Unnatural times? The social imaginary and the future of nature

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I

These are highly charged times for thinking about the nature of 'nature' and its relations to the 'social'. On the one hand, we are poised on the brink of biotechnological interventions that are opening up a whole new domain of human interactions with 'nature', indeed have the potential to go well beyond interaction, into unprecedented forms of creativity. Such developments are hugely exciting to many because of what they might promise for the elimination of disease and the enhancement of human health or well-being. On the other hand, we are also suffering unprecedented forms of unease precisely in virtue of our new found powers to control and even create 'nature', and caught up in new anxieties verging on panic about the ways in which environmental 'nature' is, or seems to be, spinning out of control because of climate change and its unpredictable character and consequences. To add to the confusion, there is the seeming incapacity of affluent Westerners to act in any but the most contradictory ways in response: huge anxieties about the impact of genetic programming on future personal autonomy go together with continuing disregard for the ways in which global economic relations deny millions of less privileged individuals the minimum of self-realization. Faced with the indisputable need to cut carbon emissions to the minimum, people continue to drive and fly as never before, and are currently encouraged to do so in the UK by a government that has given the green light to major airport expansion even as it issues advice to its citizens on energy-saving lightbulbs.

There are complex, and in some ways quite contrary, discourses on nature underlying these responses to our times. Many of these are what I have elsewhere referred to as 'nature-endorsing': discourses that lament the loss or erosion of nature, emphasize human dependency on the planetary eco-system, and demand that we both acknowledge environmental limits and revise our consumption with a view to keeping within the confines they impose. Nature endorsers are sometimes committed to overtly normative and metaphysical conceptions of the nature of nature (viewing it, for example, as possessing 'intrinsic value' or as a source of redemption from social alienation, or as that

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we must now, in Heideggerian terms, 'let be'). But all that is essential to endorsement is recognition of 'nature' conceived as an independent domain that both enables and constrains human activities, and will not prove endlessly adaptable to the demands made on it by human beings.

At the same time, and running counter to any endorsement of nature as something distinguishable from, and other to, humanity, there is also much talk about its 'social' or 'cultural' construction' (eg Eder, 1996; McNaughten, and Urry, 1998; Wilson, 1990; Vogel, 1996, 2006). And this is talk that has prompted a number of 'post-humanist' demands to revise long held conceptual distinctions between human and other forms of being.

Sometimes those stressing the 'culture' of nature do so in their role as environmentalists who are keen to acknowledge the mediation of human work and culture in much of what is loosely referred to as 'natural'. Or else – less coherently – they do so because they want us to take action against what they claim is the disappearance from the planet of anything that is 'natural' in the sense of still unaffected (or, more pejoratively, 'uncontaminated' by human culture). The conservationist, Bill McKibben, for example, has argued that nature has come to an end in the sense that even the remotest and wildest parts of the environment now bear the mark of human occupation of the planet (McKibben, 1990).[1] I call this latter type of position less coherent because if nature has indeed come to an 'end', there is little point in the injunction to preserve it. As Stephen Vogel has argued, 'if nature has ended, then it isn't clear anymore what environmentalism is supposed to protect. Without nature, an environmental theory or practice oriented towards 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 . . .' (Vogel, 2006).[2]

But many of those stressing the 'culturality' of nature do so not so much in virtue of our environmental impact, but in response to the situation that has been opened up by the huge advances that have been made of late in the field of genetics, and their actual or potential application in such areas as seed modification, stem cell research, cloning, and organ transplantation from other species. For these developments have all created uncertainty about where, if at all, the line can be drawn between the artificially contrived and the naturally given, and they are posing both cognitive and moral problems for existing definitions and criteria for being 'human'.

They have also coincided with the emergence of a range of theoretical calls associated with the politics of animal liberation and advocacy of cyborg post-humanism to replace rigid conceptual discriminations between humans and animals and between the organic and the inorganic, and to adopt instead an altogether more fluid ontology (Haraway, 1991, 1997; Gray, 1995; Peperell, 1995; Hardt and Negri, 2000: 215f.).[3] Support of a more general philosophical kind for this type of post-humanist ontological destabilization and revision has also come from the anti-foundationalist shift in philosophy, most influentially in the arguments of Foucault and Derrida: from Foucault in the form of a

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resistance to any final distinction between nature and culture; from Derrida both in his last writings on animals, and more generally in his suggestion that our intuitive demarcations between human and non-human 'others' are a form of unwarranted conceptual policing (Derrida, 1991, 1994, 2002). One might note here, too, the striking parallels between recent Continental philosophizing about vegetarianism or 'becoming animal' and arguments against human-animal dualism produced – albeit in a very different style – much earlier within Anglo-American environmental ethics (Atterton and Calarco, 2004).

II

One upshot of these various developments is a form of normative 'return to nature': the opening of a new chapter in philosophical questioning about the potential of 'nature' to figure as a countering constraint. Confronted with the prospects of planetary exhaustion or fears of the impact of technical advance on the ethics of human community we are looking again to 'nature' to see if it might provide some kind of policing role. Academics are now asking whether 'nature' can instruct us in any universally agreeable sense on what we should do, or not do, either to ourselves or in our management of the environment (Kaebnick, forthcoming; Vogel, 2006; Streiffer, 2003).

Thirty years ago, these questions would hardly have been addressed in the academy. Or if they had been, it would have been to challenge various spurious claims that were being made about the supposed 'perversity' of homosexuality, or about the 'naturally' ordained character of divisions and differences (relating to class, gender, ethnicity) that in reality owed more to social construction than to biological determination. It was, in short, to undermine reactionary attempts to invoke 'nature' as a means of policing behaviour (especially sexual behaviour), and the challenge, as Jonathan Dollimore and others have pointed out, was to the 'violence' being done in the name of 'nature' rather than to the offences being caused through its dismissal. Most of these objectors were left-leaning and saw their interventions as a progressive response to regrettable forms of social conservatism, or even bigotry (Dollimore, 1991: 114–115; Soper, 1995: 119–148, esp. 145, note 2). Hence the extent to which the appeal to 'nature' became a bone of contention in the social movement struggles of the period over class, gender and racial exploitations and their quests for emancipation.

In recent decades, however, the concern has been less to expose false forms of naturalisation of the social than to discover whether 'nature' might still provide an ontological basis or ultimate court of appeal for condemning a range of existing practices both in everyday production and consumption and in science and genetics. The protest, here, is that 'it's "not natural"'; but instead of coming from rightwing ideologues protesting against same-sex relations, women boxing, and other supposed 'perversities', it is a cry of those who are keen to protect society from what are seen as abusive and false forms of progress.

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It is true that the most explicit concerns on these issues – both of experts and of the public at large – are voiced more usually in terms of success, utility and safety: in the case of the response in the UK to GM, for example, the main debates were about whether things would work out in the way claimed by the pro-GM scientists, whether GM production was expedient or necessary to achieve the ends proposed, and, perhaps, above all, whether it could be guaranteed to be safe in both human and ecological terms. And much conflicting scientific evidence was brought into play in the disputes around all these issues. There has also been justified concern about the immorality of the huge profits being made by the GM companies. But underlying or complexly caught up in these concerns – and arguably strongly influencing the reception and interpretation placed on the data offered, either for or against such developments as GM, by the scientists themselves – has been an intuitive sense of the counter-naturality of the whole process: a questioning whether such developments are not a step too far in the manipulation of nature, an hubristic affront to the prevailing moral sense of what humans may properly do with their powers of intervention – and the notion of 'Frankenstein science' which is often invoked in this context is indicative of this revulsion.[4]

III

This reaction, however, immediately begs two questions. Firstly, on what grounds is the 'naturality' or otherwise of these new developments being determined, and how exactly, if at all, do they differ from earlier human constructions of or interactions with nature ? Secondly, why should the 'unnaturality' of certain practices be any more grounds for opposing them than it is in the case, say, of artistic production? After all, GM and similarly advanced biotechnological process is plainly unnatural according to one of the commonest definitions of the natural (and one, as noted above, invoked by many recent ecological writers) – where the kernel idea is that nature is that which is 'uncontaminated' by humans or in which humans have had no hand. But then so, too, are most of our other practices, including many that have been generally welcomed as uncontroversially beneficial. So even if there were agreement on the criteria that allowed certain applications of bio-technology to be specified as 'unnatural' (and, as indicated, this seems pretty unlikely) it is by no means clear that anything very much hangs thereby.

Theorists, then, have been justifiably wary of opting for any essentialist definition of 'nature' that could provide a criterion for distinguishing between our practices as 'natural' or 'unnatural' (whether, we might add, it be to applaud or reject them). Stephen Vogel, as indicated above (see note 2), has gone so far as to dismiss the idea that any helpful discriminations can be made through the concept. 'Not only,' he argues, '…might nature the thing have ended: the *concept* of 'nature' might be such an ambiguous and problematic one, so prone to misunderstanding and so riddled with pitfalls, that its useful-

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ness for a coherent environmental philosophy might be small indeed.' (Vogel, 2006).

However, even though Vogel is right about the difficulties of invoking nature in any moral sense, he is too ready to elide the dismissal of nature in that sense with the rejection of *any* concept of nature at all. For there is *one* sense in which nature does always have its say in human activities, and this is the sense in which all our interventions, whether environmental or biological in respect of ourselves or other beings, are dependent on the workings of physical law and process, and have their outcomes determined by them. In making this point I am invoking what I and others influenced by Critical Realism have elsewhere argued is the difference between a 'realist' or theoretical concept of nature and other more phenomenological or metaphysical concepts (Benton, 1989, 1992; Soper, 1995, pp. 149–176, 1996). Nature in the 'realist' sense refers us to structures and processes that are independent of human activity (in the sense that they are not humanly created), and whose forces and causal powers are the condition of, and constraint upon, any human practice, however ambitious (be it, for example, genetic engineering, the creation of new energy sources, attempts to manipulate the weather or 'terraform' other planets, or any other Promethean scheme). This is the 'nature' to whose laws we are always subject, even as we harness them to human purposes, and whose processes we can neither escape nor destroy. This is the 'nature' that cannot be said to be 'ending' whatever we do to planet Earth, since it will persist in its workings even in the midst of nuclear holocaust or destruction by asteroid or solar combustion.

This realist concept of nature, I have argued in *What is Nature?*, is indispensable to the coherence both of ecological discourses about the 'changing face of nature' conceived as a surface environment, and to any discourse about the genetically engineered or cultural 'construction' of human beings or their bodies. Just as environmental transformations, whether humanly contrived or not, require us to distinguish between the naturally pre-given powers and processes at work in their creation and their more empirically observable (and humanly useful or damaging) environmental effects, so we must recognize the natural body as a condition of any cultural work upon it, whether voluntary or coerced, and however profound and intrusive in its alterations. I have made this point in the past essentially in reference to the so-called 'construction' of gender and sexuality, arguing that the very emphasis on the variable and culturally relative quality of human sexuality requires as its counterpart a recognition of the more constant and universal features of embodied existence if it is to be meaningful. But the same points apply in respect of any form of medical bio-engineering, given its reliance on the 'natural' laws and processes of human biology.

If, then, the theorists who tell us that 'there is no nature' are denying its reality and specific determinations in this understanding, they are committed to a form of idealism which is incoherent. Moreover, even though the appeal to nature in some looser and more normative sense is always vexed and troubled, it is worth noting how difficult it is to keep it out of the picture altogether. Thus

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we find that even those who are most critical of the attempts to provide a criterion of naturality often end up by gesturing towards the idea, if only implicitly. For example, the Nuffield Report seems happy conceptually to invoke *some* sort of criterion of what is more or less 'natural' even as it rejects the possibility of satisfactorily saying what it is. Thus it writes:

> 'Naturalness' and 'unnaturalness' are part of a spectrum. At one end of the scale, some modifications of the plants that are now being achieved by genetic modification might also have been achieved over time by conventional [ie more 'natural'] means of plant breeding. (The Nuffield Council, 1999: chapter 8. section 9).

Stephen Vogel, as we have seen, wants us to eschew all discourse on 'nature'. But he nonetheless defends his 'postnaturalism' by reference to the importance of avoiding environmental disaster and securing human flourishing. Thus he speaks of the 'correct' belief that the effects of human activity over the last two centuries have been 'baleful' and 'destructive' (Vogel, 2006: 5). Yet 'destruction' and 'disaster' only arise in respect to human values, needs and commitments to certain lifestyles, and once we have dispensed with any reference to nature, including – as Vogel insists – biological nature – then it is hard to argue that some forms of need/desire satisfaction should take preference over others. In the very vocabulary of 'looming environmental disaster' there is a reference to biological imperatives for survival and minimal flourishing that sits uneasily with Vogel's rejection of any appeal to nature.

Something similar applies, as I have argued at greater length elsewhere, in the case of Haraway's call to blur or collapse the organic-inorganic, human-animal distinctions, given that this is promoted in the name of improved animal well-being and human sexual emancipation. For a cyborg ontology hardly seems to provide the most promising basis for protesting against the biotechnological or agribusiness maltreatment of animals as if they were indeed Cartesian machines indifferent to fleshly suffering. Nor can it easily ground a proper respect for all those ways in which the pleasures and pains of human love and sexuality are quite distinctive from those of other creatures. In other words, unacknowledged though it may be, it is difficult not to discern an implicit gesture in Haraway's ethics towards the more romantic-redemptive understanding of nature that she has, at a more explicit level of argument, wanted us to eschew (Soper, 1999, 2003).

It remains true, however, that it is very difficult to appeal to 'nature' for endorsement of any particular way of living or being. In the case of the environment, realist nature will exercise an influence on what we do, or can even try to do, but it is we who have to decide what it is ethical to attempt within those limits. Likewise, as biological organisms, we have certain requirements or instinctual responses that we cannot resist (to breathe, take in food and drink, excrete, etc), but beyond those, the area of reduced or under determination is very vast. Even in the case of such a 'basic' need as that for food, the individual can decide to resist it – and does so in cases of anorexia or voluntary

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fasting. Or to invoke the example of sexuality once more: heterosexual relations, which have been presented in some gender theory, as an arbitrary and even coercive norm of human sexual conduct (Rich, 1983; Jeffreys, 1990; Butler, 1990, 1993) are a prescription of nature in the sense that they have been essential hitherto to the reproduction and thus history of the species. Yet it is in principle possible today to circumvent 'natural' reproduction of this kind, and were we to make an ethico-political decision to do so, 'realist' nature would not step in to prevent us, although it might make it pretty difficult to do (Soper, 1996: 32–33).

If, then, neither nature in my realist sense nor any other more universally applicable normative concept of 'nature' can readily supply us with an ethics, it might seem that we are brought back to more intuitive, and therefore fuzzier, ways of thinking about the forms of resistance to what is loosely deemed 'unnatural'. Might we, for example, do better to explore what, if anything, is distinctive to moral appeals to nature in specific contexts: to ask, not what feature of x makes x 'unnatural' but what is peculiar to the opprobrium attaching to the idea that it is, and how does it differ from other forms of moral disapproval? Why is it, for example, that we tend to condemn necrophilia and paedophilia as 'perverse' or 'unnatural' (as well as wrong), but not murder or rape (which we instead denounce simply as 'wrong' or 'evil')? Is this because we are implicitly discriminating here between acts that other animals cannot do and those they do not do? Other animals, of course, can, and do, kill each other very frequently, and regularly use force in sexual intercourse, but only humans can murder or rape, because these are acts that figure as morally culpable only in the context of the human community. Necrophilia, on the other hand, although certainly deemed immoral and criminalized by us, is also condemned as unnatural – in virtue, it might seem, of its proving the exception to rather than the norm for animal behaviour.

On the other hand, it can seem just as problematic to police human behaviour by reference to what is 'natural' for other animals, as to deal with animals as if they had moral understanding. According to Freud, moreover, the so-called perversions have an 'originary' status for human beings, being a given of human nature that has to be repressed as a condition of civilization. As he has written, 'society believes that no greater threat to its civilization could arise than if the sexual instincts were to be liberated and returned to their original aims. For this society does not wish to be reminded of this precarious portion of its foundations' (Freud, 1974–86: i: 48, vii: 86, viii: 268). Hence the reason, he suggests, why we feel such loathing towards manifest perversions:

> It is as though one could not forget that they are not only something disgusting but also something monstrous and dangerous – as though people felt them as seductive, and had at bottom to fight down a secret envy of those who were enjoying them (Freud, 1974–86: i: 363).

Indeed, this disgust with the perversions is presented by him as purely conventional, illogical and irrational (Freud, 1974–86: vii: 64, viii: 83–4). And yet, as

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Jonathan Dollimore has pointed out, it would be naïve of Freud to expect us to rid ourselves of shame or disgust since these are – as he himself has argued (Freud, 1974–86: vii: 76 esp. n.1, vii: 75) – the fundamental principles of cultural order (Dollimore, 1991: 180).

The 'unnatural' or the 'perverse' in these contexts, one might therefore suggest, speaks to a species-specific and exclusive need for us to police divisions (between life and death, children and adults, nourishment and excretion, humans and animals) whose maintenance is seen as a condition of the possibility of any human community. In Kaja Silverman's words, perversion 'subverts many of the binary oppositions upon which the social order rests: it crosses the boundary separating food from excrement (coprophilia); human from animal (bestiality); life from death (necrophilia); adult from child (pederasty); and pleasure and pain (masochism)' (Silverman, 1988: 33).

So even if we cannot provide rigorous criteria for our intuitive discriminations, this is no reason to disregard them. Habermas has noted the 'symptomatic revulsion' we feel at the breaching of the species barrier that we had naively assumed to be inviolable – an 'ethical virgin soil', as he puts it, quoting Otfried Hoffe (2003: 39–4). He has also pointed out, against genetic programming, that:

> many of us seem to have the intuition that we should not weigh human life, not even in its earliest stages, either against the freedom (and competitiveness) of research, or against the concern with safe-guarding an industrial edge, or against the wish for a healthy child, or even against the prospect (assumed *arguendo*) of new treatments for severe genetic diseases (2003: 68).

And he has rightly, in this connection, spoken of a Rubicon that we should be very wary of crossing.

In this, I suggest, he echoes the warning of an earlier Critical Theorist, Theodor Adorno, who was always resistant *both* to false and fetishizing forms of naturalisation of history *and* to the 'enchantment of history', that is, to any view of history as if it were a form of 'mastery' of or 'escape' from nature. History, in fact, he suggested, creates nature in the negative sense (what he terms 'second nature') by delivering us up to new forms of fatedness, the apparent necessities of a given social order and economy, and viewed in this light, capitalist society is itself 'natural' or a-historical, since it is committed to the eternal reproduction of its relations of production and commodification. GM, nanotechnology and other forms of bio-technological appropriation of nature, however innovative, looked at in this optic would then be no more than business as usual and thus also 'natural' in a pejorative sense – since they are simply the latest vehicles for the reproduction of the market society and its profit-making and consumerist objectives.

On the other hand, in the more positive sense 'nature' (or 'first nature') for Adorno refers to all forms of concrete, individually existing beings that are mortal or transitory (that is, to both corporeal existence and to the products of labour), and in this understanding nature is the embodiment of history, and

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history the vehicle of nature. It might be said, then, that it is manifest both in the productions of bio-technology, but also in the resistance of all those who at any historical point in time, may pit themselves against the grain of dominant forces and tendencies. And one aspect of history that Adorno emphasizes in this dimension, partly under the influence of Walter Benjamin, is its 'one-timeness'. History is a transitory affair from which there is no going back, and in and through which the fate of first nature is always at any moment being decided. New technical developments, such as genetic engineering are always arresting because of the way in which we discern in them the irreversibility of our economic and political decisions and practices. To commit to them is to know that the 'innocence' of the pre-committed society will never return again and that, in that sense, the decision to enter into a new zone of instrumental rationality creates a certain fatedness, becoming part of 'second nature'. But we also know, at the same time, that there is nothing fated about the commitment itself (Adorno, 2006; 1973).

These Adornian arguments, however, cannot finally resolve the aporias of the natural/unnatural demarcation, since their ethico-political premises can always be contested. Susan Buck–Morss has written in her discussion of Adorno's negative dialectics that 'where nature confronted men as a mythic power Adorno called for the control of that nature by reason; but where rational control of nature took the form of domination, Adorno exposed such instrumental reason as a new mythology' (Buck-Morss, 1977: 58). This is an accurate summation; but it still leaves open the question of how we decide what constitutes a 'rational' control of nature and what exactly counts as its domination, and why. On the other hand, what we do know enough to know, and is captured in the Adornian argument, is that we cannot 'dominate' nature, either human or non-human, in any and every way and still expect to flourish. So even if we cannot point to any essential or universal aspects of ourselves that underlie our resistances, they are always to be attended to as signalling not so much the limits of what we *can* do to ourselves, and other creatures, and the rest of nature, but what we can do and *still expect to live well*, to be happy, and to experience the rewards of membership of an ethical community.

It would be a mistake, I have suggested, to overlook intuitive forms of revulsion to cloning, to breaching the species barrier, and so forth. But I would here insist in conclusion that it would be even more mistaken to allow the awesome perspectives opened up by genetic engineering or other technical fixes to distract us from the currently more decisive role of social determinations on human (and other animal) modes of existence and forms of potential. Our developed powers over 'nature' in recent decades have brought about a situation in which we are today often more at the mercy of what culture and economic and social policy enforces than subject to biological dictate. Breast enhancement, face lifts, and other forms of cosmetic surgery, are far easier to accomplish than shifting stereotypes on beauty and sexual attraction. Much of the illness and misery afflicting the world's poorest could be easily eradicated were it not for the economic relations and political orders standing in the way. It is, in other words, often

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easier today to counter and alter what is genetically determined than to curb or transform the conventions of culture (Soper, 1995: 139–140). Habermas has argued that the challenge of new types of biological intervention relate to our Enlightenment sense of freedom and personal autonomy: we respond very differently, he claims, to the impact on individuals of the contingencies of socialization than we would to the irreversible determination of a pre-natal production of the genome. But we need also to accept that, reversible in principle though they may be, social determinations *in their actual effects* on the powers of self-realization and autonomy of massive numbers of persons can be just as decisive. Our alarms about the risks of genetic engineering should not be allowed to overwhelm more pressing concerns about the role of the global neo-liberal economic system in precipitating irreversible global warming and ecological barbarism on an unprecedented scale.

Changes in economic and social policy could therefore do much more to advance the autonomy *and* the pleasure and sensual and spiritual fulfilment of people worldwide than can be achieved by any genetic interventions and technical fix solutions. But the policies needed to redress the huge global disparities between rich and poor in their access to resources, and hence to the minimum material conditions essential to any further type of flourishing, are unlikely to make any headway unless and until the richer nations rethink their commitments to the growth economy and its currently dominant model of human progress and well-being.

This is why it is disappointing to find so little suggestion, in mainstream responses on global warming, that it might actually be more enjoyable to escape the confines of the growth-driven, shopping-mall culture than to continue to keep it on track. All the emphasis falls on the technical fixes that might allow us indefinitely to pursue consumerist lifestyles, and we hear very little of what might be gained by moving away from the obsession with such gratifications and pursuing a less work-driven and acquisitive way of life. My case for 'alternative hedonism' is all about countering this viewpoint through the development of a heightened sense of the pleasures, both sensual and spiritual, to be gained from restraining our more environmentally damaging forms of consumption. (Soper, 1993: 78–9).

Given the massive budgets devoted to advertisement of consumerist pleasures, it is hardly surprising that 'alternative hedonism' has made little impact to date. Yet despite the odds stacked against the promotion of counter-consumerist enjoyment, a dialectic may be now unfolding that will see it winning more adherents in the future. The indices of this are to be found not only in the alarms over climate change but also in growing concerns about the human consequences of the 'work and spend' economy and the new interest, both lay and academic, in what makes for the 'good life' and personal fulfilment. It is also a tension evident in the expansion of green and ethical consumption and in the centrality of the No Logo forms of opposition within the anti-globalization movement (Klein, 2000; Littler, 2005). All this, moreover, has found some backing in the findings from the 'Happy Planet' index of well-being recently

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published by the New Economic Foundation, and in the evidence of the so-called 'happiness economics' that contests the supposed correlation between increased wealth and increased well-being (Kasser, 2007; Layard, 2005; Purdy, 2005; Frey and Stutzer, 2000; Inglehart and Klingemann, 2000; Easterlin, 2001; Oswald, 1997; Durning, 1992: 23, 38–9, 41; Bauman, 1988: 96; Argyle, 1987: 161).

If, then, we are looking for the potential agents of a democratically achieved process of change in the West today, we need to take more account of the embryonic signs of consumer disenchantment with the so-called 'good life' and of the various ways in which consumption is now emerging as a site of political contention and campaigning. These embryonic signs, I have argued, are well captured in Raymond Williams' concept of a 'structure of feeling': what is at issue here are emergent or pre-emergent responses or qualitative changes of affect that, as he put it, 'do not have to await definition or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action' (Williams, 1977: 132, 128–136). The reference is in this sense to what may be experienced only in an as yet ambivalent and cloudy form, but may in future come to exert more definite and explicit forms of pressure.

Lest it appear, however, as if all the emphasis in this account is falling on the 'greening' of the individual consumer, it should be emphasized that the role of collective strategies for changing consumption will also be crucial. The two pressures for change are intimately related, at least in democratic societies, where more collective and institutionally based measures for environmental protection and conservation are always ultimately reliant on the support of the electorate. If I have here stressed the emergence of greater individual consumer equivocation, it is precisely because of its pivotal role in encouraging governments to promote more effective collective policies on the environment both at the national and international level. Collective and individual responses are not, in this sense, to be viewed as opposing or alternative forces for consumer change, but rather as interconnected and mutually reinforcing, since the 'greening' of individual consumers is a precondition of the kind of consensus around altered conceptions of prosperity that would permit the imposition of forms of collective control over the environment and public 'self-policing' of the more ecologically destructive types of consumption. Equally, and conversely, collective strategies which focus, for example, on the provision of public transport or the 'greening' of urban space, are likely themselves to issue in benefits (healthier environments, reduction in congestion, greater safety) that encourage more extensive individual consumer support.

Given this mutually reinforcing interaction between public response and policy intervention, it is important that government should act to confirm shifts in attitudes that will otherwise, without question, remain a marginal and ineffectual development. An 'avant-garde' consumer ethics deserves and requires a complementary response from those with the power to extend its reach. At the very least, policy makers have a duty to be more honest and straightforward in

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their engagement with the public on these issues. If there is a real commitment to environmental care, the alleviation of poverty, and sustainability, then every encouragement should be given to the affluent public to rethink the good life and to consume in less damaging ways, even if that comes at the cost of continued rates of economic growth. If there is no such commitment, then there should no longer be a pretence that there is, nor any lament at the implications in terms of climate change, global exploitation, and increased pollution and ill health.

Notes

1 Though today associated in particular with McKibben's ecological argument, this idea is not a new one. It has some register in Cicero's concept of 'second nature', and was already succinctly made by Marx and Engels in their claim in The *German Ideology* (1968: 59) that: 'The nature which preceded human history no longer exists anywhere (except perhaps on a few Australian coral-islands of recent origin).' But while for earlier thinkers, human interaction with 'nature' or the encroachment of second nature over an absolute and pristine otherness to human culture, was deemed on the whole a positive condition of the development and refinement of human needs and the flourishing of a distinctively human culture, it is today – at least among some of the deeper ecologists – the ground of altogether more negative assessments of our planetary impact.

2 It is because of these confusions and illogicalities in the deployment of the concept of 'nature' that Vogel himself has suggested we might do better to dispense with it altogether. This position is discussed further later in the chapter.

3 The 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' first appeared in the *Socialist Register* 80, 1985: 65–108. It has inspired numerous commentaries and articles. For an extensive selection, see Gray, 1995. For some more sceptical and polemical responses, see McCormick, 2000; Bordo, 1990; Soper, 1999.

4 The evidence cited by Kaebnick: 'Even among the wider public, surveys have reliably shown that a significant portion of the public finds them morally troubling (Hallman *et al.*, 2004; Marris, 2002). In a poll conducted by the Pew Initiative on Food Biotechnology, two-thirds of respondents said they were 'uncomfortable' about animal cloning even though less than half thought the products were unsafe (Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology, 2005). A market research firm hired by a company that clones livestock reported that over a third of those it polled said they would not buy such products even when first told that the FDA was likely to declare them safe (Sosin and Richards, 2005). Three-quarters of respondents to a poll paid for by the International Food Information Council said that they had an unfavourable impression of animal cloning (International Food Information Council, 2005)' in 'Putting Concerns about Nature in Context: The Case of Agricultural Biotechnology', forthcoming in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*.

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