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**Locating the Boundaries: Humans, Nature, and God in Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature***

In *The End of Nature*, Bill McKibben warns the reader against the hazardous effects of climate change. Yet for whom or what, exactly, does the danger lie? According to the argument in *The End of Nature*, there are two possible answers to this question: humans and non-human nature.<sup>1</sup> McKibben is clear that climate change presents a danger to members of both of these categories; nevertheless, he also claims that the very idea of climate change compromises the integrity of the categories as independently existing entities. There are many ways in which the danger for humans and nature is one and the same – damage to the natural world on the scale of global warming affects humans physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Further, according to McKibben, the very idea that humans can alter the atmosphere, and therefore the weather, collapses the distinction between the categories altogether, and it is in this collapse that McKibben locates the greatest danger. The danger is a metaphysical one: the loss of the idea of an independently existing nature robs us of the comfort that comes with the notion that there is something that transcends us. It is ultimately for the sake of this comfort that McKibben argues, borrowing from deep ecology, that nature should be valued *independently* of human life. Ultimately, however, he provides no reason for valuing nature in and of itself other than human peace of mind; ultimately, human and natural

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<sup>1</sup> McKibben uses “nature” to refer to that which lies outside of the human. For the purposes of this paper, I will follow McKibben and use “nature” in this way, while recognizing that this way of characterizing nature may in itself be problematic.

ends cannot be disentangled. The result is that McKibben is unclear about when humans should be thought of as distinct from nature, both as entities and ends, and when humans and nature should be taken as one and the same. It is possible that the confusion over how, why, and when to draw the line between the human and the natural results from an error in McKibben's thinking, from the presupposition that humans and nature could ever be thought of and valued independently of one another. But it is also possible that the difficulty reflects a deep paradox that lies at the heart of today's secular, technological age.

McKibben presents two ways of thinking of the relationship between humans and nature: the way this relationship is and the way it ought to be. As for the way it is, nature has ended - there is no longer such a thing as a nature that exists independently of the human. Yet if McKibben could have his way, nature *would* exist as something on which humans can rely and over which we have no control. McKibben believes the notion that humans have dominion over nature is undesirable: humans shouldn't play God. Yet he also underscores how the impact of greenhouse gases on the Earth's atmosphere has demonstrated that we *can* dominate nature and we *have* been playing God. What is – the frightening extent of human power – does not line up with what ought to be – human dependence on something grander than ourselves. Is it possible transform the 'is' into the 'ought', to willfully surrender our power over nature and allow it to exist in its own right? McKibben draws on deep ecology to suggest that perhaps, by treating nature as valuable in and of itself, this transformation could be achieved. Yet although the idea that nature is intrinsically valuable is on many levels appealing, McKibben gives no reason for adopting this posture other than the fact that any alternative is upsetting. Further, even if

we do decide not to fully exercise our power over nature, the potential for doing so can never be eradicated. Thus, it is unclear how nature, as existing and valuable independently of humans, could ever be anything more than an ideal.

In order to avoid these difficulties, McKibben often appeals to religious language and ideas, although he never actually takes a theological stand. He writes: “Many people, including me, have overcome [the crisis of belief] to a greater or lesser degree by locating God in nature” (61). If nature is identical with God, the problem of the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’ disappears: nature is valuable in and of itself because it is sacred, and it can provide metaphysical comfort as something that transcends humans because, well, that’s what God does. Yet, because McKibben does not actually discuss theology, his argument for the identity of God and nature is based on pragmatics and not on any rigorous theological foundation. Ultimately, the is/ought problem remains, for he suggests that nature ‘ought’ to be divine, not that it ‘is’. And if God is dead, can we resurrect Him simply because we need Him? Is desire enough to turn an ‘ought’ into an ‘is’?

In many ways, McKibben’s argument needs some notion of the divine in order to function, for God gives content to both the idea that nature is intrinsically valuable and to the possibility that nature could provide us with metaphysical comfort. Yet, at the same time, McKibben cannot argue directly from a religious standpoint, for he seeks to engage a largely secular, scientifically-minded audience. McKibben simply borrows the language of religious discourse without committing himself to the belief system that underlies it. For example, when discussing the intrinsic value of nature, he often refers to it in terms of creation: “What is at stake is less the shape of our own lives than the very

practical question of the lives of all the other species and the creation they together constitute”(183). This religious language may appeal to many readers, especially those who are to some degree religious. But it may also alienate other, more atheistic readers. For, if a reader does not accept the divinity that McKibben finds in nature, on what grounds should she accept his ethics? Even if the content of McKibben’s values appeals to an atheistic reader, the religious resonances of his arguments are potentially alienating.

Such problems plague any discussion of ethics in an intellectual climate that has no room for theology. For can anything be meaningful without God? From a secular standpoint, is it possible to find meaning and value without reverting to a belief system that, well, one doesn’t believe in? And if not, is meaningless something we have to embrace if we are to be honest with ourselves, or else something that we ought to fight against? McKibben is unable to make his case for an environmental ethics without recourse to language of the divine. But would a truly secular environmentalism even be possible? The questions abound. McKibben makes a convincing case for the imminent danger of climate change, and his call for a move toward a more sustainable lifestyle – to actively choose to interfere with nature as little as possible – is on many levels satisfying. Yet the distinction he draws between humans and nature is problematic, largely because he provides no satisfactory way of reconciling the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’ of this distinction. Further, he presents innumerable challenges for a reader who possesses no religious belief.