
Defending Ecosystem Health: A Normative but Naturalized Notion of Ecological Function

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Abstract

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Many ecological scientists and philosophers have expressed skepticism with regard to the scientific appropriateness of the concept of *ecosystem health*, on the grounds of its supposed failure to be value-free, and its alleged implicit commitment to an organicist view of ecosystems. Because the concept is *normative*, indicating the *good* state(s) of ecosystems, it has been thought to inescapably involve ethical values and so lie beyond the scope of science. Moreover, because *organisms* are the paradigmatic bearers of health, the concept has been criticized for its commitment to the obsolete Clementian paradigm in ecology. My contribution is aimed at exploring conceptual resources from metaethics on the notion of *goodness for*, and from the philosophy of biology on the issue of the normativity of functions, in order to clarify the kind of normativity involved by the concept of ecosystem health. After explaining why this normativity can be naturalized without committing anything like what G.E. Moore has called the naturalistic fallacy, I will argue that it is not a kind of normativity that is problematic for science. I will then turn to the issue of ecological organicism and argue that though ecosystem health assumes that ecosystems have some degree of functional organization, the notion however does not require an implausible degree of resemblance between them and paradigm organisms.

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