

Jeffrey E. Foss

Beyond Environmentalism: A Philosophy of Nature.

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Foss's book is aimed at presenting 'a philosophy of nature that goes beyond the limitations and mistakes of environmentalism to provide a better understanding of our place in the natural world and our responsibilities concerning it' (xi). The book is also aimed at restoring 'balance, fair-mindedness, and objectivity' to environmental debates, 'to inform these discussions scientifically, to enlighten them philosophically, and thus to play a role in bringing about a sound and happy relationship between *Homo sapiens* and the rest of the natural world' (xi). The 'final goal of this book' is to diagram Foss's own proposal for developing a 'sound and happy relationship' between humanity and nature, his own 'environmental philosophy' (18).

The main body of the book is aimed at 'the general reader' with the more technical footnotes being directed to 'college and university students' (xi), and the book is written at this level. Hence this is not a philosophy of nature in the more traditional, rigorous, systematic sense of someone like Aristotle, Hegel, Peirce or Whitehead. It is instead a philosophy of nature in the more popular sense of a creed or handbook, a *vade mecum* or pathway whose primary function is to advance the reader—in this case, 'humankind' in general—towards what Foss believes is its naturally evolving place as 'Earth's destiny' (300).

Foss has divided his book into eleven chapters, each of which is structured in an explicitly dialectical manner giving rise to one or more 'Theses'. In the tradition of classical dialectics, Foss's Theses function as propositions that at first blush might appear as paradoxical (contradicting public opinion) but which, on careful analysis, are shown to be more likely or true. In keeping with the classical tradition, each Thesis is both the conclusion of an argument and a problem that deserves further 'ongoing study.' (10) There are twenty seven Theses in all, each one moving the reader towards a set of concluding Theses (which Foss calls his 'Code'). Foss employs various pedagogical devices in making his case, including many 'Figures' (i.e., tables, charts, etc.) in the primary text, 'Case Studies' (typically structured in dialogue form), 'Feature Boxes' (short tertiary topics, 'not essential but which fill out the discussion in relevant and valuable ways'), and of course footnotes (aimed at a more academic audience).

While there is no formal division into parts, the book is nevertheless divided along two separate strategies. The first half is more critical and preparatory in tone, providing an in-depth critique of what Foss calls 'environmentalism'. The second half of the book is more 'constructive' in character and serves to outline Foss's own 'philosophy of nature'.

By ‘environmentalism’ Foss means, ‘not a system of thought, but a loose collection of putative facts, questionable creeds, and hastily conceived calls for action—fortified throughout with plain truths, worthy ideals, and sound plans.’ For Foss, environmentalism is not a philosophy in his sense, but ‘a movement that has sprung up spontaneously from the soil of human concern and conviction, [and] so it suffers from the weaknesses that afflict popular ideologies.’ According to Foss, environmentalists share a principle set of ‘family resemblances’: ‘that our form of life is unsustainable; that we are endangering life in general with our pollution; that our use of fossil fuels will cause runaway global warming; that we are causing the sixth great extinction; that we have upset the balance of nature—and that all of these things amount to an urgent environmental crisis’ (29). Environmentalism in this general sense ‘begins with a dichotomy between human beings and their natural environment’ (xi). Environmentalism presumes: 1) that nature and all things natural are inherently or intrinsically good, and 2) that humanity and all things human are inherently or intrinsically bad (66). It is not clear how many people actually possess this set of family-resemblant beliefs, but Foss seems to think that his term applies to a very wide range of individuals, from Al Gore and David Suzuki to your typical recycling loving, climate-worrying neighbor.

Foss’s in-depth critique of environmentalism is aimed at ‘salvaging what is right and sound’ in it from what is ‘wrong and unsound’ (8). It is grounded in what he claims is an ‘objective’ consideration of scientifically legislated ‘facts’, combined with a ‘logical’ evaluation of the arguments and claims being made (where ‘logical’ is narrowly identified with ‘deductive’) (12). Foss makes the following kinds of claims: 1) Contrary to environmentalism, the environment is not in a state of crisis, 2) Environmentalism’s appeal to ‘transcendent objectives’ (e.g., that the environment is of ‘ultimate value’) is dangerous and unwarranted, 3) Environmentalism’s ‘antihuman bias’ is also dangerous and unwarranted, 4) Environmental Science is not real science in any pure, ‘objective’ (value-neutral) sense, but is merely a value driven ‘applied science’ or advocacy (which Foss claims is illustrated in the current enthusiasm about global warming), 5) Environmentalism is more like a ‘neoscientific religion’ or ‘neoreligious science’ than a rational, scientifically grounded movement, 6) The environmentalist idea that we are alienated from nature or that nature always aims at maintaining some kind of balance (a form of natural justice as it were) is a fantasy or myth, and 7) The environmentalist idea that nature is good or that nature possesses intrinsic value is false.

The more ‘constructive’ aspect of Foss’s book is in many ways more subtle, and it is actually woven into his critique of environmentalism. Foss begins here outlining his own ‘philosophy of nature’ in his defense of the ‘naturally sacred’, his theory of ‘natural value’, and his subsequent but related idea of ‘natural freedom’. Still, it is not until the final two chapters that the full force of Foss’s new proposal begins to strike home, and with surprising effect. After preparing the reader with his ideas of the ‘naturally sacred’, ‘natural value’ and ‘natural freedom’, Foss argues that our unique place on the earth (as a centre or locus of these ‘natural goods’) endows us with a responsibility towards nature

that is both ennobling and frightening. Foss concludes that humanity has evolved in such a way and with such capacities that the next step in our development, both naturally and morally, is to prepare ourselves for our newly emerging role as nature's 'nervous system'. According to Foss, it is only by recognizing our naturally evolved place as nature's guide, nature's 'brains' as it were (whose natural function is to self-consciously direct, regulate and manage the workings of and relations within nature as a whole for the good of the whole), that humanity can recognize its place as a natural being while at the same time embracing our 'unique abilities' and 'unique responsibility they create' (268).

Many of Foss's arguments against environmentalism, as well as those supporting his newly proposed philosophy of nature, rest upon a couple of very important, yet highly contentious claims. Firstly, Foss proceeds from what is in effect a very orthodox scientific/analytic distinction between *facts* and *values* where facts are said to be 'objective' conditions that make up the world, while values are merely 'subjective' expressions of sentient 'concerns'. While this is a common enough claim, Foss does not adequately address the many complex and sophisticated challenges that have been brought against this simple fact/value dichotomy (and the closely related Naturalistic Fallacy) by environmentalists and non-environmentalists alike. Despite the important critical and constructive work that the fact/value distinction does through his book, Foss's somewhat cavalier presentation of this highly contentious claim (including his sentience-based theory of natural value) comes across as one of the weakest aspects of his work.

Another highly puzzling aspect of Foss's book is his use of such key words as 'nature', 'system', and 'good'. The terms are used in so many different ways, with so many different meanings, that it is unclear at times how he is using them or what he intends them to mean. This is particularly problematic in Foss's very frequent use of expressions like 'nature as a whole' or 'the good of the whole', expressions that he uses on a regular basis even though he has explicitly argued that there can be no such thing as 'nature as a whole' (for nature is not a *system*) and no such thing as 'the good of the whole' (for there is no 'whole of nature' to which a good, e.g., a 'healthy' state, can be assigned).

Foss's criticisms of what he calls environmentalism are cutting; and while there are many places where his claims are either overstated or unsupported, there are plenty of more places where he hits the mark and hits it well. If nothing else, his criticisms should prompt others to either rethink their positions or begin to develop and defend them in a more careful, rigorous manner.

Foss's constructive attempt at developing a philosophy of nature is both bold and surprising, but it is painfully underdeveloped and seems harshly at odds with the highly deflationary, analytic framework upon which it is built. Foss's 'philosophy of nature' is riddled with unresolved tensions that will need more careful, systematic treatment before his proposals will pass the test of serious philosophical scrutiny. This is particularly true

of his theory of value, his account of science and technology (particularly the latter, which he still treats as mere applied science), and his rather limited, deductivist appeals to logic. On this last count, a turn towards the insights of argumentation theory may be helpful.

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