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"Ontological Politics: Mapping a Complex Environmental Problem"

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Carolan, Michael S. "Ontological Politics: Mapping a Complex Environmental Problem." *Environmental Values* 13, no. 4 (2004): 497–522. doi:10.3197/0963271042772587 .

What is an environmental problem? Philosophers of science and sociologists of knowledge have been writing for more than a decade about the de-centred, multiple object. Yet what if this insight were applied to the realm of environmental problems? What would be revealed? These questions are explored in this paper by examining the ontology of environmental problems. Ethnomethodologists, social constructionists, and sociologists of knowledge have all painted a descriptive picture of a thoroughly sociological ontology; an ontology that is fluid, at times de-centred, and (at least potentially) multiple. Yet if ontology is social, and thus multiple, than it is also ultimately political. But multiplicity need not imply fragmentation. It can be coherent, but this requires both coordination and trust. To give further visual and conceptual shape to this argument a heuristic model is constructed. Through this model I "map" a handful of environmental problems—in terms of their "complexity" and "epistemological distance"—and in doing so give focus to the ontologically diverse nature of environmental problems today. A case study involving a particularly contentious environmental dispute is then examined so as to give the argument additional focus and an empirical grounding.
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