Mapping Ecologies: A Short Introduction

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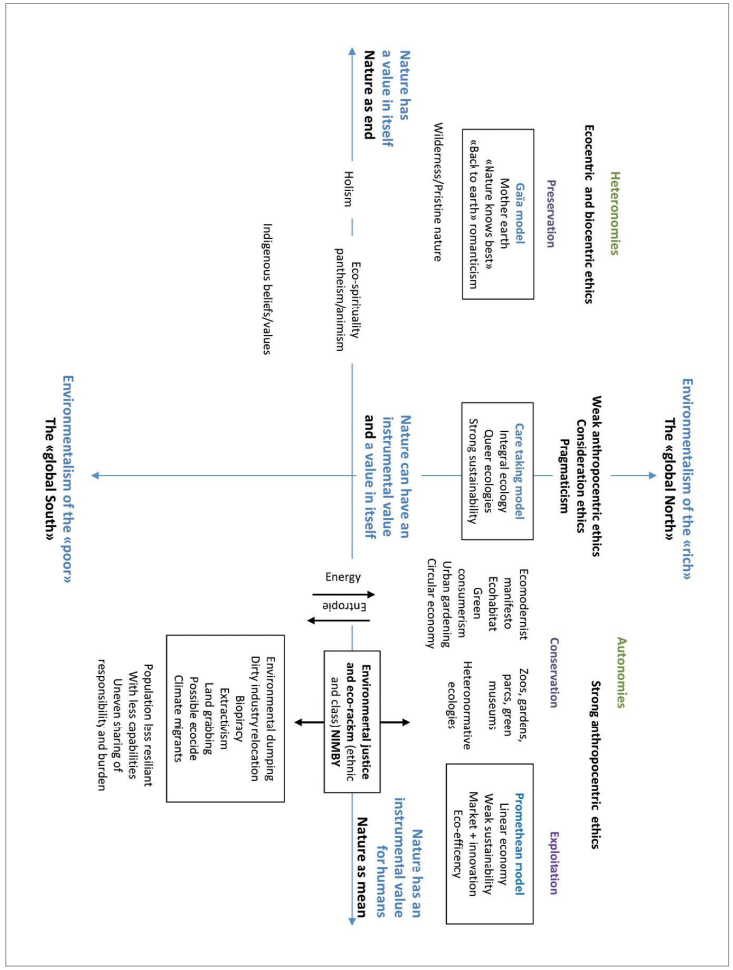

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Eric Maeder, *Ecologies Mindmap* (2018)

In this diagram I have been trying to map for more than a decade the thought patterns of environmental ethics that I discover through my encounters and readings. It was initially inspired by the reading of a text by the French philosopher Catherine Larrère entitled 'What the Mountain Knows'[1] in reference to *A Sand County Almanac* by one of the pioneers of ecological thinking, Aldo Leopold. In a few pages Larrère traces the evolution of environmental ethics thinking in the Western world from the 1970s to the present day, and identifies three major positions: anthropocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism. Each of them responds in its own way to the ecological crisis. The central question of environmental ethics is to reflect on human/natural/value relationships and to ask questions such as these: when we say that we must protect nature, what exactly are we saying? That it must be protected because otherwise we will no longer have unpolluted spaces? And so, we protect it in our own interest. Or should it be protected because it would have value in itself? Biocentrism recognises an intrinsic value for each living entity (a tree, an animal, a human). Adopting this approach for a human being means to not '*arbitrarily dispose*' of any living entity and to provide '*proof that there are valid reasons to destroy intrinsic values.*' Ecocentrism recognises an intrinsic value in an ecosystem, and does not value individual elements (a tree, an animal) but values the whole they form, the '*biotic community.*'

What is important to ecocentrics is '*the interdependence of the elements and their common belonging to a whole,*' more than the elements taken one by one. Thus, the whole – the ecosystem – is more important than its parts – any living being. This approach can therefore be described as holistic (*holos*, everything), as opposed to the individualism of biocentrism (where each living entity has an individual value in itself). Finally, strong anthropocentrism differs from the two previous positions in that it does not recognise an intrinsic value to nature; it only recognises an intrinsic value to humans. It believes that only human beings have a value in themselves (humanism, human rights philosophy) and that only humans can make value judgements. This does not mean that nature has no value, but only that this value of nature is determined 'in relation' to the human. These three positions divide the diagram into left and right: eco- and biocentrism on the left, and anthropocentrism on the right.

Seeking to overcome these three somewhat frozen positions based on heavy metaphysics, another position, called weak or expanded anthropocentrism, tries to emerge. Among these thinkers, Catherine Larrère or Dominique Bourg believe that anthropocentrism is not necessarily destructive – that it is not inherently destructive of nature. The destruction of nature has never been a main objective of humanism. This position, also called pragmatist, proposes to adopt a pluralistic and relational vision in our relations with nature. As Catherine Larrère points out, '*Why do we need to limit ourselves to "intrinsic value" to define the value of a forest? There are plenty of reasons why you might find worth in a forest, plenty of ways to value it.*'

This position occupies the centre of the sketch and attempts to go beyond strong anthropocentrism and eco- and biocentrism.

Finally, in order not to keep these ecological questions in a speculative bubble, or rather in the northern hemisphere, and to show that these questions are part of a balance of power between the so-called Global North and Global South, I have included a vertical axis to this diagram and raised issues of environmental justice.

1 / Catherine Larrère, 'What the Mountain Knows: Roots of Environmental Philosophies', Books and Ideas. net – https://booksandideas.net/What-the-Mountain-Knows.html (accessed 10 May 2019).