

Ecocentrism within Anthropocentrism: The Ecomodernist Conception of Nature

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Since the publication of its manifesto in 2015, ecomodernism has been emerging as a prominent environmental discourse within the normative debate on sustainability. Despite ecomodernism's increasing notoriety within environmental politics and environmental political theory, no systematic studies have been made on its origins and its values, and how to justify those values and assumptions normatively. Filling this gap, my doctoral thesis aims to define those essential aspects to make sense of the ecomodernist idea and policy prescriptions. An analysis of that kind shows that, whereas embracing technological innovation within liberal democratic societies, ecomodernism is not a mainstream Promethean environmental philosophy. Firstly, unlike mainstream Prometheans like Paul Simon or Bjørn Lomborg, ecomodernists are not complacent with business as usual or incremental environmental policies usually are. Secondly, since ecomodernists do not have an instrumental conception of nature—the latter being a main feature of conventional anthropocentric environmental philosophies—it does mean that the natural environment has an intrinsic value that ought to be respected. But ecomodernism's distinctive viewpoint on that matter is that technological innovation is the best—perhaps the only—way to preserve nature. That is because from this perspective, technological progress intensifies human activities, which enables to do more with less, therefore spares natural resources, and allows rewilding huge extensions of land.

Examining the ecomodernist recipes on that matter requires a previous clarification of the ecomodernist concept of nature, which makes the following questions the main research questions of my project: is there a single ecomodernist concept of nature in all of the relevant literature? Is human well-being and sparing nature compatible in those texts?

My hypothesis is that although an ecomodernist concept of nature can be distinguished, such a concept has to overcome an important paradox. This paradox is caused by two clashing premises within the ecomodernist justification about technology's environmental healing power. Those premises are the following: 1) Ecomodernists argue that social and natural systems can no longer be conceived as separate, since human intervention on natural systems has reached an unprecedented scale that some scientists argue precipitated a new geological era: the Anthropocene. Thus, sustainability is about managing coupled human-environment systems, and not about preserving a pristine nature that no longer exists. 2) The best way toward sustainability is decoupling human development from its ecological impacts, which means technological innovation enables humanity to separate from nature, because the dependence on the ecosystem's goods and services is decreasing.

A brief examination of those premises shows an incompatibility between both. How can a separation from something that no longer exists be possible? This paradox puts the ecomodernism's conceptual consistency in doubt. Therefore, it might risk its credibility as an environmental philosophy, as well as its normative power. To overcome this paradox, I argue that ecomodernism ought to embrace a consequentialist justification of nature preservation. That is because, as ecomodernists say, environmental awareness is a by-product of economic prosperity within post-material societies. Regardless of this affirmation's likelihood, a consequentialist justification of nature preservation is the only way to preserve ecomodernism's conceptual consistency as an environmental philosophy.