POOR IN PRACTICAL CAPACITY: HOW ENVIRONMENTAL ALIENATION IS REALLY A LACK OF POLITICAL KNOW-HOW

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Abstract

"Alienation from nature" is a popular notion in Western environmental culture. Influential Anglophone critical theorist Steven Vogel claims that it makes no sense, unlike alienation from our productive capacity to dwell on Earth, called "alienation from the environment." His criticism is accurate, but his view isn't. The *normative* sets appropriate production and consists of social processes of arriving at norms. Politics is foremost among these processes, and it is fundamentally know-how. Given these assumptions, poor *practical capacity* ends up being the heart of "environmental alienation" - alienation from the built environment. Look at large-scale, anthropogenic, environmental change: a deficit of political know-how leaves people alienated from the planetary environment created by human engineering.

Keywords: Environmental alienation, practical capacity, normativity, political know-how, Steven Vogel.

Straight to the killer

Humanists rejoice in splitting hairs, although there is seldom much one can do with two strands of hair. Nonetheless, every once in a while the strand in your hand leads straight to the killer. Over the last four decades, Steven Vogel has developed a democratic Marxist –and to some extent, Habermasian– critique of Deep Ecology and cultural romanticism according to which "alienation from nature" makes no sense, whereas "alienation from the environment" does (Vogel, 1996; 2003; 2008; 2011a; 2011b; 2012; 2015). By "environment," Vogel means the *socially constructed* world we live in, the way our production allows us to dwell on Earth. This is the built environment, primarily material but also to some extent discursive and symbolic (as language, following Wittgenstein (1995), is a practical tool). Most often in Vogel's work, the environment is thereby the *economy* –the place where an *oikos* is collectively made within Earth's ecology. Vogel (2015) focuses on the products we make and accept, and then our alienation from them, such as malls abandoned during a recession, gone extinct. His focus

is on the way private-sector production obscures the collective political decisions underlying its possibility and on how this obscurity makes the manner of our production –even if it is undesirable or unhealthy- seem a foregone conclusion, unstoppable.

In this reorientation of environmental philosophy toward the built environment and its economy (Vogel and Bendik-Keymer, 2024), Vogel presents a subtle and welcome critique of a long-standing and deeply held cultural position that has its roots in European Romanticism persisting to this day. I believe that the Romantic view leads through twists and turns to a number of forms of sentimentalism or misanthropy. But Vogel's view, also, is open to criticism –it promotes an implausible view of the ignorance of ordinary economic actors and ironically perpetuates the alienation it is said to criticize by mis-locating whatever alienation there may be in products rather than in our normative capacity. Accordingly, in this paper I want to split some hairs, since doing so leads straight to the killer. In economy, *oikos* is shaped by *nomos.* I will argue that alienation from the environment is best understood not as alienation from our products but from the *normative*. Based on this claim, I will further argue that the root of "environmental alienation" is the poverty so many people have when it comes to political know-how. Being poor in practical capacity is the killer. And this point is not facetious: our civilization is set up –through aggregated diffuse, minute and unintentional causes- to kill many in the future (Gardiner, 2011; Celermajer, 2021). But it can only do so if we collectively allow it do –a political failing of mass scale rooted in poor practical capacity, not in alienation from our products. Ours will be a failing, then, of *praxis*, not *poiesis.* This conclusion has specific, practical consequences which allow one to refine the meaning of estrangement from politics that animates Vogel's critical theory.

The paper's core claim

As I will explain in more detail later, by the "normative" I mean those social processes through which we arrive at norms, including the norms by which production –and the form it takes- is desirable, acceptable, or appropriate. Foremost among these processes is the normative process of *politics*, a process by which we shape the regulative and collective space of production. Vogel (2015) agrees that political estrangement shapes alienation from the built environment, but his focus is on collective deliberation to control the means of production. My emphasis, however, will be on estrangement from the know-how needed to navigate existing

political institutions and practices *involving* collective deliberation as well. Thus, political estrangement on my account involves alienation from our potential to be active citizens, not our lack of collective determination of what gets produced and how in our economy. A subtle distinction.

The reasoning, though, is straightforward. Once we understand how production is possible, alienation from the environment is foremost alienation from politics, the know-how of shaping community norms together and through governmental forms we endorse, shape, or reject. It is alienation from a *practice*, not from a product. I call this know-how *practical capacity* (Ford, 2010). As strange as it might seem to eco-romantics, being poor in practical capacity is the core of environmental alienation. And contrary to Vogel, being poor in political know-how is the site of alienation, not estrangement from the collective determination of our products.

My conclusion is one Vogel should readily accept if his focus is on political agency and collective self-determination rather than on Marxist orthodoxy, and he is iconoclastic in rejecting many parts of Marxism while championing democratic discourse (Vogel and Bendik-Keymer, 2024). But my view underscores a form of political know-how that Vogel (unintentionally) neglects: capacity of the working of institutions and their practices. Rather than emphasizing collectively autonomous labor practices, my view underscores (the need for) *collective autonomy understood pragmatically as on-the-ground know-how of how to engage in politics.* It leads to *pragmatic citizenship, forging connections with others and working over long periods of time to reshape the institutions that ultimately support, limit, block and thereby shape legal and illegal production*. All this can be seen with anthropogenic climate change, ocean acidification, elevated extinction, and the like –key instances of large-scale, human-caused environmental change from which people are commonly alienated. After reconstructing Vogel's position, I will discuss these examples as I turn to my own (hair-splittingly) different viewpoint.

"Alienation from nature" –the negative critique

First, let me recapitulate Vogel's critique of what I will call "eco-romanticism." His critique is the negative part of his argument, followed by a positive part I discuss in the next section. To begin, we should note that Vogel (2011b, 2015) makes a distinction between a

"Romantic" and a "dualistic" view of alienation from nature, viewing the latter as conceptually more clear-headed. The former claims that we are alienated from nature and that nature is normative, i.e., that if we can restore ourselves to the groove nature gives us, we will overcome our alienation from it (cf. Rousseau, 1979; Naess, 1973; Bender, 2003). To be "alienated from nature" here is to be out of touch with a source –often *the* source- of norms for the comportment of life, a view that resuscitates a kind of naturalism that was common in Ancient Greek, Roman and Medieval philosophy. But Vogel rightly views the term, "nature," as equivocal in many such positions, provided that they are naturalistic: on the one hand, we are ontologically natural, as all naturalisms are; but on the other hand, nature is a norm-giving domain which one can fail to follow. So, the "Romantic" view of alienation from nature trades on equivocation; this is why it is nonsense.

In the dualistic view, however, human beings are ontologically "anti-natural," a position one can find in environmental Kantians such as Luc Ferry (1995) and which arguably has roots in Pauline theology [1]. Here, Vogel (2011b; 2015) points out, it seems *impossible* that one could be alienated from nature since one could not possibly be one with nature –an ontological point. We could also add: Should the dualist tack toward a normative use of "nature," it seems *undesirable* that one should see nature as normative in any way, since nature goes against the kind of being one is. *Alienation* from nature –not living with nature- then means being able to live as the beings we are. Overcoming that alienation seems to imply ending such a life –a position, sure, but one so extreme as to undercut anything but the most hardened misanthropy.

In carrying forward Vogel's critique, I will refer it to "eco-romanticism [2]," since I believe eco-romanticism is more prevalent than the dualist view in the context of popular environmental culture and since eco-romanticism has been more influential in academic environmental philosophy. Eco-romanticism is found everywhere from youth nihilism that urges we go "into the wild" to heal ourselves and become one again (Krakauer, 1997) to New Age mantras to reconnect with our spiritual and sacred origin in "nature" (Gozzi, 2012). As I've noted, it is found in Deep Ecology and in positively Romantic strands from Rousseau to (some readings of) Thoreau (Cafaro, 2004) [3]. It even hides under the environmental malaise with urbanism –ironically more sustainable than living in large numbers spread around the land- and the view that if only we could stop being urbane and reconnect with the country, our spiritual ills would be healed. Once one becomes attuned to eco-romanticism, its diagnosis of

our spiritual ills in "alienation from nature" appears as a root system underneath a wide variety of contemporary views, popping up like an invasive species at inopportune moments.

The advantage of Vogel's critique is that it cuts these views off at the root. They become incoherent, and invocation of "nature" becomes misdirective. If we *are* natural, then it isn't clear how we can be alienated from nature. Moreover, if we are natural, then "nature" is functioning descriptively, not normatively. But the eco-romantic view of nature is strongly normative. Nature gives us "oughts" or at least is desirable. It isn't a matter of what we happen to be.

In its place, Vogel points people toward a Marxist analysis of alienation from our production. On his view, "alienation from nature" is really alienation from the environment (Vogel, 2012: 305). Eco-romanticism is thereby a *symptom* of alienation from the environment –a way of misplacing the source of our incapacity. I agree that "alienation from nature" is really alienation from the environment *in some sense*. Later, I will offer an interpretation of the site of alienation that splits hairs with Vogel's diagnosis, however.

Finally, it's worth noting that "alienation from nature" could mean alienation from *our* nature in so far as our nature is illuminated within the continuum of nature outside and around us (Bendik-Keymer, 2005). This would seem to be Thoreau's view, a Romantic return to natural kind teleology with the caveat that vitalism introduces a mutability to living kinds that may imply their evolution (Cafaro, 2004). But the confusions would continue. Our nature is clearly normative, but non-human nature is at best ambivalently so, perhaps in some non-human animals (Meijer, 2019) but not in, say, the elements. What would the teleology of non-human living beings show us about living with norms? Also, if what we are really alienated from is our nature - our normativity - how could a non-norm-following nature help us regain that from which we are estranged?

"Alienation from the environment" –the positive proposal

Rather than chase after a view that makes no clear sense, Vogel claims that we ought to see where we *can* be and often *are* alienated in our relation to what we produce. I will disagree with the accuracy of his claim by challenging its coherence but need first to reconstruct it. Doing so is interesting not only because it helps us to understand a historically loaded

philosophical term –"alienation"- and environmental social theory in the tradition of critical theory (Vogel, 1996), but because of the approach to politics toward which it leads.

I take Vogel to begin with a point that could be both Marxist and Heideggerian. He notes that what we must (as a practical necessity) produce the world in which we live, our *oikos* –the place of our dwelling. In his reading, this is a materialist transformation of the Kantian idea that human subjects produce their worlds (Vogel, 2011b: 193-4; Vogel and Bendik-Keymer, 2024). Our *oikos* is our *Umwelt* –our environment, the world that surrounds us and which is a product of our labor taking in and situating ourselves within Earth's ecology. Vogel (2012, pp. 307-9) rightly notes that such an environment is socially constructed, for our societies produce not each of us as Robinson Crusoe but together through the division of labor and the distribution of production. We are in charge of this environment in the sense that we decide the rules of our *oikos.* This is called our economy. For shorthand, Vogel is claiming that our environment is –most precisely- a reality of our political economy, our normative, social system for dwelling on Earth.

How can we be alienated from our political economy? For starters, we need to recognize the economic in the environmental. Vogel revives a view whose roots are in Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx, 2007: 76-83; Wolff, 2010). In looking at the plight of the industrial laborer –for instance, the factory worker- Marx noted that the laborer does not own what he produces. It passes him by on the work-line and all he gets in return is money. This is the first sense of alienation: Instead of the product of my labor belonging to me, as when I build my own home, my products become estranged from me. They go off into the world usually never to be seen again.

The second sense of alienation goes deeper. Marx noted that not only did industrial laborers lose what they produce; they also seemed to have little control over the *form* of their production. Once they signed up as workers, often with few economic options, they had to fill a mold. In this second sense of alienation, the *act of production*, not just my products, becomes foreign to me in the sense that I cannot say that I have worked it out to my judgment. This is unlike, again, someone who builds her own home. There, she can decide *how* she wants to work and *in what manner* she will produce what he does. Not so on the factory floor.

Marx also noted that industrial laborers had very little control over the *rules* governing production on a macro-economic scale. Not only were they alienated from what they made and

how they made it, but *the institutional system of production did not belong to them*. This – deeply political- alienation is nearly the most profound and is the root of all the others, for only through it can the others be. The communist revolution was meant to overthrow this fundamental, economic alienation (Marx and Engels, 2011). Vogel (2012; 2015) emphasizes this level of alienation when he discusses the relation between alienation from the environment and the "tragedy of the commons." The precise tragedy in contemporary economy, though, according to Vogel, depends on privatized production and poorly regulated consumption, ultimately on the atomizing of our aggregated actions into individual responsibility when only collective responsibility will be sufficient to avoid the tragedy (cf. Gardiner, 2011). Just so, Vogel points to alienation from the system of production. What is actually a result of our collective and tacit agreement is out of our hands as individuals when it comes to facing the tragedies of the commons in which we live, such as climate change, ocean acidification and the like.

Finally, as Wolff (2010) emphasizes and as was dear to Marx's neo-Aristotelianism at the time of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Nussbaum, 1998), the laborer is most profoundly alienated from his productive capacity as a member of the human species. This is alienation from one's own essential power –the capacity that, according to Marx, *defines* one as a human being, *poiesis* (a further point of contact between Marx and Heidegger). "Slaving" away on the factory floor, the worker loses touch with his ability to create things as a human being. In the description of my father working an assembly line at Ford Motor Company in the 1950s, the worker becomes "a machine himself: pull, move, spin, plug … repeat. Over and over." This is hardly poetry, or craft.

Vogel's diagnosis of environmental alienation does not focus on alienation from our own "species being," but it can be read behind his account without any incoherence and is nowhere denied by him. Moreover, it would explain his focus on production as the site of alienation. When I turn to my constructive criticism of Vogel's position, however, I will argue that the deepest level of Marxist alienation –alienation from our own humanity *qua* producers- is imprecise. When you analyze the alienation, it must be from what I call "the normative" – and this means that it is alienation from our *practical* capacity, from *praxis,* not *poiesis*.

In sum, what Vogel calls "alienation from the environment" is a deeply political alienation caused by people finding that the control of their system of production is out of their

hands as individuals. Shortly, I will make my own criticism of his position simply by taking and focusing this point. At present, though, a few things should be emphasized. First, Vogel (2011b: 195) claims that the rules of our system of production "appear external to each of us," forming "the given and unchangeable context in which we act" –such an appearance is a central characteristic of Marxist-diagnosed alienation. But it is unclear who this "us" is, and focusing on the projected community strains empirical plausibility, even the coherence of Vogel's larger claims about alienation. To begin, Vogel gives no empirical studies to substantiate a thought. Is he really claiming that a typical participant in capitalism thinks that the rules of capitalism are unchangeable? To believe this would be to deny capitalist reality, where the rules of market formation change as new markets emerge. It strikes me as hard to believe that am everyday person who has read the newspaper during the pandemic could deny that the rules of production change, or even that *we* –people- change them. They were infamously changed –deregulated- when the financial sector took off especially in the 1990s and then were desperately mis-regulated following on 2008 when the banks were "too big to fail " (Jackall, 2010: 221-40). Then, this same system faced major interruption in 2020 with knock-on interventions to this day to rebalance things following the pandemic. Their change has been the subject of major electoral debate in the United States of America since at least 2008 (Ryan 2012). If there is one thing a typical participant in capitalism knows, it is that her context is *not* unchangeable. The problem is that it is changed in ways that are often damaging or unjust and often by the elite few loaded down in an actually existing plutocracy. The problem is knowing-how to change it to be safe and just in a manner that uses the system to challenge plutocracy and elitism.

Second, Vogel (2012: 310) claims elsewhere that the root of the alienation is powerlessness. If I understand his position, it is that the environment, produced through the economy, appears unchanging because a typical participant in capitalism is powerless to do anything about it. She can't affect the underlying system of production by herself. This is true even if she is a terrorist, a multi-billionaire who widely leverages a market sector, or a leader whose preferences are emulated by millions: the *system* remains the same. Accordingly, Vogel (2012: 310) emphasizes that only action "together" could make any difference –presumably action that I will call "normative [4]." I fully agree with him on this and will later run with his point. However, it does not appear that alienation thereby is alienation *from the environment*

or even *from the economy*. Rather, alienation would thereby be alienation *from institutional politics* –i.e., the practice of exercising collective power in actually existing institutions.

Third, Vogel (2011b, p. 196) claims that the implication of Marx's diagnosis are:

> … striking. … Alienation arises when we fail to see the *constructed* character of the objects and institutions that surround us, a constructed character that is inseparable from their *social* character. We are alienated from objects that we have produced from our own actions, and alienation arises when we fail to recognize them as such.

With reference to Vogel's later account of alienation, what is produced at the deepest level is the system of production itself, which in capitalism involves producing the legal norms surrounding acting as a private citizen (Vogel, 2012: 307) [5]. Alienation from *this* aspect of our environment would come in any guise where addressing the private condition of action in the face of collective action problems seems unimaginable. But is it unimaginable, or simply a feature of our poor practical capacity?

It would be unimaginable if we could not imagine a different arrangement, say one whereby some things that should be public, but aren't, are *made* public. Yet we imagine this kind of different arrangement everyday: it is the basis of post-Kyoto climate change negotiation between nations, debate over health care reform in the United States of America, national debt bolstering in the European Union, labor law in most rapidly developing nations that have become sites of global uneven development, and countless other areas of dispute between the private and the public, the individual and the collective. Some scholars of globalization even argue that the strategic use of the public sphere is *constitutive* of capitalism, needed to attract labor and investment flows where quality of life or specific infrastructural needs are an issue (Brenner, 2004). For a typical participant in capitalism, nothing seems particularly unimaginable about dealing with a collective action problem by challenging the privatization of responsibility for it; this has been done all the time and continues to be done and debated in response to economic recessions, banking laws, mortgage norms, and so on. The issue, again, is not the unimaginability of changing the public sphere, but poor know-how about how to have a role in organizing and doing so. Vogel's account *can*not be accurate, since it depends conceptually on a category –the typical participant in capitalism- who must have a sense of things contrary to Vogel's account *if* she is to be a typically existing participant in capitalism.

From the environment to the normative

One of the things we can take from the legacy of philosophy is to make points as lucid and precise as they can be. To my mind, this imperative only matters if the point in question has important, practical consequences. With regard to Vogel's already sharp account, more precision and clarity do help. They give us concrete practical consequences that can assist people in becoming responsible citizens. They also dispel the ideological haze surrounding "alienation," whether "from nature" or "from the environment." More precision and clarity open up a fair amount of *common ground* among different ideological and political approaches to the study of politics and the environment. I will substantiate these claims at the conclusion of this paper.

Let us go back to the latest point in Vogel's account of environmental alienation (2012, 2015) –the point where private actors are "alienated" from the environment they produce due to the way the system of production is constructed, namely, as a *private* one (cf. also Vogel and Bendik-Keymer, 2024). Let us also look at several examples to illustrate Vogel's point – anthropogenic climate change, ocean acidification, and globally elevated (or "mass") extinction rates. In each of these examples, the "aggregate" collective determines the anthropogenic outcome (Bendik-Keymer, 2016). This collective is *not* coordinated but is the result of the way the institutionalized system of action –including production- is set up. It is set up to *externalize* environmental burdens on future generations and those currently vulnerable to the large-scale changes discussed without anyone being individually responsible (Gardiner, 2011). The aggregate effects are the result of a privatized and nation-state centered system of law – including production, in so far as (even globalized) it must conform to primarily national, and then inter*national*, law. Accordingly, we might say that the *economy* produces the effects unintentionally –warming the climate on the whole, making the oceans too acidic for much of the currently evolved system of ocean life, putting people at risk of ecosystems failing due to trophic collapse as extinction rates rise in many ecosystems globally. Not the individuals. But of course, the individuals are tacitly consenting to the economy and making it run. Hence, Vogel can claim that there is a kind of alienation here. What we are each doing is negligible, but, due to our economic system, what *we* collectively and in an uncoordinated manner are doing is substantially unsafe and unjust.

Where, though, in this economy –in what Vogel calls our "environment"- is the alienation precisely found? I want to hold our view steady here and look more closely. As Vogel (2012: 310) himself emphasizes, the point of powerlessness is found in our relation to the system of production. According to him, our *alienation* surrounds this powerlessness as the settled conviction that the system in which we live is not open to our agency should we wish to change it or even to see it as in need of justification in relation to our values, goals, and so on. However, as I believe I've shown, the alienation cannot be here, as a participant in the economy *qua* capitalist participant must deny the very thing Vogel claims, that the system appears unchangeable. On the contrary, to a participant of the economy, the system is *highly* changeable. This is what national and international politics are about.

For the time being, though, we should focus on the point of powerlessness, not on alienation, for where powerlessness is located will lead us to the actual point of alienation. What is the nature of the powerlessness? It is powerlessness *in our capacity to change our system in line with our agency* (values, goals, etc.). What is such a capacity? In order to answer, we need to understand what the nature of the system is which the capacity can or cannot affect. This system is a political-economic one. What is its nature? An economy, most generally, is a regulation of our *oikos* by *nomos* –that is, a way in which our space of dwelling is shaped by customs, laws and various kinds of norms to guide the circulation of the goods comprising dwelling. In other words, being norm-bound is (a necessary and main part of) the nature of the system. The economy is a system of norms concerning our day to day living, our "home" (*oikos*), with capitalism and its "free" market being a particular way we have accepted to guide the circulation of (a large part of) the goods we take to be of value in living our lives. This means that the capacity under question is the capacity to effect –to form or unform- such a system at the level of its constitution, which is norm-constructed and this in its most fundamental institutions where the norms are lodged and propagated. Accordingly, the nature of our powerlessness is normative. Our powerlessness, on Vogel's own account, is a powerlessness to form norms, a deficit of normativity in the sense I am using here in this paper. Whatever alienation there is should surround *this* [6].

In my usage, the "normative" indicates most precisely not a realm of set norms, but a process, namely *the process of forming norms*. A normative process is thereby one whereby people form norms regulating their collective life, and normativity is *the capacity to form such*

processes. This slightly dizzying distinction can be made clearer by considering some examples. A group of children meeting to make up a new version of "Gaga" –a popular ball game of the 2010s- have normativity in so far as it is within their power to come up with a way to develop the rules of the new version of Gaga. Their normativity thereby depends on the permission of their camp counselors, the children's grasp of Gaga's old versions, their understanding of rules, their ability to cooperate and to compromise if need be, and so on. Many conditions underlie their normativity. *Once the children find a way to make the new version of Gaga, coming up with and setting out the rules, the process they take is normative.* Through this process, they arrive at rules. They come up with –form- norms. *Similarly, when a group of citizens meet to advocate for new laws, working cooperatively over a decade in all the many areas of pragmatic life it takes to actually change law, they are expressing their normativity.* Their normativity appears in whatever *they* have created of the process, and the process as a whole is normative, including the parts they haven't created, such as established legislative channels, standard lobbying practices and the like. Normativity is the power to generate normative processes, and normative processes are those which generate norms.

The point of this technical language is to pinpoint where the powerlessness in, and according to Vogel the alienation from, the environment resides. Imagine a typical, economic actor in capitalism who becomes aware that she participates in a system that is a likely mass killer of people in future generations of humans and non-humans as well as a clear danger to vulnerable people (including non-humans; Delon, 2023) around the world, increasingly as time goes forward. She realizes that the aggregate collective of all humans on Earth is the killer, with special place given to the major polluters or obstructers of climate justice (Celermajer, 2021). What does she realize she needs to see done? She needs to see the rules of the economy change to internalize burdens on future or vulnerable people. Her focus in on *norms* that need to change - the things that continue the destructive patterns by keeping them in place and maintaining them. But now let us follow Vogel in imagining her to find herself powerless in the face of such a task: the task of changing the rules of the system. Her powerlessness concerns the normative: she does not see a *way* to form new norms for the system. If, by chance, she does not know even how she could *come up with* such a way –something that could strike her if, say, she lived in a "soft" despotic city such as Dubai, Singapore or Shanghai and did not have *wasta* or party connections; or if she lived in a corrupt, democratic state such as Mexico where actual power

is quite limited to the ordinary citizen (Tuckman, 2012) - then her powerlessness concerns normativity. In any event, the problem is, precisely and clearly, *a problem of not knowing how to generate norms that reform the system in line with justice and safety*. I will shortly call this a problem of practical capacity.

Is there alienation here? If so, where exactly? One thing I hope has become evident in this paper is that invoking alienation around the environment is usually incoherent, even in Vogel's sharpened usage. Perhaps the term itself should be jettisoned. The reason I think it should not is that the citizen we've just considered –this typical economic actor- *is* estranged from her environment in this precise and clear sense: it is out of her hands *unless* she can undertake a normative process. Accordingly, environmental alienation resides in the *lack* of normative processes precisely when they are called for, and –*pace* Marx and Vogel- alienation does not express itself as ignorance or forgetting first and foremost; it presents itself as *awareness* that the very thing one needs in order to live up to one's conscience and pursue justice and safety is *missing*. It is *estranged* –alien, out of one's powers and life as if it were for other beings, but not for you. Alienation is awareness, awareness that what you need in order to be human is estranged from you.

At this point, it's worth pausing to return to Marx's interest in our "species being" –what makes us human. One can argue that our species being is not our capacity to produce things – for many other beings produce things, often things more marvelous than we do. Our species being is rather our capacity to make judgments and commit to things on the basis of norms (Larmore, 2010; although I use normatively differently than he does). This is a classic humanist idea that goes back at least to Giovanni Pico della Miradola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, and it was carried forward almost without interruption through Rousseau and Kant to Sartre and Heidegger among others. Our capacity to act according to norms, norms which we form, defines our humanity *and* expresses what is most important to us: our pursuits of meaning, our qualitative distinctions, our values, our ideals are bound up with this power to generate and follow norms (Larmore, 2010).

Moreover, our very production is constituted by the norms. Norms set how production and the form it takes are desirable, acceptable, or appropriate. We produce according to what we take to be desirable, acceptable or appropriate in ways that comply with or challenge *custom*, for the sake of many sorts of *value*, and with *reasons* that express the norm-bearing fabric of

how we guide our lives. Normative processes, and normativity itself, are more basic than any production *qua* human production. Accordingly, *to be alienated from our normativity is the deepest form of alienation*, and it happens every day whenever we know that we need to make up new rules but can't for the life of us see how we have the power to do so. This sharp and humiliating awareness which brings many people to what Thoreau (2016, "Economy") called "quiet desperation" is alienation.

From the normative to the political, and on to know-how

I want to be more specific here, though –to press my own account for more precision. In order for the normal economic actor to change the rules of the system she's in so that it internalizes the burdens it externalizes on future generations and the world's vulnerable (not to mention onto non-human life), she will need to become *political*. This is because every economy is at bottom a *political* economy. Economies are shaped by governance, according to which, only, can they run. The governance may come through informal customs or through Federal Law, but it is governance, nonetheless. The process that concerns our citizen is politics.

I see politics as among the most important and influential normative processes (an uncontroversial view). What may seem odd to some is to call politics a process by which norms are generated, since "politics" in ordinary language can mean so many other kinds of things (Bendik-Keymer, 2023; Rancière, 2004). However, I will restrict my usage as terminology, and call "politics" *a normative process aiming at governance of a society of some scale* (the scales can vary, of course). To engage in politics is thereby *to engage in the process whereby a society comes to regulate itself, including its economy*. Behind every economy, therefore, is politics – the process of having shaped the norms surrounding production of how we dwell on Earth.

The powerlessness Vogel is clearly aiming at is political powerlessness (Vogel and Bendik-Keymer, 2024), but his concept of alienation throws him off track. What everyday economic actors who want to bring their system in line with their values need is politics, a process of bringing their own society and its economy under norms of their making. It is incoherent to assume, as Vogel does, that these actors do not *see* that their society could change if they could participate in politics; it is a condition of capitalism that society *does* change through politics. The real question is about who does politics, who can and cannot do it, who has access, and who can get anything done through it. This is the question of elitism in politics,

among other things; the very thing that has roiled the U.S. elections of late and many other nations globally. In this spirit, it seems plausible that the alienation there is from the environment will include, prominently, alienation from the political, specifically, a lack of *capacity* to be political, to enter effectively into the normative process of the political. What is this capacity?

First, it is not production. Norms are not products that have a life of their own separate from our actions. Rather, norms shape and govern our actions such that actions are what they are by reference to the norms that guide them. To come up with norms is to come up with rules for action, including the action of participating in production. Norms are more basic than production.

Second, the capacity is practical. It is a capacity to *do* something. Accordingly, it involves *know-how*, the kind of knowledge that is found in action. When one has a practical capacity, one knows how to do something. This is what saying that one *can* do something amounts to: it implies know-how. If I can do something, I know how to do it. Otherwise, I cannot. The capacity in question, then, involves know-how.

Third, although the capacity in question involves know-how, it need not consist entirely of it. This is because there are other ways to undermine practical capacity than simply undermining know-how. Coercion might undermine my capacity to do something, even though I know how to do it. Or calamity. Or old age. When I focus on know-how in this paper, it is because in the central cases Vogel has in mind –very common cases in liberal, capitalistic states- the heart of what is at issue is know-how. Actual coercion is not in the mix, nor disastrous acts of nature, nor physical incapacity.

Take the normal economic actor in capitalism, then, who lives in a democratic system or one that is in some way open to her being political. (This, actually, can be true even of life in soft despotisms, as there are often non-democratic ways to be political, for instance, through family channels and tribal connections in the United Arab Emirates or through party connections in communist China. The possibilities are limited and uneven, though.) She may think she is powerless, alienated from the political, but why? The answer would appear to be because she does not know *how* to be political. She knows that her economy should be reformed to internalize burdens it is placing on future generations and others. She is alienated from her environment in so far as she does not think she can engage in politics to change the political

economy in which she lives. But –and here I want to be quite precise- the root of her condition is not that the political *itself* is alien, since it is actually possible for her to engage in it *if only she knew how and she is aware of this*. Lacking political know-how is then the precise point of environmental alienation in all societies where it is obviously possible to engage in politics. For this reason, examining all but the most despotic or anarchic societies or failed-societies, when I point to practical capacity as the site of environmental alienation, I mean specifically political know-how.

From environmental alienation to political apprenticeship

There are consequences to my analysis of a problem that began buried in eco-romanticism. The first is that under conditions of normal democracy or even many forms of soft despotism, environmental alienation is at heart a matter of a certain kind of ignorance. It is less a freezing of the soul than a deficit of a kind of knowledge that we can provide each other –the knowledge of how to engage in politics. Marxists such as Vogel, pointing in the right direction, stop too short: they keep the discussion stuck on alienation from our products, or system of production, rather than seeing that much of the alienation is a matter of poor practical capacity, and that this can be remedied by –literally- practice. We need *practice in institutionalized politics where norms are lodged.*

Secondly, my analysis points us to look closely at *how* politics is done. Politics as I define it technically in this paper is the normative process of governing a society, including its economy. This understanding of politics places it squarely within a process of collective autonomy, since it is the *society* that must govern itself, and since the norms generated by the process of politics are assumed to express genuine agency (rather than making people conform to what violates their agency). To dispel environmental alienation, we should turn our energy and breath to learning how politics as collective autonomy is actually done. One advantage of doing so is to fill a major gap in Marx's own work, which tended to lean on diagnosis with vague –and violent- utopian proclamations as to what it would be to address his diagnosis practically (Marx and Engels, 2011). Another advantage is to side-step the ideological turf-battles between Marxists and other kinds of democratic citizens and to look instead at what *works* when it comes to collective self-regulation. What really works (Schmidtz and Willott, 2002)? Perhaps we will find ourselves not discussing a destructive revolution but a long, slow,

pragmatic process. Or if we are finding ourselves occupying Wall Street –or Tahrir Square- perhaps we can then turn to what kinds of things we need to know so as to move forward institutionally and to actually regulate our collective life together in a way that expresses our agency. It is still alienated to think that *la beauté est dans la rue* [7] - or that you are changing anything normatively if you storm the U.S. capital and poop on Nancy Pelosi's desk.

Third, the focus of the argument so far moves us away from so-called "ideology critique" (Vogel, 1996; Vogel and Bendik-Keymer, 2024) toward civic education, legal education, apprenticeship in important social institutions and character formation. If alienation from the environment is at bottom a deficit of political know-how, then the thing to do is not to go around unmasking the effects of ideology –something that generates tremendous door-stops of books in popularized versions of intellectual culture (e.g., Zizek, 2012) [8]. Rather, it is to learn how one's society works *at the level of its norms* –the mechanisms of its government at different levels, the society's laws and their legislation, and the cross-cutting power of major social institutions to affect the fabric of norms that actually guide or disorganize collective life (cf. Tuckman, 2012). Secondly, it is to learn what it takes as a person to work with others cooperatively, dealing with people one doesn't like, learning to explain one's reasons in terms of many different viewpoints, listening to views one takes to be antithetical in order to find the grain of practical truth in them, and so on. Or it is to learn how much patience, perseverance, and focus one must have to actually effect a normative change –how many years it can take. One needs some character. All these things can't be done sitting around in one's chair and watching films "critically" (Zizek, 2012; Vogel and Bendik-Keymer, 2024). None of these things admit of easy fixes, and none can be bought with the coin of an "interpretation." We have to do something, and become something, in collective action with others –and to focus on being understanding and effective across the many institutional levels it takes to organize society, over many years. Given the complexity and difficulty of politics, it might even be most helpful –and humble- to see our long-term and cooperative action as an *apprenticeship* [9].

Decades ago, I taught at a "progressive" college whose students were harbingers of the Occupy movement's middle and upper middle class youth contingent. The student culture was also strongly eco-romantic, seeing escape from society in nature as a valuable sanctuary. To many of these students, becoming deeply and pragmatically involved in politics was "selling out." The irony, of course, is that the students thereby kept themselves disempowered. Their

"alienation from nature" was actually alienation from political know-how –and it was a symptom of how desperate and detached from their normative capacity they had become. It was escapism from their own humanity, understood as their own normativity. Precisely and concretely, they were and remained alienated, because they distanced themselves from the know-how that would allow them to engage in collective self-rule.

Even if they had learned to decode "alienation from nature" in terms of "environmental alienation," they still would have remained alienated as long as they focused on the false belief that the system was out of their hands. Rather, they needed to accept -what is accurate- that they *could* participate in politics (these were college educated, middle and upper middle-class youth in a liberal nation state). More importantly, they needed to tarry with the reality that politics requires a great deal of know-how gained painstakingly over time. In this light, until they entered the internship at the World Bank and *left* the forest, they remained alienated. One doesn't have to *agree* with the World Bank's policies to learn from it. Until they *started learning laws*, how we can actually make or unmake them, and stopped dreaming about the critical underside of shopping mall products (Buck-Morss, 1991), they likewise remained disempowered. Poor practical capacity is the killer.

NOTES

[1] Of course, Kant was subtler than Ferry's position. In the "Third Antinomy" of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant (1965) makes it clear that we cannot assert any ontological thesis about ourselves other than that there seems reason to assert both that we are natural beings in the order of natural causes and that we are capable of originating a cause, i.e., of being free, outside the causal chain of nature.

[2] There is no capital "R" in my term, because we are not discussing a historical period.

[3] As I have argued (2005), Cafaro places Thoreau in a vitalist tradition according to which nature is freedom. This would complicate an eco-romantic reading of Cafaro's scholarship. However, since freedom is a political concept grounded in the presence of norms (free-*dominion*), it is unclear how the continuum of life could be free unless it were *our* freedom surrounding it (as in a nature preserve). If Thoreau's vitalism –or my account of Cafaro on Thoreau- cannot resist this criticism, we are left with a reading according to which getting back into nature is, once again, in line with eco-Romanticism and its equivocation, since we are then both "natural" and "alienated from nature."

[4] A terrorist cell could act together; a group of highly invested millionaires also could; a religious group might as well. Unless these groups act *so as to change the norms of the economy*, they may obstruct the economy but will not change it *as a system*.

[5] Although Vogel (2012) is cited as a later version of Vogel (2011b), there is a substantial shift from production to politics, which my current argument wants to push into the open. However, even with this shift and Vogel's (2012) mention of the practical demands of collective action, Vogel's view still remains mired in these papers in the Marxist orthodoxy according to which environmental alienation is a failure of *poiesis*, not *praxis*. The cost of this is not to see the practical demands of dissolving our alienation from the normative: it is to leave the issue hanging in mid-air without a clear diagnosis or practical response. It is, ironically, to *displace* alienation, not to address it. Vogel (2015) shifts the emphasis somewhat more toward deliberative *practice* and so closer to the direction for which I am arguing, but the deliberation still presents at the level of the text as eerily deinstitutionalized and lacking in practical capacity within actually existing institutions. I do not believe that this is his intent, however, and hence frame this paper's criticism as a friendly and constructive one.

[6] The characterization of economy in the preceding paragraph is of course very general and incomplete. The reason for it being so is that my argument needs to extract our relation to the normative in our relation to economy and thereby to our socially constructed environment. All I need to pick out is the way economies are bound by norms, a point not exclusive to economies, of course, but relevant to deepening Vogel's line of work.

[7] A popular expression in the 1968 French student uprisings. Since these uprisings have become normative for twenty-first century anti-globalization politics such as the Occupy movement, the expression has more than historical relevance.

[8] Literally: 1000 pages of "ideology critique" with little pragmatic focus; indeed, the rhetorical frame of the book is a one-night stand!

[9] How different this would be than the apprenticeship self-promoted by Donald Trump's TV show from 2000s and 2010s.

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