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Making the City 'Second Nature':
Freegans 'Dumpster Divers' and Moral Reconciliation in Urban Life*

Abstract

How do people reconcile deeply held moral beliefs with social environments they find hostile to those beliefs? Cultural and political sociologists have long focused on how individuals cope with hostile environments by building supportive networks and embedding themselves in communities of like-minded people. In this paper, I draw on Durkheim to show how actors can also create moral harmony and stability through a direct relationship to the physical environment and non-human objects. I show how, in one community of radical environmental activists called "freegans", this moral reconciliation is created in a seemingly unnatural, immoral, and unsustainable urban landscape through a re-ordering of the physical world that enables them to see their urban lives as "natural." This work calls attention to role of non-human objects in affirming moral beliefs, creating moral communities, and maintaining moral boundaries, as well as the contradictory and constraining role of morality in social life.

Keywords: morality, environmental sociology, nature, freeganism, waste, urban space, materiality, Durkheim, social movements

Introduction

How do people reconcile deeply held moral values—the individual and cultural codes that "specify what is right or wrong, good or bad, or acceptable or unacceptable" (Stets and Carter 2012:122)—with life in contexts that make living in accordance with those values difficult? Urban ethnographers have a long tradition of exploring how members of poor and racialized groups reconstruct their moral worlds in the face of hostile circumstances (E. Anderson 2003; Duneier 1999; Liebow 2003), but the question has broader relevance. Migrants, for example, must adapt to new contexts they find to be both unfamiliar and, often, immoral (Jerolmack 2007). Political activists, too, must reconcile a desire to *change* society with the need to survive, day-to-day, within a social world in which most people do not share their worldviews.

This article examines how actors achieve "moral reconciliation"—a stable sense of living a moral life even in the face of intractable contradictions between individual values and social environment—through an ethnographic case study of "freegans" in New York City.[1] Freeganism is a growing anti-capitalist movement in the United States and Western Europe whose participants attempt to dramatize the unsustainability and excesses of mass consumerism through minimizing their participation in the mainstream economy and living off its waste.[2] Freegans are best known for publically "dumpster diving" and redistributing discarded food

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[1] Scholars have now published on freegan communities in New York, Oregon, and Australia (Barnard 2011; Edwards and Mercer 2007; Gross 2009; Lindeman 2012); the author has identified freegan communities in the United States, Brazil, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Norway, Sweden, Austria, Greece, and Poland. One freegan group, freegan.info, claims that over three-thousand media stories have been published about the group in the last decade, and that its e-mail lists have several thousand subscribers.

[2] According to the website freegan.info, "Freegans are people who employ alternative strategies for living based on limited participation in the conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources. Freegans embrace community, generosity, social concern, freedom, cooperation, and sharing in opposition to a society based on materialism, moral apathy, competition, conformity, and greed."

outside of supermarkets (Barnard 2011), but freegan practices also include "squatting" in abandoned buildings, creating and repairing bicycles and clothing from discarded parts, and eschewing paid employment for full-time activism. Freeganism is a small manifestation of larger currents in radical social movement organizing, combining the performative, symbolic attacks on capitalism of the alter-globalization movement (Della Porta 2007; Graeber 2009; Juris 2008) with an extreme concern for the environmental and ethical impacts of everyday practices drawn from animal liberation, fair-trade, and ethical consumer movements (Haydu and Kadanoff 2010; Johnston 2008; Pichardo Almanzar, Sullivan-Catlin, and Deane 1998).[3]

Although freegans are ideologically heterogeneous—some described themselves as anarchists while others evinced a more reformist critique of capitalism's excesses—nearly all claim that their activism is geared towards making humanity live more "naturally". Jason, a tall, muscular white freegan in his mid-twenties, explained:

> My vision is that eventually we live in a world where we don't have any of this modern technology. Live with the land, on the land, and everything we get comes from nature. Civilization is fundamentally, inherently crazy and unsustainable, and eventually it exhausts itself. I think we can be mature, responsible beings, but still be wild animals. That's what other animals on the planet do, why should we be any different?

To him, electronics, processed food, and wage-labor all represent barriers to an appropriately natural existence. Jason's vision of freeganism thus harkens to the "back-to-the-land" communes and "voluntary simplicity" movements that flourished in the 1960s (see, e.g., Belasco

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[3] The linkages between freeganism and other contemporary social movements are further highlighted by the fact that many of my freegan informants were among the first participants in Occupy Wall Street's encampment in September 2011. Freegans said that they helped the encampment survive by dumpster-diving food before donations rendered doing so unnecessary.

2007; Berger 1981; Case and Taylor 1979; Jacob 1997), except in one key respect: freeganism is an almost entirely urban phenomenon.[4]

This is surprising, because the urban environment makes withdrawing from capitalism—the ostensible goal of freegan practices—nearly impossible. Despite his stated desire to live outside modernity, for example, Jason continues to work as a film editor—a job he says he loathes—in order to make monthly rent payments. Jason told me that he was fully aware of these contradictions, and blamed them on the fact that he lived in a city that made squatting nearly impossible. He was joined by nearly all the other participants in freegan.info in expressing deep distaste for the urban environment. For all the primacy they give to living in harmony with their surroundings, the relationship between the freegans I studied and their immediate environment—New York City—appears to be one of almost complete disharmony.

One interpretation of this apparent contradiction would be that freegans' moral norms are little more than ad-hoc justifications with little bearing on their actions. Indeed, prominent arguments in cultural sociology have emphasized how frequently peoples' stated values diverge from their actual behavior (Campbell 1996; DiMaggio 1997; Swidler 2001).[5] I take as a starting point, however, recent work that suggests that individuals do need to create an underlying sense of congruence between moral motivations and everyday practices (Vaisey 2009; see also Giddens 1984). Moreover, to constantly and consciously reevaluate our lifestyles vis-à-vis our moral values on a daily basis would be "cognitively overwhelming" (Vaisey 2009:1684).

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[4] In five years of monitoring the freegan-world e-mail list, I have not encountered a single mention of rural freeganism. The one academic account I can find of rural freegans notes that even these freegans frequently go into a nearby city in order to dumpster dive (Gross 2009:61).

[5] To offer one example particularly relevant for this paper, paeans to the "moral" value of preserving the environment have become "almost a cultural constant or norm in western society" (Derksen and Gartrell 1993:434), and yet show only a weak correlation with ecologically-oriented behavior (Castro et al. 2009; Diekmann and Preisendörfer 1998; Pichardo Almanzar, Sullivan-Catlin, and Deane 1998).

Merely documenting contradictions and showing how actors justify them, then, is not enough.

Instead, we must analyze how actors come to *resolve* these conditions, achieving a sense that,

like a "fish in water" (Wacquant and Bourdieu 1992:127), their everyday habitus, values, and

social environment are aligned. In the end, the goal of these processes of "moral reconciliation"

is to make living morally "second nature", something that happens without constant struggle.

How does this moral reconciliation happen? Drawing on the work of Emile Durkheim,

sociologists have focused on how morality is created and sustained through social processes (see

Hitlin and Vaisey 2010). Far less attention has been given to Durkheim's corollary observation:

although morality is derived from society, its power stems from the fact that it is perceived as

extra social, coming from "something greater than us" (1965:257). Hence, we invariably see our

morality as embedded in external entities, such as Gods or abstract concepts like "nature", which

are in turn often represented in physical objects. As I show, non-human objects can thus

function in asserting personal morality, creating moral communities, and drawing moral

boundaries. Yet I argue that, far from simply affirming our morality, our commitment to moral

objects also functions as a form of constraint. In short, morality—usually placed in the realm of

ideals and relationships—can have an important physical dimension.

I make this theoretical point by showing how freegans achieve moral reconciliation in an

otherwise antagonistic city environment through a re-ordering of the physical world. They do so

by repurposing an old American moral code—a celebration of wild nature—and applying to their

own urban lives. As I show, freegans make living morally in the city "second nature" by

reimagining the city itself as natural, treating urban waste as a "natural" resource and themselves

as skilled foragers living in a harsh urban frontier. This is not mere discourse: the physical

properties of urban space, in turn, limit and constrain freegan action, which is precisely what makes this socially-constructed nature into something morally meaningful.

I begin by reviewing the literature on morality and social movements, showing how scholars have emphasized the importance of social interaction in sustaining movement identity over time. Although this argument is drawn from Durkheim, I point out that Durkheim *also* argued that morality—despite originating in society—must be perceived as being outside of it. Morality is thus embedded in physical objects that we see as moral in-and-of themselves and which act back upon us. I use this as the starting point for a discussion of how a recent literature on the social construction of nature can be applied to study moral reconciliation in the city. I then explore freegans' contradictory relationship to urban life. I demonstrate how freegans overcome these contradictions by constructing three different kinds of "nature"—nature as a resource, set of bodily practices, and frontier. I close by suggesting some implications for the study of morality, social movements, and urban environments.

Durkheim and the Materiality of Morality

Social movement scholars have called attention to the way divergent moral worldviews separate pro-life (Jensen 1997; Lakoff 2002; Luker 1985), animal rights (Jasper and Nelkin 1992; Jasper and Poulsen 1995) or anti-biotechnology (Schurman and Munro 2010) activists from the mainstream population. Across a wide range of issues, participants in new culturally- and personally-oriented movements appear as individuals with a strong "moral identity" (Stets and Carter 2012)—that is to say, people whose sense of self is rooted in their capacity to bring their everyday behaviors into line with their moral norms (Melucci 1989; Shepherd 2002; Teske 1997). Yet almost by definition, social movement participants are mobilized by the sense that

the society they live in is in some significant way *immoral*.[6] For political activists, living in agreement with one's values is both critically important and particularly difficult.

Scholars have argued that social movement participants cope with external hostility to their beliefs and challenges to their lifestyles by creating "free spaces" where they interact with others who share their values (Evans and Boyte 1986; Glass 2010; Hirsch 1990; Kellogg 2009). It is primarily through *social* relationships and interpersonal rituals of interaction, then, that the "cultures of solidarity" or collective identities that sustain social movements over time are created and reaffirmed (Moon 2012; O'Hearn 2009; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Szerszynski 2002). Even the "space" in "free space" serves almost exclusively as a proxy for "social ties": Polletta (1999:12) explains that "while physical settings are important to establish or reaffirm social relationships, it is the relations themselves rather than the physical sites that are important in explaining their role in mobilization."[7] This suggests that, in the case of the freegans, we would look for "moral reconciliation" happening in spaces where they are able to shut out the outside world and interact with others who share their anti-capitalist values.

In many respects, this approach to how social movement activists sustain unconventional moral worldviews over time builds on ideas articulated by Emile Durkheim. Although his entire *oeuvre* can be read as one extended engagement with questions of the functions and origins of morality (cf. Abend 2008), the overall thrust is relatively straightforward: moral life is a manifestation of society itself, emerging to constrain atomistic behavior and reaffirm the reality

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[6] Indeed, the desire to transform society to bring it in line with some higher moral principle of justice or fairness is precisely what, for some sociologists, differentiates "social movements" from mere "interest groups" (Turner 1996).

[7] A similar absence of serious discussions of the role of the physical world can be seen in work throughout cultural sociology. Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) talk about situating culture in concrete settings, but never discuss the non-social element of these settings. Similarly, while Emirbayer and Miche (1998:110) assert the importance of "environments" for understanding agency, the environments they refer to are "cultural, social-structural, and social psychological".

of something greater than the individual. As Durkheim himself argued, "moral remaking" occurs "by the means of reunions, assemblies and meetings where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments" (1965:476–477). In short, morality is constructed and sustained through social interaction in response to the needs and exigencies of group life. Commenting on Durkheim's analysis, Bellah (1973:xliii) summarizes, "it is the very intensity of group interaction itself that produces social ideas and ideals and…it is from the warmth of group life that they become compelling and attractive to individuals."

A perspective on morality that focuses exclusively on the immediacy of group interaction, however, struggles to explain how "morals" have any enduring power to shape behavior. Social networks are constantly shifting (see Vaisey and Lizardo 2010), yet morals are supposed to be solid and lasting. Indeed, at the core of Bellah et al. (1985)'s study of individualism and commitment in American life is an insistence that direct, interpersonal interaction between unconstrained individuals cannot sustain a moral community. Instead, true morality—that provides both a clear sense of the ends of life and constraints upon behavior— must be derived from something external to the self and its immediate social milieu. These external forces could be Gods, institutions like the church, or ideals like "civic republicanism". Even if it through social interaction that morality is infused in people, that morality must be traced to something outside of that interaction.[8]

This observation would not come as a surprise to Durkheim; indeed, it was central to his argument in *Elementary Forms*. In his view, although society "exists and lives only in and through individuals" (1965:389), it is only through the *failure* of individuals to recognize this social origin that morality has any effect. As Durkheim explains, the constraints of morality

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[8] This is thus a direct rejoinder to those who see morality as existing purely within interaction (see Turowetz and Maynard 2010)

"give men the idea that outside themselves there exists one or several powers, both moral and, at the same time, efficacious, upon which they depend. They must think of these powers, at least in part, as outside themselves" (1965:239). While morality comes from society, then, it derives its strength from the perception that it is *not* a product of human action or thought, but instead comes from "something greater than us" (1965:257).

It is from this necessary yet paradoxical interplay of the social and non-social in moral life that Durkheim's conception of totems—objects that represent the moral community and are the focal point of moral practices—originates. Actors make totems out of the desire to represent the impersonal social forces that they as acting upon them. Thus, although totems are "the source of the moral life of the clan" (1965:219), they are nonetheless always, in part, tied to something *outside* the clan, such as wild animals (1965:87). Totems are not just external outgrowths of moral life, though. Society "cannot be assembled all the time" (Durkheim 1965:391), so totems serve to remind the individual of his or her moral obligations to the collective even when that individual is outside of the social context from which those obligations originated. It is through rituals around the totem that moral communities are constituted, and totems mark the boundaries between different communities (Durkheim 1965:194). Consequently, the religious forces Durkheim describes are "physical as well as human, moral as well as material" (1965:254).

Although Durkheim was focused on *religious* practices, his argument can be applied to moral life more broadly. As he shows, the world of "morality"—which we typically associate with the lofty realm of ideas—and that of the "material"—which we usually relegate to the mundane and quotidian—are indelibly linked. This observation parallels recent claims about the importance of physical objects in holding cultural meanings stable over time (Latour 2005; McDonnell 2010; Molotch 2003; Mukerji 1994; Schudson 1989). Boltanski and Thevenot

(2006) push this argument further by explicitly connecting *material* objects to *symbolic* claims about morality. They argue that, because moral arguments must be based on abstract principles, moral worth cannot be attached permanently to individuals or groups. Instead, moral "proofs" must be "based on objects that are external to persons, objects that will serve in some sense as instruments or devices for determining worth" (2006:131).

Boltanski and Thevenot thus offer a framework for examining how individuals use objects to draw moral boundaries between themselves and others and in turn come to see themselves and their community as morally-worthy (see also Lamont and Thevenot 2000; Lamont 2000). Pious Muslims, for example, might choose to wear the veil in order to differentiate themselves from others who they see as immoral (Tugal 2009:449; Winchester 2008). Environmentalists, riven with guilt about the unsustainability of Western lifestyles, might spend hours atoning for ecological transgressions by sorting recycling or working in backyard gardens (Haluzah-Delay 2008; Shepherd 2002; Szerszynski 2002). Homeless men might show their moral worth through the "procurement or arrangement of physical setting or props" (Snow and L. Anderson 1987:1349) that signify middle-class lifestyles. And, of course, moral boundaries are also drawn through the objects we *don't* associate with, such as Jews rejecting non-Kosher food (Douglas 1966). In all these cases, objects are imbued with meaning through social processes, but the social-origins of this meaning often disappear, and objects assume an almost fetishistic role as markers of moral worth in and of themselves. More than that, objects come to seem as though they are acting upon us, compelling us to behave in certain ways.

In short, the paradoxical nature of morality originally identified by Durkheim—that morality is at once social and non-social—points to multiple routes through which a group or individual can reconcile moral ideals and the social environment. Of course, there is extensive

evidence that social networks can and do play a crucial role in sustaining morality over time. Yet there are limits to this: not all individuals can immerse themselves in social contexts where their moral worldviews are likely to be supported, and even when they do, morality derived entirely from social interaction can lack stability and permanence. In these cases, things *outside* of society can serve as proofs of moral worth and bulwarks of stability in an otherwise challenging social environment. Doing so, however, entails subjecting ourselves to moral forces that we see as outside our control.

Wilderness, Morality, and the Social Construction of Urban Nature

This paper addresses the general question of the relationship between the moral and the material through a concrete investigation of nature in the city. In this section, I draw on literature on the social construction of nature to offer a framework for examining how freegans engage the physical dimensions of the urban environment to use nature in processes of moral reconciliation.

The power of nature as a form of moral justification is firmly entrenched in American culture (Cronon 1996a:73). This linkage between "what is natural" and "what is moral" has been forged by the intellectual work of figures like Frederick Jackson Turner and Henry David Thoreau, as well as the campaigns of early environmentalists like John Muir. Together, they argued that American ideals of independence, self-government, and individualism all stemmed from a close relationship to nature (Nash 1973:146). But what does "nature"—a famously slippery term—actually mean?[9] In contrast to Western Europe, where "nature" is identified with rural places continuously remade by human agriculture (see, e.g., Bell 1994; Fourcade 2011; Thevenot and Moody 2000), nature in the American popular consciousness is often synonymous

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[9] For a review of the huge range of different uses of the term "nature", see Cronon (1996b).

with "wilderness"—places free from human manipulation.[10] This makes natural things a set of

moral objects *par excellence*: stable repositories of meanings completely outside of society.

For most of the discipline's history, sociologists have adopted a similar definition of

nature as anything which is "primordial, autonomous, and mechanistic" (Goldman and Schurman

2000:564); that is to say, non-social. This shared definition of nature has underpinned a parallel

set of assumptions about the relationship between nature and cities. In American narratives

about place, urban and natural areas are often counter-posed, with those places that are "closer to

nature" perceived as more able to "nourish moral and religious life" (Hummon 1990:35).[11]

Similarly, the idea that cities are unnatural is a "familiar theme" (Krupat 1985:157) in

sociological discussions of urban existence: as Wirth (1938:2) famously remarked, "Nowhere

has mankind been farther removed from organic nature than under the conditions of life

characteristic of great cities."[12] For him, the separation of urban residents from natural spaces

led them to become disconnected from their own internal natures, leading to potential moral

disorder and breakdown. Certainly, from this perspective, "nature" cannot provide any sort of

moral reconciliation for city residents.

Environmental sociologists have pointed out that these views of "nature" are socially-

constructed and reflective of a particular time and culture (Burningham and Cooper 1999;

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[10] Emerson, for example, described nature as "essences unchanged by man" and "not…subjected to the human will" (2008:3, 46).

[11] To offer one example, the movement of middle-class families from cities to suburbs was, in part, predicated on the belief that, by being closer to nature, such spaces were more moral environments for raising families (Fishman 1989; Jones et al. 2003).

[12] This division between cities and nature is visible in other paradigms of urban sociology as well. Marxists have emphasized the way cities consume an inordinate share of natural resources and transform surrounding ecosystems (Brechin 1999; Foster 1999; York, Rosa, and Dietz 2003). Neo-Weberian work on urban growth machines demonstrate the inexorable expansion of the urban frontier at the expense of rural areas (Logan and Molotch 2007; Rudel 2009). For a review, see Wachsmuth (2012).

Freudenburg, Frickel, and Gramling 1995; Greider and Garkovich 1994). Taken on its own, the statement that nature is a social construct tells us little. More important is *why* certain things get constructed as "natural". Bell (1994:28) argues that, in one English hamlet, people used nature to solve a "crisis of identity and legitimation" created by the loss of traditional bases of moral worth. Although their ideas of what nature actually was varied depending on class and gender, for the villagers the appeal of the "natural conscience" stemmed from the fact that it was a "manner of moral thinking conceived as free of social interest" (1994:7). Similarly, Jerolmack explores how, for Turkish pigeon-handlers in Germany, the pigeon-coop and the natural space it represents "act as a moral and experiential preserve… that validates their sense of morality and worth through a connection to their homeland" (2007:887). In both cases, "nature" is not something that simply exists "out there", but is a repository of cultural meanings. Objects and spaces conceived of as "natural" serve as powerful symbols of moral beliefs that have more staying power than social relationships.

On a purely theoretical level, a constructivist approach suggests that any number of different things could be "natural". In practice, however, studies of the processes by which nature is constructed tend to focus on interactions with things that conform to a more conventional definition of what is, and is not, "natural". Fine (1998) studies nature through following mushroom-gatherers in a woods; Freudenburg et al. (1995) elaborate their argument by examining different perceptions of a mountain. Although some work has examined natural construction in cities (Jerolmack 2007), I develop this approach further by focusing on the particular challenge and opportunities that the physical components of the city—and the symbolic meanings attached to them—pose for constructing nature and using nature for moral reconciliation. Rather than simply arguing about whether the city is "natural" or "unnatural" (cf.

Harvey 1996; Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw 2006; Robbins 2004), I focus on the different kinds of things that freegans construct as "natural" within it. In particular, I show how, for the freegans, "nature" at various times means a set of resources, bodily practices based on the pre-social characteristics and dispositions of human beings, and a frontier.

Although all these definitions of "nature" share an underlying commonality—that they refer to things perceived as existing independently of and prior to human interference—they are brought to life through interaction with different aspects of the urban environment. Some sociologists have conceptualized the process of constructing nature as a purely mental process: nature is literally "thought" into existence through a "discursive re-imagining" (McSweeney and McChesney 2004:40). This suggests that the possibilities for constructing nature are essentially limitless: an actor could claim that virtually anything is natural and use it as a demonstration of his or her morality. This perspective, however, misses the vast cultural apparatus—from scientists to popular intellectuals—that have coded certain objects and places as "natural" and others as "unnatural."

As such, the objects of natural construction are not just drawn willy-nilly from the environment. We might think of the role of physical objects in dialogue with Bell's (1994:8) use of toolkit theory to describe processes of natural construction. As he argues, nature is like a "wrench" that people can "fit to the howling machinery of their lives" by latching on to various aspects of the external world. Yet like any tool, the natural "wrench" fits some bolts better than others. Objects have material qualities that vary in their "enunciability"—that is, their ability to support the different meanings attached to them (McDonnell 2010:1803). Actors may be able to find "nature" in novel and unpredictable places, but not every physical object is equally well-suited to processes of moral reconciliation.

Moreover, undoing the coding of certain things, like the city, as "unnatural" takes deliberate effort, which, following Fine (1998:2), I call "nature-work." Even if the goal of processes of moral reconciliation is to make morality "second nature", getting there nonetheless requires time and energy. This brings us back to Durkheim's original idea of morality as constraint. Although I will show freegans wielding objects as examples of their moral worth, those objects, in turn, appear to act back against them. It is precisely this back-and-forth struggle with physical objects action that allows freegans to see nature as a non-social force, which in turn gives it its moral power. If living "naturally" were always easy, there would be no need to do it, because it would cease to serve as a moral benchmark.

I thus use freegans' construction of "nature" in the city to elaborate, more generally, a model for the role of the physical world in moral life. Freegans' morally-laden conceptions of "nature", as I show, are social constructs, drawn from American culture, middle-class ideals, and their own political ideologies. These different visions of nature, however, are tied to different sets of everyday practices and physical objects, which exemplify morality and mark moral boundaries. Imbuing these objects with meaning—especially when those meanings diverge from the ones given to them by mainstream culture writ large—takes deliberate effort. Moreover, these objects act back upon the people using them for moral reconciliation, directing them to act in ways that they see as "moral" but which are not consistent with other desires and interests.

Diving In: Methodology

This study is based on nearly two years of ethnographic fieldwork with one freegan group, based in New York City, conducted between 2007 and 2009. Over this time, I attended scores of freegan.info events: "trash tours" (publically announced dumpster dives open to

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newcomers and media), wild food foraging expeditions in city parks, collaborative sewing "skillshares", "feasts" held in the homes of individual group participants, and monthly group organizing meetings. I also immersed myself in the broader activist scene of New York, attending protests, demonstrations, and planning sessions for a range of other movements with which freegans were affiliated. As time went on, I began to spend time in the freegan bike workshop and an attached anarchist community space, which led to more and more informal interactions with freegans. Eventually, I also began to engage in freegan practices, like dumpster diving and do-it-yourself bike repair, on my own. Direct, bodily participation in freegan activities allowed me to experience first-hand how living as a freegan restructures space, time, and the uses of the senses. Through incarnating the contradictions of freegan practice and morality myself (cf. Wacquant 2004), I more fully understood how everyday practices and relationships to the physical world could help resolve these contradictions.

Freeganism is a phenomenon that has only recently come to the attention of sociologists (indeed, lexicologists only identified "freegan" as a new word in 2004). As such, my initial research was guided by a general interest in understanding freeganism as a new form of anti-capitalist social movement. The incongruous prevalence of nature in freegan discourses and practices was not something that I anticipated finding, given that I thought I was researching a social movement fixated on urban waste. Instead, the centrality of nature emerged organically throughout the course of fieldwork and ongoing data analysis. A second emergent theme was the freegans' conflicted relationship to the city, which led me to ask how freegans reconciled their natural morality with their physical and social environment.

My search for a theoretical framework with which to analyze freegans' nature-oriented practices led me to the sociological literature on the social construction of nature (Bell 1994;

Fine 1998; Jerolmack 2007) and a geographical literature on nature in cities (Gandy 2002;

Harvey 1996; Heynen et al. 2006). In applying them to my data, however, I found each

problematic. The former offered little analysis of how actors engaged with the physical

dimensions of their environs to bring visions of nature into being, and the latter tended to focus

on whether cities, as totalities, were "natural" or "unnatural" without explaining *why* or *how*

urban residents brought different conceptions of nature into existence. In the course of engaging

with these theories, my analytic perspective shifted from letting theories and categories emerge

from the data to testing hypotheses derived from theory through fieldwork, a process of

theoretical reconstruction congruent with the extend case method (Burawoy 1998).

This more direct focus on analyzing different mechanisms through which freegans might

reconcile themselves to the urban environment shifted my data collection strategy. In the spring

of 2009, I conducted 20 interviews—nearly a complete census of active members of the

freegan.info group who self-identified as "freegan"[13]—in which I asked individuals to elaborate

their views of nature, morality, and cities, and confronted them with some of the contradictions

between practices and values that I observed during fieldwork. I also analyzed several thousand

e-mails from freegan.info's "freeganworld" list-serve (which has over one-thousand subscribers),

giving me a better sense of freegan ideology and practice across contexts. In 2012, I returned to

New York after a three-year hiatus, and conducted follow-up interviews and observations, which

gave me another chance to test my budding theoretical arguments in the field and examine

whether the same mechanisms of moral reconciliation appeared over time.[14]

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[13] I defined "active" group members as people who attended freegan events over a period of at least three months. Only two such individuals declined to be interviewed.

[14] In 2012, the group was quite a bit smaller and most were far more pessimistic about the prospects for the growth of the freegan movement than they were in 2009. Although the freegan *community* was weakened, freegan discourses and practices related to nature and the city and

Despite this breadth of sources of qualitative data, my argument draws primarily on participant observation with freegans in New York City. As previous work suggests (Barnard 2011:431–434), freegans are adept at influencing the way they are represented by both the media and the myriad sociology students who have come, for short periods of time, to study them. It was therefore crucial to get beyond the "frontstage" (cf. Goffman 1959) of freegans' political theater—where they present freeganism as a unified and totalizing anti-capitalist lifestyle—to the "backstage" where freegans discussed the challenges of living by their beliefs. By observing the freegans for an extended period of time and by quite literally "getting my hands dirty" by joining in on freegan practices like eating discarded food, I gradually gained access to the more unguarded and candid moments of freegans' lives.

Studying freeganism in the "backstage" also allowed me to address a vexing challenge in the study of morality: getting past the ad-hoc justifications actors offer for their behavior in order to identify their underlying motivations. As I explore below, freegans claim that their practices are guided by a desire to educate the public about waste and build an anti-capitalist movement. In the private backstage—in which freegans were isolated both from the public and from one another—I observed many practices that did little to contribute to either goal. Instead, as I demonstrate, these behaviors are unified by an underlying moral motivation to live "naturally".

In his own work on motivation and justification, Vaisey (2009) argues that forced-choice survey questions often do a better job of capturing these kinds of deeply-internalized motivations than do open-ended interviews. But this comparison suggests sociologists must ultimately rely on some kind of verbalized representation to study moral beliefs and behaviors. Using

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their apparent function in moral reconciliation were largely the same, which lends support to my argument that moral reconciliation for freegans comes primarily through interaction with the physical environment.

participant observation we can actually *see* patterns of behavior and identify trends that reveal the underlying motivations behind them. Ethnography thus is a valuable technique for studying morality "in the wild" (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010:11) rather than a psychologist's laboratory.

Cities of Contradictions: Freegans and Urban Life

Freegans and Natural Morality

What kind of moral worldviews do freegan.info participants bring to their activism? The majority of self-identified freegans with whom I have interacted are well-educated (over half have graduate or professional degrees), white, and describe themselves as coming from "upper-middle class" or "privileged" families.[15] Unsurprisingly, a middle-class habitus shapes freegans' nominally "natural" practices. Still, these demographic similarities belie sprawling ideological diversity. In interviews, some freegans described themselves as stridently anti-capitalist; others articulated a more temperate concern with waste and over-consumption. Asked about the future they envisioned building through their activism, certain respondents expressed a desire to return to a culture of thrift and judicious resource use they associated with their grandparents; others evinced a fervent craving to dismantle industrial society in its entirety.

Indeed, one of the few points of unity among freegans was a moral imperative to live more "naturally" or in harmony with "nature". As Jonathan—a freegan activist in his mid-20s who lives in a squatted building in Brooklyn and claims not to have bought food in over a year—explained, "We're just so disconnected from it [nature]. One of the goals [of freeganism] is just

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[15] That said, freegan.info was actually comparatively *more* diverse than other anarchist groups in New York or freegan movements documented elsewhere. The group is run primarily by women, and events tend to attract substantially more women than men. Moreover, in contrast to previous accounts that describe freegans as nearly universally under the age of thirty (Edwards and Mercer 2007:282), freegan.info's organizers and event attendees reflect a more diverse age structure, with significant participation from people over forty.

connecting with each other and connecting with the rest of life on earth, connecting with the earth itself." As in virtually all Judeo-Christian moral discourses, freegans built their moral worldviews around a conception of a fall from grace—in this case, a turn away from nature. As Evie put it, "There was a point where human beings stepped out of nature and decided to control nature", and it was at this point that the seeds for a whole range of social ills—mass consumption, exploitation of animals and humans, and ecological devastation—were planted.

Until he left the group in 2009, Adam was one of freegan.info's most visible spokespeople, working full-time on a variety of radical environmentalist and animal-rights projects and supporting himself almost entirely with discarded food and clothing. A self-described "anarcho-primitivist", Adam insisted that "humans should stop living anywhere but the ecosystems we're evolved for…it makes no sense to live in cold climates. Note the lack of fur! We are mammals with large sections of exposed skin…Anywhere we need clothing to live is somewhere we were clearly not intended to be." For Adam, there is a close connection between humans' internal nature (what "we're evolved for") and the external spaces it is natural to inhabit. Like other freegans, he framed his adoption of freeganism not as the culmination of a series of choices, but as the result of a set of moral compulsions to live in harmony with the natural world, which in turn entailed conforming to his own human nature.

The importance of nature as a fount of moral justification and an anchor for freegans' political vision became particularly evident during disputes and conflicts within the group. Most freegans are deeply concerned about animal rights and the ecological implications of livestock production. Despite this, most stated that, in principle, they sanctioned eating "scavenged" meat[16], because doing so did not give any monetary support to the animal industry. Yet I

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[16] Meat from a dumpster or, in rarer cases, road-kill.

observed that the vast majority of freegan.info participants continued to adhere to veganism while dumpster diving, even though this made surviving as a freegan difficult (because vegan sources of protein, like nuts or soy, are rare finds). Alex explained his choice not to eat "dumpstered" meat based on his understanding of human evolution and biology:

> I feel one-hundred times happier when I'm not eating animals because I know my biology is not set up for being an animal eater…I don't want to kill any animals, and I don't really want to eat them. That's just how I am. I feel like it's a better life to be more at peace with nature.

The minority of freegans who did choose to eat meat in turn defended their practice by proffering a different vision of what is natural. Madeline, a former corporate public-relations professional in her late 40s who quit her job to engage in full-time activism, argued:

> I seriously challenge someone who says that they're primitivist and is a vegan. Because I don't think a primitivist vegan living in a temperate climate could happen. I would like to see that person be set down in the Adirondacks and see how they meet their minimum calorie intake and protein…There's something psychological [in being a primitivist vegan], something about being ashamed to be alive. Yes, we're predators.

Irrespective of their substantive positions, freegans agreed that the answer to the question "how were we evolved to live?" mattered, because it provided a guide to the central question behind freegan morality: "what is natural?"

In all of the instances cited above, "nature" came up indirectly. I did not ask freegans for their views on "nature" *per se.* Instead, freegans deployed nature across a wide range of domains

as a way to justify a various ideological positions and personal practices[17], evoking a "green sphere of moral worth" (Lamont and Thevenot 2000:257). As these examples made clear, freegans staked their moral identities on their capacity to live naturally and in harmony with the natural world. As I will show in the next section, however, this commitment to "nature" was deeply problematic given freegans' urban lifestyles, pointing to the need for moral reconciliation.

The Challenge of Urban Freeganism

Given the anti-urban currents that run through American environmentalism, and freegans' celebrations of living "naturally", it was unsurprising that many freegans articulated a deep distaste for the city. One characterized the city as a "black hole sucking up all the resources of the planet"; another as an "evil haven of decadence and debauchery." Alex described urban life as "incredibly psychologically destructive" because it separates residents from natural spaces in which human nature could flourish. As Zaac speculated, "I think rates of depression are so high in America because we're in a city, and we aren't in some heavily forested area being spontaneous and finding wild asparagus." If all moral beliefs are organized around semiotic oppositions (Baker 2010; Douglas 1966)—"good" and "evil", or "pure" and "unclean", for example—then for freegans the core moral binary was that between the "city" and "nature". "I think that the urban culture is what I'm opposed to", Lola explained, pointing to the city itself— not capitalism, waste, or consumerism—as a metonym for immorality.

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[17] For example, when I asked Annabelle why she thought so many women were attracted to freegan.info's events, she paused for a few moments and suggested that "women are evolutionary predisposed to be more opportunistic in terms of finding things [as in dumpster diving]. If you look at who collects material in our society…it's always the women." When confronted with a question she had not previously contemplated, she resorted to an essentialist argument about the intrinsic nature of the sexes.

Living in New York City is problematic for freegans on a practical as well as ideological level. In freegans' eyes, space is essential for constructing a community outside of capitalism: freegan.info needs locations to organize communal meals, conduct skillshares, and store goods they scavenge. Individual freegans also need places to live. On paper, freegans have a clear strategy for securing space: squatting illegally in abandoned (or "wasted") buildings. Yet in New York, property values are too high for buildings to be left abandoned and, in contrast to squatter-havens like Barcelona, Berlin, or Oakland, New York's police actively search for and remove unlawful occupants.[18] The result was a sense that, for all their political and moral commitments, there were many parts of freegans' lives that they could not control. As one rent-paying freegan told me, "there are so many things I see that I can't change. I can't change the way the building I live in operates. I know that if I lived elsewhere, and if I had the money to build my own house, I would do things completely differently."

The same problem confronts freegan.info as a group. As the recent experience of the Occupy movement demonstrates, there is a near-absence of "free" spaces—both in terms of un-policed places where activists can congregate, and locations that can be used without charge—in New York City. Even finding a place for freegan organizing meetings—usually attended by less than a dozen individuals—is a problem. Freegan meetings require a place where freegans can sit for two hours and talk without anyone buying anything, a criterion that excludes most restaurants and coffee shops. The closest thing that freegan.info had to a space of its own was the 123 Community Center in Brooklyn, where for several years they maintained a bike workshop that used discarded parts and volunteer labor. Even there, though, making rent proved to be a constant challenge, and the community center was evicted as the property gained in value amidst

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[18] For an analysis of New York's crack down on squatters during the 1980s, see Smith (1996).

gentrification in 2009. This lack of space not only provides another reason for freegans to despise the city, but also forecloses some of the avenues of moral reconciliation—particularly, social interaction in "free spaces"—emphasized within the existing literature.

The effects of this inability to find space radiate outwards. One of the pamphlets that freegan.info passes out avers, "Freegans are able to greatly reduce or altogether eliminate the need to constantly be employed." As a consequence of needing to make monthly rent payments, though, nearly all freegans maintain conventional, waged occupations. Noted one freegan, "It's way too idealistic to expect that you will never need money," and as a result, wage work remains an "unpleasant reality." While some freegans have found employment in activist organizations or non-profits, others work in more clearly problematic fields, like product design.

Freegan hostility to the city is founded on a combination of frustration with the practical constraints of urban life and a belief that cities and nature are antithetical to one another. "Manhattan is one giant contradiction", one freegan admitted, highlighting how an urban existence opens freegans up to charges of hypocrisy while simultaneously keeping them away from the wild nature they idealize.

Justifying Urban Life

There is thus a glaring contradiction within New York's freegan movement. Freegan activists espouse a moral worldview that emphasizes the importance of living naturally, and embrace an ideology that emphasizes going to extremes, like eating trash, in order to live in accordance with moral principles. At the same time, individual freegans make their home in a city that they see as the antithesis of nature and which they perceive as preventing them from putting many of their principles into practice. On the other hand, freegans' public events—like

dumpster-diving trash tours—could *only* take place in a city where there is abundant garbage and a pedestrian audience. Freegan activists thus face an acute version of the challenge with which I opened this article: the difficulty of reconciling deeply-held moral beliefs with a hostile social environment they cannot, or will not, escape. How do they do it?

When I asked freegans how they justified living in a city, given their anti-urban beliefs, most respondents emphasized the importance of finding an efficacious site for their activism. Despite a frequent rhetorical trope that freeganism is a way to "exit" capitalism, most participants actually embraced freeganism as a way to give "voice" to an anti-capitalist critique centered on waste. Along these lines, Jason explained his continuing presence in the city in terms of his effectiveness as an activist:

> Setting up a commune out in the country would be good for me, but I don't know how that would be for the overall resistance. I definitely want to get out of the city eventually… [but] there's a lot of work that needs to be done in all different places…and lots of it needs to happen here, and not in the country. Since I'm here, I should do the work that needs to be done here.

Often, freegans explained that, because they had long been "city people", their greatest contributions to social change would come from work in a city: "It's important to organize and be involved in the place that you know, a place that you're not an outsider. Having lived a lot of my life in an urban place, it's important to focus there."

As the above examples suggest, freegans buttressed their justification for living in the city by framing it as a personal sacrifice for the good of the cause. Wendy, for example, explained that she stayed in New York—despite having a standing opportunities to move outside it—because it was the "financial capital of the world", meaning that "everything that has to be

done has to be done here." Or, as another freegan put it: "If you're going to strike at capitalism, you've got to do it in the city." I bluntly asked Adam, "Why do you choose to live in a city that is the antithesis of what you stand for?" He quickly responded, "You just answered your own question." By drawing on a logic of political efficacy and of self-abnegation for the sake of the movement, freegans offered a justification for why they continued to live in cities, despite often having the resources and connections to go elsewhere.

I am not merely interested, though, in how freegans discursively justify what they do. Instead, this paper examines how freegans create moral reconciliation—a deeper sense that, despite all the contradictions between their beliefs and actions, they are nonetheless leading good and moral lives. True moral reconciliation happens only when living morally comes as second nature—when morality is embedded within the unreflective fabric of everyday practice.

As pointed out in the theoretical introduction, social movement scholars—drawing on a sociological tradition reaching back to Durkheim—have argued that this moral reconciliation often happens through group-level, social processes taking place in "free spaces". Freegans would thus reconcile themselves to the city by circulating in the subcultures and activist communities that concentrate in urban environments. Despite its primacy in the existing literature, though, this approach offers at best only a partial explanation. Although freegan.info holds group events nearly every week, most of the time—in their jobs, homes, and social lives— freegans are interacting with non-freegans. Jonathan described the sense of social isolation these interactions engendered: "I always stand around and I'm in a room full of people and think, 'Oh my God, no one is an anti-capitalist here'. I feel so alone, I feel so out of place…It's so lonely.

It's depressing as hell to live here."[19] Many of the activities freegans do engage in, like

dumpster diving, are practiced outside a group context as much as within it. Moreover,

freegan.info as a group was riven by conflict and disagreement for the entire period of my

fieldwork. Activists cited a "basic lack of trust" as one of the reasons that "there's no real

freegan community": most reported that they attended freegan.info events out of a sense of

political obligation rather than because they enjoyed it or found it fulfilling. Consequently, I

found little evidence that the "warmth of group life" (Bellah 1973:xliii) served as a significant

source of moral stability in freegans' lives.

Back to Nature in New York City

Nevertheless, for all their ideological criticism of the city and frustrations with the

barriers to freegan practices it posed, it was clear in observations and interviews that freegans

had come to feel like living morally there was second nature to them. Despite distant aspirations

to "get out" and "get closer to nature", none had immediate plans to leave the city, nor did they

see a need to do as such. Although none could articulate exactly how this sense of moral

coherence and consistency came about, many suggested that it came from their participation in

freegan practices themselves. As Anna, a special-education teacher in her mid-40s, explained:

> It [freeganism] is a way of downscaling the city somehow. If you live in a place that is so
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> overwhelming in size and population and lots of things, it's a reality check to say, 'Okay,
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> I can live small here, I don't have to do this and that and I can still be happy and feel like

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[19] Many freegans also described feeling alienated from other non-freegan activists. Freegans critiqued other radical and anarchist movements for being insufficiently committed to living out their principles in their lifestyles and more focused on partying than achieving social change.

I'm part of the city.' I think that's important too. I can find my place in the city without

creating more waste in it.

I argue that freegans find their "place in the city"—and, in turn, a place for their values in urban

life—by using freeganism to enact a more natural mode of urban existence, through interaction

with the apparently unnatural physical environment of the city itself.

How can freegans simultaneously denounce the city as unnatural and conceptualize

themselves as living naturally within it? The answer relies on the historical ambiguity of cultural

constructions of "nature". As I argue, freegans can acknowledge that the city is clearly not

"natural" like a wilderness, yet still construct three *different* versions of nature in the city.

Drawing on pre-existing social constructions of nature, freegans approach nature as resources,

bodily practices, and frontier space. In the sections that follow, I show how each of these

different natures is created through interaction with physical objects and space, and functions to

provide moral affirmations, mark moral boundaries, and construct moral communities. In turn, I

demonstrate how these interactions carry with them limitations and constraints.

Natural Resources, Waste, and Urban Foraging

Freegans' "wild food foraging tours" through city parks are, in large part, neither political

nor practical. Zaac, an experienced forager, gets only a fraction of his calories from foraging.

Foraging events lack the performative critique of capitalist that makes freegan trash tours

appealing to the media. Instead, I interpret wild foraging as an example of nature-work: a way

of constructing nature in the city. In this respect, nature is the "sensuous external world" (Marx

1978:72) that provides the physical raw materials for human reproduction. On one tour along the

northwest edge of Manhattan, a visiting activist from California commented how, to his surprise,

the plants we were finding were identical to those he found in his home state, despite vast differences in climate. Zaac replied, "There's lots of biodiversity in the rainforest, but there's unique species here [in the city] too." Both presented the city as an ecosystem, replete with its own species, flows of resources, and cycles of food availability. Within the context of these tours, mundane objects like mushrooms eking out a living on the underside of a log become powerful symbols that "reveal nature at work" (Fine 1998:34) even in the otherwise unnatural urban environment.

Expeditions to find burdock root and edible flowers are not the only moments where freegans approach the city as a natural resource base. They also do so with respect to a less obviously "natural" resource: urban waste. Huge streams of waste are bi-products of all major cities, and New York, which produces 14 million tons of solid waste every year, is no exception.[20] Of course, despite a sociological tradition of naturalizing these processes in terms of "urban metabolism" (Keil and Boudreau 2006) or "urban ecology" (Park and Burgess 1968), there is nothing superficially natural about New York's vast waste disposal apparatus. Indeed, in their public events, freegans go to great lengths to emphasize the highly *unnatural* social processes that create waste. As one freegan explained to a group of fifteen newcomers on a trash tour: "It's not individuals, it's the system [that produces waste]. The stores are trying to extract surplus value, to borrow a Marxist term. But our system ends up with a huge amount of waste and unrecognized costs."

Outside of the public and highly politicized context of freegan "trash tours", though, freegans often talk about waste differently. In our interview, Alex spoke of waste as part of an exogenous set of processes endemic to the city which freegans could not control: "There's a flow

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[20] http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/html/theplan/solid-waste.shtml

of traffic and there's a common movement in the city that's not really defined by anyone *per se*, but is taken advantage of by a few people." More unguarded moments show how freegans come to see waste as if it were a fixed part of the external environment, like any other natural resource would be, rather than an internal feature of the society they were seeking to change. One weekend, I went to Governor's Island with Jonathan and Marie, two young freegans, for a free art festival. We had been discussing the recent closure of the Occupy Wall Street encampment, and I commented that the island had large tracts of open space that could be occupied. Jonathan replied, pensively, "Yeah, but what would you eat? You'd have to go into the city to dumpster [dive], and there are only ferries on the weekend." Marie laughed, "You remember that food comes from places other than dumpsters, right? You *could* farm it." "Oh right", Jonathan replied, "I forgot."

While in public freegans describe themselves as social movement activists challenging urban waste, at other times they imagine themselves as "urban foragers" committed to living off of it. The availability of garbage depends on the vicissitudes of store employees and sanitation workers, yet for urban foragers, it is "nature" that provides waste. Noted one freegan, "The difference between foraging and agriculture is trying to control nature, versus preparing yourself to respond to whatever nature throws at you." One freegan drew out the "urban forager" analogy, describing in detail how her dumpster diving paralleled hunting and gathering:

When you go dumpster diving…you do things in the natural way. It's like going harvesting or gathering…[or] going in the forest to find food…You need to explore, first, to find good spots. Then you need to really work for your food: it's harder, you need to open bags, to search, to climb into a dumpster...It's always surprising. You don't know what you're going to find. It makes it more natural. It's like going back to the time when

people would go into natural spaces to get food…When you have crops, and you're a

farmer, you know what you're going to get. The freegan way is more like hunting.

As the above quote emphasizes, the character of dumpster diving is determined by interaction

with the physical environment. Urban foraging is profoundly shaped by the features of New

York City that freegans themselves cannot change: a high density of stores, trash placed on the

street curb (rather than in back-alley dumpsters), and regular trash pick-ups that ensure a steady

flow of waste.

Despite the abundance of garbage, it is only through developing specialized knowledge

of their physical environment freegans are able to take advantage of New York's waste stream.

Leia, a Hispanic mother in her mid-twenties, said that when she moved to New York, she was

"starving" because she couldn't find food. Even though she had lived off of waste in Minnesota,

she was accustomed to looking in back alleys and dumpsters: she only learned how to effectively

forage in New York when she attended a freegan.info event and was taught how. In a sense, she

adapted herself to a base of natural resources which, as environmental constructivists have

pointed out, were "socially, culturally, and economically defined" (Castree 2005:115). Of

course, Leia could have simply gone to the store and bought food, suggesting that the ecological

limits she confronted were a social construct. As evident in her description of herself as

"starving" when she could not find garbage to eat, though, the constructed constraints of the

urban resource base was, to her, real—because of a moral imperative to live naturally drove her

to subsist off of waste, which in turn required that she accept the limits that the availability of

waste imposed on her.

As these examples suggest, waste serves for freegans as a physical representation of

individual and group moral beliefs that, in turn, compels the holders of beliefs towards certain

behaviors. Freegans described how they would often take far more than they personally needed when dumpster diving and redistribute it, because they couldn't bear the thought of leaving valuable items in the trash. Some admitted that their practice of freeganism bordered on hoarding, because they felt such a strong compulsion to "rescue" only marginally useful items. Others even talked about waste in quasi-religious terms. At one tour, one freegan suggested: "I say we all take all the stuff that we find and give it out to people, share it, and put the value back into it…Pay homage to it. To me it's sort of like saying grace, in a way. It's a spiritual thing for me." On another night, we approached the backside of a Food Emporium, where, from a distance, it was clear there was a larger-than-usual amount of food. As we walked up, Janet exclaimed, "Oh my god, this is going to be outrageous." The group lingered at this spot long after everyone had taken what they could possibly carry. When I asked Madeline whether we should move on, she sighed, "It's like an elephant graveyard. Right now, we're just here mourning the food." As we left, Janet woefully stated, "My heart is really breaking right now." While in their public performances, freegans use waste as a prop for showing capitalism's immorality, incidents like these show the deeper emotional and moral significance of waste to freegans that compels them to act in ways that do not follow a strictly political logic.

At times, the freegan critique of capitalism that denounced the over-abundance of waste and this treatment of waste as a finite natural resource base came into conflict. In 2009, Zaac lamented "There has been less waste lately…No more bulk boxes with one bottle broken and the rest intact, but slimy." Some speculated that the decline in waste output was a result of the economic downturn. Others, though, returned to ecological metaphors, noting that a particular "fertile" chain of stores in Murray Hill had been "overharvested" and thus become "exhausted" by the overly-frequent "exploitation" of local "foragers". Some local dumpster divers—not part

of freegan.info—claimed that they were going hungry as a result. Subsequent discussions in the group highlighted an ongoing tension between attempts to challenge waste and expand the freegan movement while simultaneously maintaining their resource base over time. In several years with the group, I was never told the locations of the legendary "Pom Dumpster" or "Odwalla Bin", which held high-quality and rare items. Although freegans usually show careful deference to dumpster divers who appear to be poor or homeless, the imperative to live off of waste makes a degree of competition and conflict over particular objects inevitable.

These examples highlight the trade-offs political activists like freegans face when simultaneously trying to change society and live morally within it. On one hand, freegans want to expand practices like dumpster diving as widely as possible to change the system they oppose; yet their desire to live "naturally" requires them to accept the physical limits of this expansion. This contradiction is evident in the different ways waste itself is discussed: in public, as a symbol of capitalist abundance; in private, as a finite and valuable resource. This dual function of waste depends its "polyvalence" (McDonnell 2010:1807)—a degree of semiotic "wiggle room" that allows an object to sustain multiple meanings at once. Waste is at once a prop that is used to recruit newcomers to the freegan movement *and* a finite resource used to draw boundaries between freegans and other urban residents. These meanings are in tension, but together they help freegans to see themselves both as agents of future change and as moral beings in the present.

Human Nature: Senses, Bodies, and Time

In their claims to be "urban foragers", freegans highlight how practices geared towards constructing waste as an external natural resource base are coupled with the acquisition of skills

and knowledge about the physical environment. As such, for freegans, more inwardly-directed forms of nature-work are also a central part of reconciling themselves to the urban environment. In this section, I show how freegans use their senses, perceive their bodies, and structure their time in accordance with what they perceive to be the essential characteristics of human nature. Although many scholars have noted how morality involves the embodiment of particular conceptions of space and time (Bourdieu 1990; Ignatow 2010; Winchester 2008), I highlight how freegans this process is mediated through interactions with physical objects.

Simmel (1957) classically argued that cities overwhelm the senses, isolating their residents from the odors of industrial production and the sight of environmental degradation. Some freegans described this urban sensory assault as one part of the social system they opposed:

> Repression has a lot to do with the senses. I feel like pollution has a lot to do with the senses. And I feel like, at the same time, as our sensitivity is oppressed by society, our senses are polluted through the increase of industrialism. I feel like a lot of industrialism and a lot of pollution is just caused by that kind of insensitivity to the climate, to the environment.

Although scholars have argued that, in Western cultures, "nature" is experienced primarily through sight (Macnaghten and Urry 1998; Merchant 1989:21; Weigart 1997), for freegans, living naturally in the city also involved smell, taste, and touch. Indeed, as I quickly realized on my own, successful urban foraging requires the senses to be constantly attuned. When dumpster diving, edible items are signaled not by neon-signs, but more subtle and difficult to discern hints: lumpy plastic bags or the faint smell of food. Outside of one grocery store, Adam discovered a bin filled with discarded tofu, chicken, and cheese from the store's hot food salad bar. As a

vegan, Adam wanted only the tofu, but in the darkness, the difference was hard to see. Adam fearlessly plunged into the mixture and pulled out a sauce-covered white chunk, and explained to me how to identify whether it was meat based on its texture and the way it broke when crushed between the thumb and forefinger.

Freegans further emphasized that developing one's senses was key to determining what dumpster-dived food was safe to eat. In response to a query about food safety, Deirdre quipped, "I never look at the sell-by date, it's irrelevant to me. It's about the condition of the food: you smell it, you taste it, and if it's horrible, don't [eat it]." Eating safely also meant cultivating knowledge of the material properties of food, knowledge which freegans claim had been lost with urbanization:

> Not knowing about food, and thinking about safety standards, that comes from living in
> the city... If you take a yogurt, and you don't know what it is and you don't know how
> it's made, and all you know is the expiration date, then after the expiration date you'll
> throw it away. If you know how a yogurt works, you know it could be good two months
> after. You just taste it.

Adam offered a further elaboration, emphasizing the divergence between the natural qualities of food and the false cultural standards we impose upon it: "We have false ideas about what constitutes fresh food. A lot of food tastes better when it looks worse. But those are not the tactile and aesthetic qualities people look for when they purchase produce." By becoming "experts on food", freegans were thus able to use their knowledge of and relationships to physical objects in order to draw moral boundaries between themselves and the rest of society.

The irony is that freegans actually know very little about where their food comes from. In contrast to organic and local food movements that fetishize intimate consumer knowledge of

food's origins (see Johnston 2008), freegans often are unsure of where the food they get originally comes from or why it is in the dumpster at all. An item might be thrown out due to the store over-ordering, minor blemishes and decay, or a product recall.[21] This prompts one of the most common questions asked by media and newcomers about freeganism: does anyone ever get sick? Invariably, freegans respond that no one ever ails from recovered food, arguing that the human body is naturally much stronger than we typically give it credit. In response to one query, Janet replied:

> We're all raised to think garbage is dirty: 'Don't touch that. That's been on the floor. That's been in the garbage.' Most of us probably have strong immune systems and touch things all over the place that are germy…The first time I went on a trash tour I didn't take anything like an apple or pear, I only took citrus, like and orange or a banana. Now I'm braver and I just wash them well, and if I'm not sure I'll peel them. But now I take almost everything.

Leia put it more succinctly: "People in this country are a lot more freaked out about dirt than they need to be. We need a little dirt in our lives for our immune systems to be strong." Freegans thus put stock in the "hygiene hypothesis" (Clark 2004:22; Edwards and Mercer 2007:389), a notion circulating in punk, anarchist, and back-to-the-land communities that modern hygiene has weakened humanity's natural resistance to disease. Although freegan.info discourages participants from eating straight from dumpsters when media are present, outside of formal trash tours freegans would often spend hours debating politics and revolutionary strategy while eating directly from a trash bin. Eating slightly rotten and over-the-hill foods thus served as

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[21] For discussions of the origins of food waste at the store level, see Bloom (2010) and Stuart (2009).

affirmations of a commitment to an alternative lifestyle and as a marker of difference from other city-dwellers with whom freegans interacted.

Freegan nature-work also entails adopting new rhythms of time in everyday life. As Simmel (1957) argues, urban residents are disciplined by "clock time" rather than organic impulses and bodily needs. A wide literature has argued that capitalist society requires a separation between time spent in public and private, work and leisure, production and consumption (Adam 1994; Harvey 1996; Zerubavel 1985). Superficially, freegans celebrated the way their lifestyle "liberated" them from capitalist temporal rhythms, allowing them to spend more time engaged in un-paid activities with the more flexible, task-oriented schedules of pre-capitalist societies (cf. Thrift 1990). In contrast to a modern industrial food system built on standardization and predictability, freegans embraced the unscripted moments of dumpster diving, averring that "It's always unpredictable; that's part of the adventure of it!" Reflecting Fine's (1998:49) observation that "meaningful experiences of nature must include uncertainty", I witnessed first-hand the excitement that emerged whenever there was a particularly rare find, like a box of tempeh or a pomegranate.

Nevertheless, freegans' deep-seated desire to live naturally as foragers also carries with it temporal structures. Although food is wasted at predictable places and times, other items freegans need to find in order to avoid spending money—clothes, toiletries, and appliances, to name a few—appear more stochastically. As a result, freegans must always be on the look-out. One evening, the group was walking from an organizational meeting to the site of the trash tour. On the way, we came upon a dumpster filled with reams of printer paper that had been discarded. Quality paper for printing fliers and pamphlets is scarce in dumpsters, so the group spent nearly a half-hour collecting it—even though it made them so late for the subsequent tour that, when they

arrived, the attendees had already left. When I began to dumpster-dive more necessities myself, I realized that traversing the city on foot took much longer than it had previously, as I zig-zagged across streets in order to examine any garbage that looked remotely promising. I struggled to maintain a barrier between time spent "diving" and time spent "not-diving". Living "naturally" by breaking down the structures of capitalist "clock-time" thus takes away from other activities, including more direct forms of political activism.

Food waste is more reliable than other forms of garbage, yet also more constraining. While a grocery store might be open sixteen hours a day, the window of time for dumpster diving is just a few hours between when stores close and garbage trucks appear. One night, I was working in the freegan office with Adam—who does not cook and usually eats directly from dumpsters—when he looked at the time on his computer and said, "It's eight-thirty. We can almost go dumpstering." Eating like a forager means gathering food at the inconvenient times it is available and going without otherwise. As Deirdre explained:

> I try to project and say 'This is what I have, I probably won't go on this day because of the weather.' But I have to plan in advance to make sure I'm prepared. Usually I know when the stores are closed, and that means that, usually, ten to midnight is the good range. It gets laborious, to stay on the street, late *late* at night, day after day. So I try to limit it to get what I need, at least. It can so easily turn into still [being] on the street at 1:30 in the morning. It's exhausting for me.

Freegans must conform to the rhythm of waste metabolism on a seasonal as well as daily basis. Back-to-school shopping season, for example, was one of the only time freegans could dumpster dive office supplies; college move-outs in May presented a unique opportunity to find instant oatmeal and other non-perishables, which they would store for the rest of the year. In effect, as

pointed out in another study of freegans in Oregon, dumpster divers choose "working for food" over "working to pay for food" (Gross 2009:62); both, however, entail work, and take time.

All of the practices cited above reflect how freegans relate to themselves, as city-dwellers, in ways that they perceive to be "natural". Yet even such internal *human*-nature-work also requires interaction with the physical world: with wasted food, New York's waste-management system, and urban space as a whole. Despite their pride at developing skills as urban foragers, part of the moral power of these practices depended on the fact that there were limits to how far skills could take them: freegans had to wait for when food was available, and accept what was given to them by the urban environment.

These practices also in some ways detract from freegans' goals as activists: eating rotten food may help freegans demonstrate to themselves that they really are as hardy as pre-modern foragers, but it directly contradicts their public claims that dumpster-dived food is perfectly good. These practices are also reflective of a upper-middle-class habitus, one which celebrates "slow food" and "getting one's hands dirty" in a way that is alienating to minority and under-privileged communities (cf. Guthman 2008). Some might use these tensions to challenge the authenticity of freegan claims either to be natural or political efficacious. I argue, however, that such contradictions are endemic to processes of moral reconciliation, by which living "morally" compels us to follow dictates that flow from imperatives that may seem illogical.

The Urban Frontier

Although all freegans juggle tensions between their political ideals and everyday lives, these contradictions seem particularly acute for Zaac, a white male in his early 30s. Despite helping Jason and Adam organize an "anti-technology" conference in 2009, Zaac has a degree in

computer science. He puts that degree to work for forty hours a week in Greenwich, Connecticut, where he programs touch-screen computers: his job, as he puts it, "makes it easier for rich people to watch T.V." Zaac explains his job as a necessary evil that allows him to focus on his real interests: learning new skills and building everyday objects. When Zaac showed up at one freegan meeting in mid-summer, he was wearing a backpack that he had built out of bicycle tire inner-tubes and was clad in sandals he put together from discarded fire hose. Attached to his backpack was a trowel he told me he used to dig up edible plants he finds in long bicycle trips, one of which brought him to some of the most remote regions of northern Canada. He admitted he could probably find a backpack or shoes in the dumpster, but preferred crafting them himself:

> When I buy something I really need, I don't feel like I own it. I'm afraid to sew it, patch it up. This backpack, I can feel it. I know what's wrong with it; I know what's right with it. If something's not working, I can cut it up and make it work for me in a new way. It's all about ownership…Once you make something, you can control exactly what it's going to do.

When I pressed Zaac as to whether he actually envisioned needing the skills he was developing anytime soon, he demurred, responding that "I don't know where exactly my learning is going towards, so I don't know what I'm aiming for." Like wild food foraging, this "re-skilling" seemed both politically and practically irrational. I argue, however, that is represents another form of nature-work, deployed to enlist the physical world in a process of moral reconciliation.

But what kind of "nature" is created by making shoes from fire-hose? In this section, I explore how freegans rework the city into a frontier space and themselves as skilled pioneers

coping with a harsh environment.[22] This investigation has relevance that goes beyond the

freegans, given the upsurge of "urban homesteading" practices like backyard gardening among

the anarcho-environmentalist communities within which freegan circulate (Carlsson 2008;

Shepherd 2002).

Superficially, practices of building bicycles and other do-it-yourself activities seem like

aspirations to achieve what Marx calls the "species being", in which man makes "all nature his

inorganic body" (1978:75). Yet for freegans, the aim of these practices was not to domesticate

or dominate urban space, but to live in harmony with it. For example, when Leia proposed to the

group that they work together on a garden behind her apartment building, she explained:

> My ideal is a little different than just having a mini-farm. I'm very interested in letting the
>
> plants that just naturally grow in the area do their thing and even help them grow. This
>
> includes 'weeds.' I don't really believe in the concept of an undesirable plant. I believe in
>
> biodiversity.

Although freegan political activities were a direct challenge to urban institutions, freegan nature-

work sought not to transform the city but to develop skills that would allow them to survive

within the limits of what the city made available. In this respect, freegan ideals regarding work,

skill, and knowledge come close to Levi-Strauss' classic notion of the primitive "bricoleur",

individuals who are "adept at performing a large number of tasks" with a limit range of resources

and tools (Levi-Strauss 1962:17; see also Harper 1987).

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[22] This is not the first appearance of the notion of an "urban frontier": the late Neil Smith describes how first-wave gentrifiers described themselves as "homesteaders" and "pioneers" (1996:11) in order to justify and naturalize their intrusion into the Lower East Side. While the gentrifiers' use of the pioneer metaphor appeared to be purely discursive, though, I argue that freegans actually enact it in quotidian practice.

In parallel terms, one respondent described freeganism as "all about making use of the resources at hand." After one freegan feast in Jason's apartment, eight of us stayed around to watch Zaac conduct a "skillshare" for the group. Zaac removed a handful of yucca leaves from his backpack and placed them on the floor. He demonstrated how to scrape off the flesh of the leaves, which isolated the internal fibers. These, he explained, could be weaved into rope. After half an hour, Zaac had created a drawstring for his hat, while the rest of us had only a few sloppy, short strands fibers to show for our efforts. Nevertheless, the group was so enthralled by the event that, immediately after, they began discussing plans for similar trainings in canning and preserving fruit, sewing clothes, and even making wine. In the city, even a modestly experienced dumpster diver could easily find discarded rope without the exertion required to weave it him or herself. By taking yucca leaves from outside a gas station and reworking them, though, freegans showed how objects tied to what they saw as the worst aspects of the city—cars and fossil fuels—could be imbued with radically different moral meaning. The skill-share was a moment of Durkheimian "collective effervescence", when the freegans constituted themselves as a moral community, albeit through shared interaction with the non-human world.

Nowhere was the ad-hoc use of materials and problem-solving approach of the *bricoleur* more evident then the freegan bicycle workshop, a cramped basement space located in the heart of Bedford-Stuyvesant, a low-income and historically black neighborhood. As Wendy explained, the bike workshop started when she found an abandoned bike and she and Quinn started working on it together. Although she had no previous experience in bike maintenance, she found the experience "exhilarating" because, for the first time her life, she realized that she could "build and create things and figure out how to do stuff, solve problems, use tools." Quinn, offered a similar assessment, explaining that bike repair "got me into working with my hands",

which is "so critical to being a human being—to be able to manipulate your environment and physical things." For Quinn, the bikes that came out of that space were profoundly symbolic of freegan values: through problem-solving and careful repair, decaying discarded parts became bikes that could provide sustainable transportation for decades. Yet bikes themselves were not always cooperative with the process: rebuilt and repaired bikes were constantly breaking down and needing new scavenged parts, which themselves would not last long. The objects with which freegans bound up their identity demanded constant attention and work.

While it existed, the bike workshop provided a collective space in which freegans could share knowledge and engage in a common project. At other times the focal point of this nature-work was a more direct relationship between a freegan and the urban world. Lola, an itinerant arts student and community organizer, elaborated that bicycles are one part a tool for preserving nature and one part medium for experiencing it:

> Bicycling is such a freeing feeling. You're in direct contact with nature. The physical aspect of it is amazing. It feels to me like breaking through some kind of invisible barrier…You can't fall asleep on a fixed gear [bicycle]. You can't just ignore things that are going on. You can't just look up at the stars; it's actually being in contact and being directly involved with what is happening.

To Lola, nature was something with which she could be in "direct contact" in the city, found not by "look[ing] up at the stars" but by engaging with her more immediate, urban environs. Lola expressed particular pride at her fixed-gear bike: she built it herself, which to her meant that "I know every part of it and understand why and how everything works." As with becoming an expert on food, understanding the material properties of her bicycle was crucial to living a less alienated and more natural life. In the summer of 2008, Lola spent a stint housesitting a luxurious

apartment in the Upper West Side. She confided to me, "It felt really weird, so I brought my bike into my bedroom with me, just as a reminder." Lola's bicycle thus functioned as a personal symbol of her moral worth despite the contradiction that staying in the apartment of an affluent family friend represented.

As with other freegan constructions of nature, the freegan formulation of the city as a frontier was clearly a means of moral differentiation. While freegans like Zaac continued to work in waged jobs and live in conventional apartments, their skills in dealing with physical objects set them apart from co-workers and apartment-mates. During one freegan event, Adam lectured a group of college students about the uselessness of their formal educations: "We live in a profoundly de-skilled society. We've been infantilized, and very few of us know how to do anything outside of our little narrow box of employment." Indeed, these elements of freegans' natural pioneer ethic at times seemed to undermine the very anti-capitalist community they claimed, politically, to seek to create. Explained Alex, "It's do-it-*yourself*. When you rely too much on other people, including collectives and communes, you will get run over. Everything you want, you should be on top of and be ready to basically go and get for yourself."

In buttressing their own moral worth, then, freegans at times idolized individual self-reliance and adopted an idealized image of a not-too-distant-past in which Americans were skilled, thrifty, and resourceful (Strasser 1999; Weber 2009; Yates and Hunter 2011). Rather than evoking a more distant human nature, freegans here claimed to be enacting Depression or frontier-era values. After one sewing workshop, Anna explained why she attended:

It's the fulfillment of doing something. We're so used to not doing anything with our hands, we're reminding ourselves that we have those skills. It's something that's always

been done, that we can easily pick up again. It's only been one generation, and we've

lost sewing. Our mothers could sew. So, there, it's not a huge rift.

In some ways these references to "old people and traditional values", as Adam sarcastically

described them, put freegan claims to be living morally on firmer ground. Yet by celebrating a

past riven with racial and gender inequities, it also undermined and discredited some of freegans'

more radical critiques of American society. Once again, objectives of social transformation and

moral reconciliation came into conflict with one another.

Conclusion: First and Second Natures

Although freegans rarely talked directly about the natures they were constructing in the

city, most had an inchoate sense that their practices were re-naturalizing the city. When I asked

Quinn to reflect on nature in the city, he replied:

Within the city, nature is a park, a tree, or a bug. Or maybe it's noises or creepy things or

shadows. That's nature to me. Freeganism is a way of relating to nature in the city. It

lets things happen organically. Everyone is part of the equation. It ends up being just,

sort of, magic. People are like nature and there are all sorts of varieties and uniquenesses

[sic] in any situation.

His quote ties back together the diverse strands of moral and material, social and physical, urban

and natural, which I have tried to disentangle throughout this paper. While Quinn suggested that

nature emerged in the city "organically", however, I have shown how freegans actively engaged

with the manufactured and inert physical environment of the city in order to bring three different

visions of "nature" into existence. Constructing nature was not an end in itself, but an avenue

through which freegans reconciled themselves to an urban existence which they saw as

politically necessary but morally problematic. They enlisted various objects in this project of moral reconciliation, but these objects and the moral meanings imbued in them placed their own demands on freegan behavior.

The growth of freeganism as a social phenomenon over the last decade merits investigation in itself, offering an opportunity to explore the reasoning behind a wider movement for alternative systems of food production, transportation, and work. This conclusion, however, focuses on this paper's broader implications for the sociology of morality, nature, and urban life.

As noted previously, Durkheim saw morality as originating in social relationships yet partially obscured by the physical objects. The objects themselves, however, have largely disappeared within a sociological approach to morality that emphasizes relationships between persons. Certainly, these sorts of collective rituals and interactions that have taken center-stage in the sociology of morality played some role in the moral lives of freegans. Nonetheless, Durkheim's arguments about totems suggest that there is another path to moral reconciliation— one which runs through objects used to provide affirmation of personal morality and to draw boundaries from others. Even collective rituals are often organized around physical objects. Within the resurgence of interest in the sociology of morality (see Hitlin and Vaisey 2010), one key but under-theorized arena is the role that objects—from religious icons to old photographs— play in moral life. For freegans, these objects took surprising forms, like wasted food or scavenged bicycles, evoking Durkheim's own observation that totemic object are not just "gods or spirits", but could include "a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, [or] a house" (1965:52). Further research could elaborate why certain objects but not others play such a role in moral life, and how their material qualities in turn shape morality.

This paper also argues for a different approach to studying contradictions in moral action. Supposedly "moral" actors like the freegans almost always disappoint: activists claiming to live outside of capitalism prove to be deeply embedded within it, and individuals profoundly concerned about the environment wind up living in unsustainable circumstances. Such examples provide fodder for perennial debates within cultural sociology about whether stated beliefs provide any significant guide to behavior. I have suggested, though, that rather than simply asking *whether* moral worldviews and actions ever consistently align, we should acknowledge that they rarely do and instead focus on *how* actors negotiate and reconcile themselves to inevitable gaps between them. I have proposed "moral reconciliation" to go beyond questions of justification to describe the processes by which actors align everyday practices, moral values, and social environment to make moral living a kind of "second nature".

Such an approach is consonant with Durkheim's own approach to morality and claims of the "duality" of human nature. Precisely because morality is seen as coming from things outside of ourselves, it often comes into conflict with our "first nature"—our internal drives and desires. As Durkheim notes, "we cannot pursue moral ends without causing a split within ourselves, without offending the instincts and the penchants that are the most deeply rooted in our bodies" (1973:152). Morals are an important object of study not because they unify all of our actions under a few simple principles, but because our morals divide us as individuals and provoke internal struggles that must be reconciled. While actors themselves may come to see morality as something naturally embedded in the fabric of their quotidian existence, sociologists must remember that morality always entails constraint. This partial and incomplete submission to forces—whether emanating from collective rituals or physical objects—outside of us is missing

from recent work conceptualizing morality in terms of individual identity and interaction (Stets and Carter 2012; Tavory 2011).

Some of these same principles for studying morality could also benefit environmental sociologists examining the social construction of nature. "Radical constructivists" have argued that, because "nature" is a purely cultural category with no stable reference, cities are as "natural" as anywhere else (Gandy 2002; Heynen et al. 2006; Robbins 2004). As David Harvey (1996:186) pithily remarks, "in a fundamental sense, there is nothing *unnatural* about New York City" [emphasis in original]. To an extent, by highlighting how freegans can use the seemingly unnatural urban environment in the construction of different sorts of "nature", this work supports a position that argues for the flexible and diverse uses of "nature" in moral life. Yet broad statements that assert that anything and anywhere can be "natural" ignore the extensive and distinctive nature-work that goes into creating nature in an environment like the city. Sociology's second definition of nature as a social construct cannot ignore that these constructs are always tied to our first, original definition of nature: things which exist "out there", at least partly independent of human action.

Perhaps most importantly, such analyses easily miss that the persisting cultural power of nature stems from the fact that it is seen as *not* of our own making. Even in an era of nano-technology and transgenic crops, the belief in an essential, primordial nature remains a powerful one. Throwing "nature" into the heap of other concepts we have shown to be constructs may capture some underlying commonalities, but also blinds us to the particular ways it is brought into being and its distinctive place in moral life. In speaking of the origins of religion, Durkheim remarked that "It is an essential postulate of sociology that a human institution cannot rest upon

an error and a lie" (1965:14). Our beliefs about where morality comes from may be "lies", but in

our day-to-day interactions with the world, we make these moral injunctions true.

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