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THE PROBLEM OF FINDING A POSITIVE ROLE FOR HUMANS IN THE NATURAL WORLD

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As necessary as it obviously is, the effort of "wilderness preservation" has too often implied that it is enough to save a series of islands of pristine and uninhabited wilderness in an otherwise exploited, damaged, and polluted land. And, further, that the pristine wilderness is the only alternative to exploitation and abuse. So far, the moral landscape of the conservation movement has tended to be a landscape of extremes. . . . On the one hand we have the unspoiled wilderness, and on the other hand we have scenes of utter devastation—strip mines, clear-cuts, industrially polluted wastelands, and so on. We wish, say the conservationists, to have more of the one, and less of the other. To which, of course, one must say amen. But it must be a qualified amen, for the conservationist's program has been embarrassingly incomplete. Its picture of the world as either deserted landscape or desertified landscape has misrepresented both the world and humanity. If we are to have an accurate picture of the world, even in its present diseased condition, we must interpose between the unused landscape and the misused landscape a landscape that humans have used well.

Wendell Berry (1995, 64)

INTRODUCTION

If one wants to identify what has gone wrong with humans' relationship to the natural world, there is probably no better place to look than in Eric Katz's (1997) fine collection of essays, *Nature as Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Community*.¹ Many key insights for understanding our disastrous attitudes toward nature can be found in this compilation of twenty years of merciless criticism of anthropocentrism. Katz's articulation of the source of our moral obligations to nature is deeply on target: Nature is a subject owed moral concern fundamentally because of its independence from humanity and its autonomy from human domination and control.

What cannot be found in *Nature as Subject* is a vision of a positive role for humanity in the natural world. My worry is that Katz's views about the value of nature and our obligations to it leave no room for such an account. I fear that Katz's conceptualization of how humans have wronged nature may entail that *all* human activity toward nature wrongs nature. This would undermine the possibility of envisioning an environmentally just future in which humans live in the natural world in a morally appropriate way. This is a serious problem, because environmental philosophy needs an ethic for the use of nature, as well as for its nonuse. We need a vision of a constructive human relationship with nature, in addition to a characterization of our past failures of relationship. The question I pose is whether Katz's ideas allow for an account of how humans can be flourishing members who contribute to natural community.

This is a problem not just for Eric Katz, but for all of us who accept a broadly preservationist environmental philosophy. If one believes that natural value is fundamentally a function of nature's autonomy from humanity and that a major goal of environmentalism should be to preserve nature relatively uninfluenced by humans, one will have to work hard to explain what positive role humans might have in nature. The alternatives of either minimizing human influence on nature, or sacrificing natural value for human goods, fail to provide for such a positive role. Katz's conceptualization of these matters brings out this problem poignantly. After a brief characterization of the wealth of ideas in *Nature as Subject*, I will explore this difficulty in some detail. In explaining why this is a problem for Katz and in exploring ways he can avoid it, I hope to set a path that preservationist environmental philosophers can follow if they are to develop a positive vision of humans' place in nature.

A SKETCH OF KATZ'S POSITION

Katz defends a nonanthropocentric, holist, and communal environmental philosophy that treats nature as a direct subject of moral concern. He argues that "human desires, interests, or experiences cannot be the source of moral obligations to protect the environment. . . . [because they] are only contingently related to the continued existence of wild nature as such" (74). Anthropocentric defenses of nature preservation are easily subverted when human interests or technologies change and thus a secure philosophical foundation for environmental protection requires direct moral obligations to nature.²

Nature is a subject for Katz because it has "its own processes and history of development independent of human intervention and activity" (115–16). Nature's autonomy from humans, its freedom to pursue its own independent and unplanned course of development, gives nature a moral claim on us that Katz identifies as "*the call of the wild*" (117). In contrast to human artifacts that are a mere means to human ends, "natural entities, existing apart from human projects, can be considered as ends-in-themselves" (129). For Katz, nature is a subject of moral concern whose self-realization can be subverted by human domination.

Katz maintains that it is natural systems themselves rather than the individuals in them that ought to receive primary moral concern. Individualistic environmental ethics tend to limit moral standing to sentient or living beings, and an adequate environmental ethic must capture environmentalist intuitions about the value of nonliving natural entities, species, processes, and systems. Individualism also cannot account for the special importance of rare or endangered species: "Individuals qua individuals are never rare or endangered—any individualist criterion of moral value . . . would apply equally to members of both endangered and plentiful species" (53).

Katz does believe, however, that individuals are morally important. His eco-holism is communal rather than organismic, because organismic holism fails to properly account for the value of the individuals in ecosystems. Rather than being parts of an organism whose value is reduced to their instrumental contribution to the whole, Katz argues that the individuals in ecosystems are members of a community and have some autonomy, independence, and value separate from their community roles. Katz's communitarian ethic thus attributes intrinsic value to both the com-

munity as such and to its individual members. While organismic eco-holism provides no constraints on sacrificing individuals for the sake of the whole, Katz thinks his communal eco-holism helps to “soften the revolutionary character of an environmental ethic that considers the ecosystemic good superior to the good of human individuals; . . . natural individuals (including humans) will not be excluded from direct moral consideration” (26).

Still, Katz takes the value of community as primary and he weights it over the secondary value of its members as follows: “As long as the welfare of the community is not at stake, individual natural entities—including animals—must be protected. . . . [they] cannot be harmed unless there is an overriding and serious need on the part of the entire natural community” (28). Katz’s apparent denial of human superiority over other community members (185–6) shows that he does not weaken the radical flavor of eco-holism all that much. Katz takes his communitarian model of environmental ethics seriously: “For me, the focus of moral concern and the determination of moral value must lie in the idea and concrete existence of community. It is within communities that we perceive and acknowledge moral obligations and relationships” (171).

For Katz, origins are central in assessing meaning and value in environmental ethics because they determine the application of his key concepts of artifact and naturalness. Katz argues that human artifacts “stand in a necessary *ontological* relationship with human purpose” (122). In contrast, the ‘natural’ “is a term we use to designate objects and processes that exist as far as possible from human manipulation and control” (104). Thus in determining natural value, Katz has us focus on whether or not humans were involved in the genesis of an entity. On his view, human involvement turns a (once) natural entity into a human artifact, significantly altering its character and value. Thus Katz accepts the idea that domesticated animals are artifacts. “They are,” he says, “. . . living artifacts to be sure, but they are no more natural than the wooden table I am using to write this essay” (85–86). It is well-known that Katz also considers restored ecosystems to be artifacts. Katz argues that “the imposition of human plans—human ideals, goals, and designs—converts natural processes into human artifacts. The natural environment cannot be redesigned or restored and remain natural” (93). Thus environmental restoration is “the big lie,” making us feel good about healing nature when fundamentally “a ‘restored’ nature is . . . an unrecognized manifestation of the insidious

dream of the human domination of nature” (95). Rather than making nature whole again, nature restoration is like “putting a piece of furniture over the stain in the carpet” (106).

THE PROBLEM: NO POSSIBILITY OF A BENIGN HUMAN ROLE IN NATURE

There is a great deal to be said in favor of Katz’s nonanthropocentric, communal eco-holism, particularly its chief insight that nature’s value is rooted in its autonomy from human domination. But I worry that Katz’s characterization of natural value and of how humans subvert nature’s integrity may not allow for appropriate human involvement with nature or use of it. According to Katz, “the primary goal of Western civilization, especially Western science and technology, has been the control and domination of nature for the promotion of human benefit—the human imperialism over nature” (138). This is fair enough (and important) as a diagnosis of past practice. But Katz’s characterization of the human/nature relationship suggests that *any* human use of nature is abusive. In introducing his book, he says, “When humans shape and manipulate the natural world to meet their own interests, to satisfy their desires, it is a form of anthropocentric domination, the oppression and denial of the autonomy of nature” (xxiv). But humans, like other species, *must* shape the natural world to meet their own interests. Human survival, much less human flourishing, requires this. Katz’s language suggests that humans—by their very nature—dominate, oppress, and subvert the autonomy of nature.

In an essay first published in 1995, “Imperialism and Environmentalism,” Katz writes, “it is the basic policy of human civilization—even where that policy is unarticulated—to modify or to conquer the natural world, to subdue Nature for the furtherance of human good” (138). But if treating nature as subject means avoiding subjugating nature, and if civilization involves such oppression, then respecting nature would seem to require us to jettison civilization and live in wilderness. In “Judaism and the Ecological Crisis,” Katz characterizes nonanthropocentric reasons for preserving nature in this manner. He writes, “the nonanthropocentric intrinsic value perspective implies a policy of strict nonintervention in natural processes, an absolute sanctity of nature” (217). Is Katz committed to the idea that nonanthropocentric ethics opposes any human alteration of nature, because this interferes with and thwarts nature’s autonomy? Is he advocating what has been called a policy of human/nature apartheid based on the idea

that, as Stanley Kane (1994, 71) puts it, "nature can be fully itself and thus have full value only when left undisturbed by human beings"?

Such a view is vulnerable to powerful currents in contemporary environmental thought attacking what many see as an overemphasis on nature as wilderness. Environmental historian William Cronon (1995, 44), for example, argues that "Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves no place in which human beings can actually make their living from the land." An adequate environmental philosophy must allow that human beings belong on the planet too, and it must articulate how it is possible for us to respect nature while continuing to be human. We need to conceive of a constructive human/nature relationship that allows us, as John Visvader (1996, 18) says, to "imagine giving more to the world around us than the gift of our mere absence."

What is needed if humans are to have something other than a purely negative and harmful role with respect to nature is a distinction between human alteration of nature and human domination of nature. We need to conceive of certain types of human uses of nature as not abusive. Modification and alteration of nature need to be distinguished from controlling and dominating nature. Although Katz at times makes these distinctions (e.g., 144), overall, his writing systematically glosses over such distinctions and some of his language suggests that he cannot accept them at all. For example, in "The Call of the Wild," Katz writes, "In the context of environmental philosophy, domination is the anthropocentric alteration of natural processes" because "the entities and systems that comprise nature are not permitted to be free, to pursue their own independent and unplanned course of development" (115). Thus human alteration of nature for human purposes appears to be ipso facto domination of nature.

Katz's strongly negative reaction to suggestions that humans might alter nature in benign ways or for nature's own benefit (rather than solely for human benefit) illustrates his tendency to equate human alteration and modification of nature with domination and the thwarting of nature's autonomy. Consider his reaction to one discussion of sustainable forestry. While giving Chris Maser (1988) a rough time for some of the mechanistic language in his book, *The Redesigned Forest*, Katz writes, "The goal of sustainable forests are to create forests that best suit human purposes. These forests are artifacts, designed and developed for a human function, *even in*

the limiting case where the sole purpose of the creation of the forest was the replication of the natural" (126, emphasis added). But one might use nature as a pattern in sustainable forestry out of respect for nature, not to control it. The goals of sustainable forestry might include benefit to wildlife and preserving biodiversity for its own sake, in addition to a sustained production of timber. Such alterations of nature need not be viewed as attempts at domination of nature.

In an essay first published in 1985, Katz worries about substituting functionally equivalent exotics for natural species and writes, "human modifications harm the intrinsic value of entities contained within natural systems . . . [they] have intrinsic value (among other reasons) by virtue of their existence in a *natural* world. Forcing these entities to conform to a human ideal, a human value, of what nature ought to be, would harm this intrinsic value. Thus, the modification of natural systems—even when the result is an increase in systemic well-being—is a violation of the intrinsic value of natural entities" (45). In conversation, Katz has thrown cold water on the idea that human activities might in some way benefit nature or increase natural value. To be sure, there is a need to resist many alleged human improvements of nature—as in the above case of replacing natives with exotics that enhance ecosystem health. But doing so by defining human alteration of nature as itself degradation will not allow humans who want to be respectful of nature to interact with it at all. Activities such as birdwatching from a distance would seem to be the extent of allowable interaction on this account of respecting nature.

RESTORATION AND ARTIFACTS

Katz's well-known and powerful attack on the restoration of nature best illustrates his skepticism toward the possibility of benign human alteration of nature. Here we find two tendencies in Katz's thought that underlie his vulnerability to the problem of finding a positive role for humans in nature. One is his tendency to rigidly dichotomize the natural/artifactual distinction and overlook his own admission that the difference admits of degrees. The second tendency is to assimilate all human intentions and purposes toward nature to anthropocentric attempts at domination and control of nature. Katz must back away from these tendencies if he is to allow for a positive vision of humans in nature.

To understand Katz's conception of restored natural systems, we must first grasp the central role the artifactual/natural distinction plays in his

thought. In “Artifact and Function: A Note on the Value of Nature” (121–32)—an essay I believe to be his theoretically most sophisticated and important—Katz builds on some of Andrew Brennan’s (1984, 1988) ideas and argues that the essence of a natural entity is that it is intrinsically functionless. Natural entities, including individual organisms, species, ecosystems, and abiotic natural objects were not designed for a purpose. (In order to avoid objections about natural artifacts such as beaver dams, I would modify his claim and say that natural entities—in so far as they are natural—are not designed by humans.) Natural entities do not exist to serve humans; they were not created as a mere means for human ends. This lack of human design gives these entities an independence from humanity that grounds their natural value. In contrast, human artifacts are intrinsically functional. They were designed to fulfill a (human) purpose and they exist to serve this function; they are a means to human ends.³ Because human artifacts lack the requisite independence from humanity, they lack natural value.

Human restorations of nature, Katz points out, are designed to fulfill a human purpose.⁴ Katz believes that they are intrinsically functional beings and are appropriately characterized as artifacts that lack natural value. In “The Big Lie,” Katz writes, “the re-created natural environment that is the end result of a restoration project is *nothing more* than an artifact created for human use” (97, emphasis added) and although “these restored and redesigned natural areas will appear more or less natural . . . they will *never be* natural” (98, emphasis added). Katz insists that even “benign’ and minimal intervention compromises the natural integrity of the system being restored” (101). He continues, “Once we dominate nature, once we restore and redesign nature for our own purposes, then we have destroyed nature—we have created an artifactual reality . . . which merely provides us the pleasant illusory appearance of the natural environment” (105).

Katz concludes “The Big Lie” by insisting that he is not arguing for leaving exploited ecosystems in their damaged state. Instead, his point is to guard against the delusion that human attempts at restoration can make such ecosystems whole again. But given his analysis of the nature of restoration, it is not at all clear Katz is entitled to support restoration of any sort. If restoration really amounts to dominating nature by turning it into an artifact, would it not be best to leave degraded nature alone after our exploitation? Katz’s analysis of restoration would seem to imply that we

ought to let degraded nature come back on its own, rather than further dominating nature by trying to restore it.

Katz’s account of how we should evaluate restored nature suggests that *any* human involvement in nature, no matter how minor and no matter how morally praiseworthy the intent, turns that part or dimension of nature into an artifact and thus undermines its natural value. The mere human touch so stains nature that it loses its autonomy and natural value. This account subverts attempts to morally distinguish between restoration projects that really amount to domination and control of nature for anthropocentric purposes, and acts of restoration whose purpose is repentance and that seek to rehabilitate nature so it can once again flourish on its own.

Katz is of course right that both types of projects are the result of human purposes. But the differences in the content of the human purposes involved must be taken into account. In one case, the purpose is to benefit humans, in the other, it is to benefit nonhuman nature. Characterizing both purposes as “anthropocentric” conflates the source of the purpose with its content: That something is a human purpose does not mean it aims to benefit humans. Katz writes that “human progress is the purpose of all human activity” (139). But human moral progress in our dealings with nature is not anthropocentric in any sense that conflicts with respect for nature. A nonanthropocentric outlook seeks to cultivate the human purpose of healing our relationship with nature and living in partnership with it. One way to begin this healing process is to practice appropriate nature restoration. If we are to find room for a positive role for humans in nature, we must distinguish between human purposes that respect nature and those that do not.

Katz might respond by allowing that certain attempts at restoration may have good intentions and nature-respecting motivations but continue to insist that the results are nevertheless anthropocentric artifacts and equally so; as products of human intentions and purposes they are devoid of natural value. Katz has suggested that there is a kind of “epistemic imperialism” of humans over nature whereby natural objects become infused with human purpose. It is as if once a natural entity becomes enveloped in human intentions or purposes that by itself is sufficient to render it an artifact devoid of natural value. But this gives human intention far too much power in determining the meaning and value of nature. Clearly the mere existence of human purpose toward a natural object does not turn it

into an artifact: Human purpose is implicated in the existence of designated wilderness areas, for example, but that does not mean they are appropriately characterized as human artifacts devoid of natural value.

Additionally, human purposes are involved in restoration projects that successfully lessen human influence on natural systems. Attempts to restore a river by removing a dam involve human purposes, but the result is a lessening of human interference in the affairs of the river, not increased domination. The stain of human involvement may not be entirely washed away by this attempted restoration, but the river is now far less an artificial ecosystem than it was when the river levels and the fish migrations were under human control. Sometimes additional human involvement in nature can reduce the ongoing effects of earlier human involvement and when this is so, the result is a natural system that is more autonomous, wild, and free from humans.⁵ Such human involvement with nature is not additional domination of nature, but nature respecting.

We can begin to avoid these difficulties without abandoning Katz's central insight that nature's value is importantly a function of its independence from humanity and its autonomy from human domination and control by emphasizing that human influence comes in degrees and by avoiding treating the natural/artificial distinction as a rigid dichotomy. Katz himself makes this point persuasively when he says in "The Big Lie" that "the concepts of 'natural' and 'artificial' are not absolutes; they exist along a spectrum, where various graduations of both concepts can be discerned" (104). Thus we can make distinctions between types of restored landscapes based on their degree of naturalness. We need not—as Katz's language so often suggests—see restored landscapes—or any other phenomenon altered by human purposes—as thereby becoming purely artificial and devoid of natural value. At the extremes, it surely makes sense to think of things as artifacts or natural entities without qualification: Tables are artifacts and asteroids are natural entities. But for things that fall in between these extremes, placing them in one of these categories can distort as much as it can illuminate our understanding and evaluation of them. Katz's characterization of restored ecosystems as artifacts is such a mixture of illumination and distortion.

Human interventions into and modifications of nature do not render natural entities into artifacts in the same way and to the degree that tables are artifacts. Even natural entities significantly shaped by humans do not become purely artificial. Biological nature continues to operate in fun-

damental ways in cultivated flowers, gardens, farm fields, and domestic animals, and this gives these entities some independence and autonomy from the human purposes to which they are put. There is a difference between shaping living things to use them for human purposes and actually creating and using an inanimate tool. Many characteristics of domesticated animals have been selected to suit human purposes, but these animals have purposes of their own (e.g., the avoidance of pain), as well as original biological tendencies, and thus they are not entirely artificial and unnatural. A cow is much more of a natural entity than a table, though more artificial than a wildebeest. To what extent restored landscapes are artificial depends upon how greatly and tightly they are molded, dependent upon, and controlled by humans. For example, restoring a longleaf pine savannah by periodic burning creates far less of an artificial reality than does clear cutting the native pines and replacing them with a chemically-managed tree farm of genetically-enhanced loblolly pines.

STRATEGIES TO AVOID THE PROBLEM

The central problem I have been exploring in Katz's work is the failure to allow for a positive role for humans in nature. If Katz is to extricate himself from this problem, he must place at the center of his environmental philosophy the distinction between human alteration and involvement with nature on the one hand, and human domination, control, or thwarting of nature's autonomy on the other. In one of the later essays, "Imperialism and Environmentalism," Katz himself clearly explains what is needed. He asks, "When does intervention become an attempt at domination? After all, humans must eat and grow food, must build houses, roads, cities, must cure disease. Are these all acts of imperialistic domination that are morally suspect?" In reply he says, "Not all interactions are instances of unequal power relationships; to use a biological concept, some actions are symbioses . . . Do we humans seek a balance with nature, a type of partnership, or a power relationship of control and domination? Are our agricultural processes, for example, organic, working with natural processes, or are they highly technological, seeking control through artificial fertilizers and pesticides?" (144).

I have identified several resources to help answer this question of how appropriate human involvement in nature is possible while still fundamentally valuing nature for its independence from humanity and its autonomy from human domination and control. First, we must acknowledge that

human purposes in altering nature can be nature respecting and need not be purely anthropocentric in an instrumental sense. This will allow humans to use nature as a means without necessarily using it as a *mere* means. Our use of nature need not be devoid of respect and concern for its flourishing, just as our use of other humans need not be devoid of respect for them. This is the kind of partnership relationship between humans and nature of which Katz speaks.

Second, we must allow that human alteration of nature—although subtracting from natural value in an important respect and to a certain degree—need not render the result a purely artifactual reality devoid of natural value. If human alteration of nature for human purposes did necessarily result in such an artifactual reality, it would be hard to avoid seeing human interaction with nature as domination of nature.

We should also accept the idea that although independence from humanity may be a root value of nature (at least in the context of today's overly humanized planet), it is not the only reason that we value nature. If nature's independence from humanity were the only reason we valued nature, then any human involvement with nature would automatically degrade nature to some degree (except for restorations of nature that lessen ongoing human impacts). If human involvement did necessarily degrade natural value, a symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship with nature would not be possible.

Fortunately, we should and do value nature not only for its independence from humanity, but also in virtue of other characteristics, including its diversity, beauty, stability, and complexity. Because of this, human involvement with nature could contribute to nature's value—say its beauty or diversity—even while diminishing its independence from humanity. For example, although planting flower gardens, domesticating animals, and creating the rural landscape all lessen nature's independence from humanity, perhaps we can see them as contributing to nature's value in terms of its beauty and diversity. If so, human interaction with nature can be a mutually beneficial relationship and need not result in overall degradation of natural value.

Furthermore, it is important to focus on the *scale* of human use of nature. For example, it would be foolish to suggest that the scale of the use of nature on the North American continent by Native American peoples constituted an attempt at domination of nature in the same sense in which modern western culture attempts to dominate North American nature. In

addition, even significant human technological control and management of nature on a local scale would not constitute domination of nature on a global scale. Katz's domination of nature language has great moral power in the current context because humans are massively manipulating nature around the globe. Clearing woods for farm fields and to build human homes does not in itself constitute the domination of nature. But another clearing of another wooded area for another subdivision in the context of today's exploding human population and incredibly inefficient land use is part of an overall pattern that does amount to an attempt to dominate nature. Human uses of nature that do not subvert nature's autonomy when practiced at an appropriate scale become nature-domineering when practiced on a massive and global scale.

Finally, we need an analysis of the concept of nature's autonomy that will allow for human involvement with nature that does not thwart nature's autonomy. Nature's autonomy need not be compromised by human involvement, just as a person's autonomy need not be compromised by the involvement of others. Katz's suggestion that nature's autonomy consists in its self-unfolding totally separate from any human involvement severely limits the possibility of a positive role for humans in the natural world. We must distinguish nature's absolute independence from humanity from its autonomy from human domination and control. Although human involvement with nature diminishes its independence from us, this need not lessen nature's autonomy. By valuing nature's autonomy from human domination (and not just its independence from humanity), we allow for certain types of human involvement with nature that preserve a fundamental value of nature.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that Katz's perceptive characterization of the failure of the human relationship with nature makes it difficult to conceive of how humans might have a positive role in the natural world. His diagnosis of this failure suggests that all human uses of nature are abusive and it intimates that the ideal is a human/nature apartheid with minimum human involvement with nature. Katz can begin to work himself free of this problem by giving up his rigid natural/artifactual dichotomy, by emphasizing degrees of naturalness, and by focusing on the distinction between human alteration and human domination of nature. Paying attention to the scale of human modifications of nature and granting the existence of nonan-

thropocentric reasons for altering nature are important as well. Conceiving of a constructive human relationship with nature will also be made easier by acknowledging that although independence from humanity is a root value of nature, there are other valuable dimensions of nature as well. Human involvement with these dimensions need not degrade them and may even positively contribute to them. Finally, once we distinguish human involvement with nature from human domination of it, we will be able to conceive of a positive role for humans in nature that need not thwart nature's autonomy.

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NOTES

1. All otherwise unattributed page references are to Katz's 1997 collection of essays, *Nature as Subject*.
2. Katz's views have been significantly influenced by Krieger (1973). Krieger argues that nothing is wrong with plastic trees or with other simulations of nature. Human welfare is often best served by creating artificial environments and getting people to value them, rather than preserving natural environments. Thus the anthropocentric defense of nature preservation will often fail.
3. Some things that humans produce, such as waste piles along the roadside, are not intentionally produced and thus would not be considered artifacts under this definition.
4. This does not by itself make them artifacts. Katz admits that human design is not sufficient to render something an artifact, for human infants are the product of human design, but they are not artifacts.
5. For a development of this point, see Hettinger and Throop (1999).

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