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"When Something is to be Done: Proof of Environmental Harm and the Philosophical Tradition"

Hull, Carrie L.

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This paper is centred around a debate taking place among environmental scientists. One camp argues that proof of a causal connection between a chemical and a biological anomaly must be demonstrated in the laboratory. The other contends that actual damage is underestimated in the lab, and that it is therefore necessary to conduct supplemental ecoepidemiological research in order to determine the full impact of toxic chemicals. Members of the former contingent—claiming to be defending scientific rigour—sometimes accuse their peers of practising an inferior science. This paper argues that this contention is supported by a philosophical tradition tending to favour abstract and formal analysis over the close examination of material detail. To the extent that this preference has been adopted by the media, industry, policy analysts, and regulatory bodies, more is at stake than an intellectual squabble. The paper provides a brief overview of the history of the formalist tendency in philosophy, followed by an illustration of the ways in which advocates of a strict laboratory methodology implicitly rely on this foundation. The work and ideas of contemporary ecoepidemiologists are then compared to this imposing edifice of traditional science.
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