbes engage in. The dams of beavers and the webs of spiders are presumably natural; why are the dams built by humans or the polyester fabrics woven by them not so? Indeed, don’t many environmental thinkers insist that humans are part of nature and claim as well that it is our failure to see ourselves as part of it that leads to the hubris and arrogance whose ultimate consequence is environmental disaster?

One way to answer this (pretty standard and pretty obvious) objection is to point out, as John Stuart Mill already did, that the word nature has at least two distinct meanings and that the objection here depends on conflating them (1963, pp. 373–75). On the one hand, we commonly use the word nature to mean simply the totality of the physical world subject to the ordinary forces described by physics and chemistry and evolutionary biology, and in this sense human beings, like every other species, are surely natural. The contrast term to “natural” in this sense would be “supernatural,” meaning something that somehow exceeds or escapes the world of ordinary physical processes. (And the extension of the term might well be empty.) On the other hand, we surely also use the word nature in such a way that the contrast term is not supernatural but rather artificial. A person with a taste for natural foods or a preference for natural fibers, after all, is not someone who prefers her meals or clothing not to have a supernatural origin, but rather someone who prefers them not to involve acts of human making. Thus nature in this second sense means exactly what McKibben suggests: the world other than the human one. The first sense of the term is being used when environmental thinkers worry that humans have forgotten that they are part of nature, but it is the second sense that McKibben is using when he worries that nature has ended. The term is simply ambiguous, and what looks like a contradiction is really the result of the ambiguity.

Clarifying the ambiguity, however, does not fully solve the difficulties. If environmental theory is supposed to tell us something normative about our relationship to nature, it isn’t clear that either of these meanings of the word will be very helpful. For, as Mill pointed out, in the first sense (where nature is everything in the physical world), everything we do and make is natural; in the second (where nature is the non-human), nothing is. In neither case can we make much sense out of claims, for instance, that certain human practices or products are more “natural” than others: we either are already guaranteed to be fully natural or else we are guaranteed, by definition, to be nature’s opposite. In neither case can we do anything to change this situation.

Protecting nature seems problematic in each case as well. If nature means the nonhuman world, then humans could protect it only by abstaining from having anything to do with it, perhaps by enforcing the boundary between “natural” and “built” environments as stringently as possible. This is an odd conclusion, first of all because if McKibben is right, then it’s already too late—the boundary has been breached, nature is gone—but secondly because even if he isn’t, such a position seems to have nothing to say about what happens on this side of the boundary (where we actually live), leaving us curiously free to engage in any environmental depredations we wish to undertake. If, by contrast, nature simply means (as Mill
puts it) “the sum total of all phenomena,” then working to protect it seems pointless, because in fact nothing humans do could harm it (1989, p. 37). Nuclear power plants and toxic waste dumps are no less natural than beaver dams or spider webs; the atmospheric consequences of global warming and chlorofluorocarbon use are no less natural than those of photosynthesis or respiration. If nature simply means the physical world, then nature is really in no danger—although we might be, and so might some of the other entities found within that world. (But note that a list of “natural” entities so endangered would have to include not only animals and plants but also, for example, buildings and appliances.)

Still, pointing out that nature has two meanings, and can refer either to everything in the world or to everything in the world other than human beings, does seem to rescue McKibben’s argument from the objection that it forgets that human beings are natural too. Let’s use the capitalized Nature to refer to the first, broader sense of the word, and lower-case nature to refer to the second, narrower one. Humans then are doubly-part of Nature, we could say, but still are capable of ending nature. Yet to put it this way is to notice a doubt arising: is McKibben really more worried about nature than he is about Nature? More generally, is the goal of environmentalism the protection of nature or is it rather the protection of Nature? And which, by the way, is to be identified with the environment, the world enveloping us? Drawing the distinction between the two meanings solves an apparent difficulty with environmental theory’s repeated invocation of “nature,” but it isn’t clear that this leaves environmental theory in a better situation.

For notice that if it is nature in the narrow sense that we are concerned with, then calling certain human actions “unnatural” will no longer depend on discovering that they harm Nature but rather will simply be a matter of definition. Human actions will be unnatural not because of what they do to the world but merely because they are actions performed by humans. The word “nature” is here simply stipulatively defined as excluding the human; we can no longer be criticized for acting unnaturally, because the claim that any particular human action is unnatural turns out to be analytic. The strong distinction between nature and the human world and the claim that the latter world is unnatural turn out to be valid by definition, not because of the discovery that there are empirically significant differences between the nonhuman world and the human one or because the former world is somehow more genuinely Natural than the latter. When McKibben writes that “nature’s independence is its meaning,” he certainly seems to be talking about (lower-case) nature, but when he laments the end of nature, it isn’t always clear what he has in mind. He writes, for instance, that one of the dismay-

ing consequences of the end of nature is that “we can no longer imagine that we are part of something larger than ourselves” (1989, p. 83). But if nature’s independence is its meaning—if it is non-human nature and not Nature as a whole that he is worried about—then in what sense could we ever have imagined that we were part of it?

When nature is defined as that which is separate from human beings, the claim that human action destroys nature turns out to be an analytic truth. But analytic truths scarcely seem like good candidates on which to found an ethical or political critique; they are not usually things we bemoan or condemn. Nor, of course, are they things that become true, or more true, over time: it makes little sense, for instance, to say that capitalism or technology or anthropocentric arrogance or modernism have made them true. Yet isn’t that what much critical environmental thinking wants to argue? Those who criticize the contemporary world for what it has done, or is doing, or threatens to do, to nature, it seems to me, do not intend to be expressing analytic truths. They believe, correctly I think, that the effects of human activity on the world over the past century or two have been baleful and destructive, and they believe that different sorts of human activity might produce effects that are less baleful and destructive. But then it cannot be nature in the lower-case sense that they think is being destroyed.

One could, after all, stipulatively define a different term to refer to the complementary concept of any species—shnature, perhaps, to refer to the world independent of the actions of shrimp or bature to the world independent of the actions of beavers. Then it would surely be true that wherever shrimp swam or wherever beavers built dams shnature or bature would be destroyed. Yet to make such definitions would be silly, and to lament the destruction thereby defined into existence would be even sillier. Of course a world that shrimp or beaver had taken over, spreading and overpopulating like kudzu, would likely be ecologically disastrous. But note that the problem then would be the harm to Nature, to the world that we share with beavers and shrimp, not to shnature or bature. Isn’t that what environmentalists worry about when they worry about the effect of human action on the world—the end of Nature, not of nature? And in warning us about it, aren’t they concerned about a kind of destruction that the right sort of environmental policies have a chance to prevent or to repair—not one that occurs inevitably, no matter which policies we pursue, as a matter of definition?

To be unhappy about the replacement of nature by a humanized world, I am suggesting, one must be able to point to some (presumably lamentable) empirical characteristic that the natural world possesses that a humanized one does not.
But then that characteristic cannot without begging the question be its naturalness alone, if naturalness simply means nonhumanness. Thus it cannot justifiably be just the end of (lower-case) nature that bothers McKibben: there must be something that the humanization of nature actually harms, and it is that something—is it capitalized Nature?—that he is really concerned to protect. That human beings can (but need not) destroy nature, that they can (but often do not) live in accordance with nature, that nature could (but often does not) serve as a normative model for their actions—these are all meaningful ideas, and yet if “nature” is being defined in the stipulative sense as that which is simply other than human action, then none of these ideas make much sense at all because they all either affirm or deny (pointlessly, in either case) what the definition of nature analytically guarantees to be true.

If nature means the nonhuman, then the “end of nature” through human action can neither be criticized nor prevented, because its occurrence is a matter of definition, not of choice. And so, it seems to me, an environmental theory that wants to protect nature cannot intend by nature that second, lower-case, meaning. The assertion that “human action is ending nature” must be a synthetic one, which is to say there must be some matter of fact about human beings that removes their actions and the results of those actions from nature, for reasons that are more than definitional. So “nature” in the last sentence cannot mean nature in the lower-case sense. But it cannot easily mean Nature in the capitalized sense either because in that sense humans are supposed to be part of Nature as “the sum total of all phenomena”, and it is hard to see how they could end that.

Now nature has at least one other common signification—surely relevant here—whereby it refers neither to the sum of all phenomena nor to the specifically nonhuman world but rather to the world of life. We speak of someone deciding to leave the city and move into the country as a person who wants to be closer to nature, and here we clearly do not mean by nature either the physical world as a whole (because otherwise she’d already be there, in the city) or the nonhuman world (because otherwise she’d never get there, no matter how far she moved). Nature in this sense means the biological world, the world of flora and fauna, the biosphere. There’s not much nature in the city, we say, with the exception of parks or weeds growing between cracks in the sidewalk.

But this third meaning of nature surely doesn’t solve the problem, for humans are of course alive too and so are still fully natural even in this sense. Is it possible, though, that the definition of “nature” we have in mind is one in which living human beings themselves are natural but their products are not? The contrast term to natural in Mill’s second sense, remember, was artificial, not human. The end of nature in this sense would mean not the transformation of nature into something human so much as its transformation into something made by humans—an artifact.

To say that humans are natural but the products they create are not (are artificial) sounds plausible, but a little thought suggests that there is something odd about it. For one thing, among the products humans create are other humans—and I’m not talking about cloning or IVF or similar examples, I’m talking about ordinary sexual reproduction. A baby conceived in the traditional way is after all a human product, and this fact suggests that not all human products, nor all human actions, are unnatural. When we exhale, when we defecate, when we make babies, the objects we produce are not typically called artificial or unnatural. It thus seems as though some of the behaviors through which humans produce new objects in the world are natural while others are not. We emit carbon dioxide into the atmosphere when we exhale, and we also emit it when we build and drive automobiles powered by fossil fuels. Why is the one sort of emission called natural while the other is artificial and said to threaten the end of nature?

The carbon dioxide produced by human respiration surely has some (albeit small) effect on the overall heat absorption of the atmosphere; global temperatures are different from what they would be if no humans were around to breathe. Yet those effects are considered to be natural ones, not different from the effects on global temperatures of the respiration of other animals, or of plant photosynthesis. What distinguishes, then, our natural products from those that are artificial?

Is the distinction one between biological and nonbiological products? If by this is meant that our natural products are those that are themselves alive, the examples of defecation and respiration are sufficient to refute the idea. Is the distinction rather between those products made of organic materials and those that are not? But plastics are made of such materials, as are most “artificial” flavorings and colorings. Or is it the biological character of the processes involved that distinguishes natural human products from artificial ones? But much will now depend on what “biological” means. Why is respiration a biological process and not the collection and combustion of fossil fuels? The danger of circularity here is strong: why can’t technological methods be understood as biological ones? To say they can’t requires having decided ahead of time that technology isn’t natural, which begs the very question in dispute. (And note of course that exhalation can be technologically mediated too—most obviously in the case of people who need mechanical assistance with breathing, but in other cases as well. If the quantity
of carbon dioxide I exhale increases because I am running on a treadmill, does the additional carbon dioxide now count as an artificial greenhouse gas? In the course of biological evolution, various organisms have developed various strategies to get around in the world. The processes by which spiders build webs and beavers build dams are surely biological—why not the processes by which humans build automobiles?

Rather than drawing the distinction between natural and unnatural human actions by appealing to biology, one might try appealing instead to the role played by intention in the action. We can choose whether to engage in technologically mediated actions like driving cars; respiration or defecation, on the other hand, seem not to be matters of choice, and that might be a reason for calling the latter actions "natural" ones. But many children are born because their parents specifically intended to make them, and we would not want to call artificial someone whose conception was consciously planned by his or her parents. A woman may choose to become pregnant and bear a child, just as she may choose to burn fossil fuels to drive a car. If the role of human intention in producing an object determines whether that object is natural or not, then it is hard to see why the baby she bears is any less artificial than the carbon dioxide her automobile emits. It is true that sometimes the pregnancy does not come to pass despite the actions the hopeful parents engage in to cause it, but sometimes one's car will not run either, despite one's best attempts to start it. Similarly, although it is true that once the pregnancy begins, processes are set into motion that the mother cannot fully control (but which her intentional actions may still affect), it's also the case that once one starts one's car and gets it moving, processes are set in motion that are not fully controllable either (but again which one's intentional actions may surely influence).

Even defecation, an act of nature par excellence, is not in truth so entirely lacking in intentionality. Toilet training, for example, is the process of educating a child in choosing where and when to engage in it. It's true I have no choice whether to defecate or not, but when and where I do so is typically up to me. The truth is that all these actions—becoming pregnant, driving an automobile, even defecating—involve a complicated mixture of intentional and unintentional elements. The trouble with identifying the distinction between natural and artificial human behaviors with the distinction between unintentional and intentional ones is that it fails to acknowledge this complexity and instead treats intentional actions as though they took place somewhere outside the ordinary world of Nature. But the capacity to act intentionally in fact is part of that world; it is a capacity that has evolved in human beings in accordance with standard Darwinian processes, just as the capacity to fly has evolved in birds. Why should the exercise of the former capacity remove an act or its product from nature, while the exercise of the latter does not? Humans act intentionally in Nature, not outside of it.

The appeal to intention here, however, should be the tip-off as to what is really going on in these (repeatedly unsuccessful) attempts to distinguish "natural" human products from "artificial" ones. The (familiar) territory we have entered is the territory of Cartesianism. The dualism being posited between humans and nature derives from a dualism within human beings themselves. Humans, it turns out, are inwardly divided; they have two sides, a "natural" side that connects them with the rest of the world of nature and another side, associated with thought and intention, that separates them from it. The distinction between natural and artificial human products is really the distinction between those products we produce using our minds and those we produce using (merely) our bodies. It is the body that is natural, and so too are that body's products: babies, exhalations, feces. But the mind is something other than the body; its products are different and somehow stand outside the world of nature. When thought is employed in the production of something, the product is thereby rendered "artificial" and not natural.

The familiar dualism at work here is one that has been pretty thoroughly discredited and that few philosophers explicitly hold today. It is also pre-Darwinian; rather than seeing thought or intention as themselves capacities that have evolved naturally, it treats them as ontologically distinct, as if they had arisen independently of the processes that have led to the capacities of all the other species in the world. Yet despite its philosophical and biological deficiencies, such a dualism does seem to underlie the conception of nature as distinct from the artificial that McKibben (and many others) take for granted. Such a conception, it turns out, functions less as an account of what nature is than as an account of what human beings are: creatures who transcend nature, and transcend it because of their minds.

But then those, like McKibben, who employ that conception of nature are not using the word in any way different from those who use it to mean what I have called Nature. For them the two meanings of the word I suggested—nature as everything in the world and nature as everything other than the human—collapse into one: nature does mean everything in the (physical) world, but now it turns out that humans live, in part anyhow, in another world. So when McKibben and others say that human beings might end nature, it is indeed Nature that they must
mean. I said earlier that the contrast term to natural could be either supernatural or artificial, depending on which sense was being employed, but now the two latter terms turn out to be connected: the reason that (some) human products are called artificial is that human beings are (in part) supernatural. Human activity, or at least that kind of human activity in which we employ our minds (and not just our reproductive organs or our digestive systems), is somehow outside of Nature, outside of the ordinary physical world. So the claim that human action harms nature, that human action could conceivably end nature (or already has), is indeed a claim about Nature in the sense of the “sum of all (physical) phenomena”—a sum from which mental or intentional action has been excluded—and not the sort of definitional claim about nature discussed earlier.

More specifically, it is a metaphysical claim. If the harm to nature that humans did were any sort of empirical harm, anything that scientific investigation could uncover, then for just that reason the harm would itself be part of Nature and so would in fact be no harm to Nature at all, though doubtless perhaps a harm to particular entities within Nature. Thus, for instance, when it is suggested that human action is unnatural because it violates the finely tuned balance that characterizes nature, the suggestion only makes sense if nature is indeed characterized by such balance: but if human action violates that balance, then apparently nature is not so characterized, unless we have decided beforehand and for other reasons that the effects of human action on nature are not themselves natural. (It would be like saying that birds are unnatural because nature—with the exception of birds, of course—is marked by flightlessness.) Or if it is asserted that the transformative impact of humans on nature is on a scale so radically different from that of other species as to render it unnatural, again this makes sense only if the global impact of natural species can be shown always to remain within certain limits—but of course it cannot be shown to do this unless we have decided antecedently that the impact of human actions is not to be counted in the determination of what the limits are. The argument here is perfectly general; we can’t decide whether humans are natural or not by observing nature, because before observing we would need to decide whether humans themselves are part of what is to be observed. But if the dualist claim that humans are at least in part unnatural cannot be a matter of empirical observation, then (if it is not merely a matter of definition) it must be a matter of a metaphysical assumption. It is not a discovery about the human impact on nature, but rather a metaphysical presupposition about it.

When environmental thinkers distinguish nature from the human, I am suggesting, this is not because it is possible to discover in the world some ontologically significant difference between those things humans have transformed and those that they have not. Rather, this view begins by assuming the existence of such a difference—begins, that is, by assuming that humans are distinct from nature, typically because of their mental 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. The position does not (although it often claims) posit a species-neutral criterion of naturalness and then notice with regret that the actions and products of one particular species (our own) fail to satisfy it. Rather, it starts by assuming that humans are (partly) unnatural and then looks for a criterion that confirms the assumption. Far from being a discovery about nature, I would argue, the claim that certain acts and products are unnatural is in fact the expression of a certain a priori metaphysical view about human beings. The dualism here is presupposed, not argued for.

And it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this dualism is also fundamentally anthropocentric. Humans stand in an absolutely unique and distinctive relation to nature, according to this view: alone of all the species in the world, their acts have the special ability to move something out of the natural realm entirely, because they possess qualities of reason that themselves transcend nature. This surely is an impressive and metaphysically unique species, one set off ontologically from every other. Why should this sort of view not be called anthropocentric? It is true that this is an anthropocentrism in the signs reversed, in which humans turn out to be unique in that they are uniquely dangerous, capable of visiting a kind of ontological harm on nature of which no other species is capable. The human mind no longer looks here like the crown of creation but rather like a dangerous exotic whose appearance poses a metaphysical peril to nature and its independence. Yet underneath the surface misanthropy, this view of humans remains remarkably similar to that found in traditional triumphalist anthropocentrism: here, too, we humans are viewed as metaphysically distinctive, possessing (because of our reason) extraordinary characteristics that render us singular among all living creatures. The human mind, seemingly not a product of ordinary evolutionary processes (because how otherwise could it allow us to “transcend” nature?), appears to this dualism as something sui generis. Aldo Leopold described the land ethic as calling on humans to see ourselves as a “plain member” of the land community, not as its “conqueror,” but isn’t it exactly as a conqueror,
albeit a dangerous conqueror who must be resisted, that human beings appear on this account?

The distinction between humans and nature that seems crucial to much environmental thinking, I am suggesting, depends on a philosophically and biologically untenable dualism that treats human beings as exceptional creatures that somehow transcend the natural. And notice that the problems here are not solved by asserting that the human/nature dualism is not to be understood as absolute but rather involve a continuum, or admit of degrees. It’s surely true that when employing the sense of nature as “independent of the human,” we tend to speak of degrees of naturalness. But although this fact is sometimes mentioned as if it showed that the dualism posited by such a view of nature does not perniciously remove human beings from the natural order, it shows no such thing. Recasting a binary opposition as a continuum doesn’t render it less dualistic, it only extends the dualism along an axis whose poles (even if reached only asymptotically) remain fundamentally opposed to each other. Why is naturalness measured along an axis whose negative pole is the human? Human beings here are still anthropocentrically picked out as animals with the remarkable ability to remove items from nature. The fact that this removal is always partial and takes place by degrees does not transform the fundamentally dualist (and anthropocentric) character of the position.

I have been indicating some of the reasons why it is essential to develop a “post-naturalist” environmental philosophy—an environmental philosophy after the end of nature. This is not only because McKibben might be right—nature might already have ended—and yet there remains a lot for environmental philosophers to do. Nor is it only because the end of nature might be something that has always already happened and therefore might be something we need to learn how to think about without nostalgia. Both these reasons at least assume we know what nature is, and know in particular how and why to distinguish it from the human. What I have argued, however, is that even this may not be so clearly true. Not only might nature the thing have ended, but the concept of “nature” might be such an ambiguous and problematic one, so prone to misunderstanding and so riddled with pitfalls, that its usefulness for a coherent environmental philosophy will turn out to be small indeed. We have seen the difficulties in the concept, especially when it is employed dualistically to mean something like (but not exactly, it turns out) “that which is independent of the human”; it seems to require continual modification, it frequently issues in antinomies, it produces a series of paradoxes, and most of all its employment seems to commit one to an essentially Cartesian anthropocentrism that fits uncomfortably with the other theoretical commit-

REFERENCES