

The Case for an Environmentalist Reformation: or, why Foss may be an Environmentalist after all.

Christopher Mitchell

2000

Part A

The first thesis, in fact the primary focus of Foss' paper, is the claim that environmentalism is antiscientific. It is the case, Foss contends, that "environmentalism is a religion" [Foss, 1]¹. This claim is supported in the body of Foss' arguments and many of the other theses that Foss advances are by way of support for this claim. None of the arguments are conclusive, of course. However, taken together, the premises do make a strong case for his thesis. First, there is the observation that, like religions and many political ideologies, there is the initial identification "of some goal which is more important than the happiness --or lives-- of individuals" [1]. In environmentalism this is the need to 'save the world'. This, obviously, urgent agenda may justify all manner of violence to achieve its ends.

Secondly, the majority of environmentalists "simply [take] it on faith that" [ibid.] the "central creed of environmentalism" [ibid.] is true --- human beings are "degrading the environment at an unsustainable rate" [ibid.]. This is due to the fact that the 'front-line' environmentalists, indeed, the "vast bulk of humanity" [1] do not have the requisite scientific understanding to claim anything more than a good faith belief that this 'central creed' is proven. Furthermore, that environmentalists claim that the 'central creed' is proven *at all* indicates a profound lack understanding of the degree of certainty available to scientific endeavors. Scientific proof is *not* conclusive and is perpetually disputative. This fact, Foss asserts, is both ignored and underrated by environmentalists.

In addition to this is the curious fact that, while environmentalists generally blame science and technology for most of the world's ills, they are

¹ This paper is in response to a paper presented by Jeff Foss "Why I am not an Environmentalist" (Lecture @ University of Victoria: Department of Philosophy. Dec. 3rd. 1999).

“quick to fasten onto any scientific proposal which supports their faith” [2]. Therefore, Foss asserts that environmentalists have, in effect, both an uncritical and hypocritical attitude towards scientific evidence. It shows what may even be logical inconsistencies in the environmentalist’s position. If they accept scientific evidence *at all*, then they must accept that the issues of environmentalism are in dispute, which they do not. Therefore, their position is incoherent, or at least deeply flawed.

Which is to say nothing of the nature of environmentally scientific endeavors. Foss argues that environmental science must involve the synthesis of vast amounts of information. Environmental scientists, however, must restrict themselves to small areas of expertise. This produces a “logical gap” [2] between the research conducted and the final, generally apocalyptic, claims of environmental scientists. It is for these reasons that he claims that environmental science is:

oriented away from ordinary science, away from analysis and specialization and towards synthesis and broad expertise ... it will be necessary for the environmental scientist to do his or her research primarily in the library, consuming, rather than producing, empirical information. ... the environmental scientist looks and feels much more like a humanist than a scientist [p.3].

Therefore, it simply is not the case that anyone *knows* anything at all about the future state of the world, in this regard. Furthermore, even the hypothetical states of the world are very much in dispute. It is not the case that there is an established scientific view on this position. Therefore, any claim to the contrary is simply the same kind of unreasoned faith that is betrayed when someone affirms that they *know* that it was the Virgin Mary who appeared to them on the billboard on the freeway. It is religious faith.

Finally, there is the thesis, in direct opposition to these environmentalist claims, that *there is no* scientific evidence which ‘makes the case’ for the belief that there is an impending danger of global destruction by

means of environmental collapse. For one thing, Foss observes, there is the fact that both the Alvarez comet and a series of devastating ice-ages have not managed to end life on earth. He states, in a slightly different but still relevant context, "it is surely arrogance for us to assume that we have much influence" [6]. We cannot reproduce or even approximate the destructive power of these events and yet life survived. Therefore, the environment does not need saving. It survived that devastation, it shall survive us. A related point is that significant environmental concerns, such as the destruction of the rain forest, pale to insignificance when viewed from such a long-term perspective. Particular rain forests are no more a necessary or "permanent part of the biosphere than [our] lawns" [4].

Which brings us to another point: Foss claims that environmentalism has its roots in mythological thinking. He states "it is clear that environmentalists feel a great love for nature *in an idealized form*" [Foss, 5, original emphasis]. Foss argues that it is sheer prejudice or romantic thinking which lies at the root of environmentalism. Environmentalists, he asserts, argue for a mythical Rousseau-esque realm in which all lived in harmony with each other. Life, Foss seems to assert, is all Hobbes: "Human beings of old, like the few stone-age peoples still living today, had lives nastier and shorter than our own" [4]. In accordance with this view, environmentalists adopt a variety of 'original sin' in which all evil is attributed to human technological success. For these reasons, Foss asserts that environmental thinking is both "unscientific [and] antiscientific" [5].

Foss spends much of his time arguing against such popularized issues as global warming, the ozone layer 'hole' and the reduction of biodiversity. However, I shall not deal explicitly with these arguments due to time constraints, and because they are not pertinent to my position. Finally, Foss spends some time advancing what he feels would be a reasonable methodology for a "[g]enuine environmentalism" [Foss, 8]. I shall postpone my exegesis of this section until the second part of the essay. Since Foss anticipates many of the arguments I shall offer, it will be easier to deal with his replies in turn.

Part B

For the second half of the paper I shall, primarily, argue against the thesis that environmentalism is religious, or at least that it is always religious. I must qualify my statement in this way because I genuinely believe that environmentalism is sometimes religious. I, myself, know many people of this kind of conviction. However, I believe that it is over-generalizing to state "environmentalism is a religion" [1] and Foss does so. Therefore, the general thrust of my argument is that Foss argues against a straw --albeit organically grown -- person. Consequently, I must examine Foss' arguments to see if there is room for a coherent, though non-religious environmentalism. Foss himself argues for the kind of approach I shall illicit in the end of his paper, which is the reason for the title of this paper.

Argument from Scientific understanding

First, there is the argument from "scientific understanding". Foss suggests, correctly I would assume, that since the majority of people do not have the scientific knowledge to even understand scientific data, that they must believe simply on *faith* that the world is being destroyed by environmental degradation. However, this evidence of faith is not, necessarily, evidence of religious faith. Consider current reports that exposure to television violence increases antisocial behavior in children. This data is highly disputed and no firm conclusion has been, nor is likely to be drawn. However, parents across the world are conscious of this information as they decide what they will allow their children to watch. My point is this: when technology or science raises the possibility that some harm is being incurred by our actions -- we are forced to take this possibility into account. Furthermore, depending on the nature of the harm incurred, we are forced to take action (political action, I am not advocating the violence that Foss is, rightly, mindful of). There has been scientific evidence, reported by supposedly reputable scientists, that there is global environmental danger. If people, especially people who did *not* understand the science, refused to take any action at all this could be considered at least morally negligent. If a fireman told you that he strongly suspected that your house was burning

down, you would be reasonably justified in trying to find a hose and some friends to help you use it. My point is simply this, it is not necessarily religious faith that motivates people to become environmentalists, it is their faith in science. Furthermore, this is a faith that is *justified* insofar as it is necessary to take an ethical stand on scientific and technological issues that may affect the well-being of ourselves and future generations. Of course, this is very much like an environmental version of Pascal's wager. Which may make it smack of religion anyway. However, I do believe that it shows that someone could come to have environmental conviction (pun intended) without necessarily being accused of being unreasonable, or religious.

Argument from Scientific Double standard

Foss suggests that environmentalists employ a "double standard" in their attitude towards science. He argues that though science is criticized as the destroyer of nature, environmentalists often use scientific evidence as support for their claims. But I do not really believe that this is, necessarily, either an accurate portrayal of environmental connection to science, or a persuasive interpretation of the environmental reasoning. For instance, consider the person who has come to their belief in environmentalism through any of the scientifically presented literature that is available. Subsequently, they come to the belief that science itself is to blame for the, alleged, destruction of the world. Thereafter, they read more scientific evidence that there is an impending global disaster. Now, the belief that this supports their view does not in any way put them in any inconsistency. They do not deny that science gets answers, it is what those answers lead to that is criticized. Environmentalists may argue, coherently, that technology proves itself to be damaging to the environment. In other words this may not be evidence of a double standard, it may simply be ironic. However, Foss argues, in his comments for this paper, many environmentalists deny that there is a split between technology and science. Many, but not all. It is my contention that environmentalism is a multifaceted organism which many branches and many interpretations. Many environmentalists are more than happy to use newly developed technologies in their efforts to clean up past disasters. For example, environmentalists welcome the invention of new

compounds that aid in the removal of oil spills. This is not hypocrisy; it is the recognition that science may provide answers to some of the problems it has created.

The next points are linked. As stated in section A, Foss argues that there is no evidence for global environmental collapse partly because there is no possibility that we will destroy the environment. The ice ages could not accomplish destruction, after all, nor shall we. However, while it may be the case that some environmentalists argue that this kind of 'scorched earth' scenario will occur, I definitely do not think this is representative of the entire class. Sure, the environment will persist in *some* form, it just might not be one that any of us enjoys very much, or is around to see. This is certainly not an irrelevant consideration. Foss argues, in his commentary, however, that there is:

[n]o evidence of this. [And that, furthermore], many environmentalists *deny the pleasures* (driving, flying to Europe, using electronic media, etc.) which harm the environment. People have too much enjoyment - at the cost of nature - so they say. David Suzuki, for example, calls for an entire restructuring of society in small agrarian groups.

However, this is not necessarily the kind of enjoyment that I had in mind. I should have been more specific in referencing such *quality of life* issues, such as access to clean drinking water, and an un-degraded environment in which to raise our children. There is *certainly* evidence that people's lives are being affected by the degradation of their water supply. Of course, some degradation of this kind is inevitable. We cannot, as a species of over six billion, expect to incur no damage. The question is how much? How should the world be?

Foss sees some evidence of mythical thinking on the part of environmentalists. He argues for the theory that environmentalists seek for a return to the good-old days, a mythical time like that of the Garden of Eden. This is, I believe, the most uncontentiously straw-like section of the

argument. Many, perhaps most, environmentalists would be extremely happy to see the alleged environmental damage slowed at all, let alone stopped, or reversed. While there are, obviously, thousands of the Luddite-like variety of environmentalists out there, and in their case, as with many of the other arguments, Foss' criticisms may hold; it is not the case that this mythical thinking is evidenced by all.

Furthermore, Foss states, "[s]pecies themselves may win or may lose" [5]. But, is it not possible that some species might lose by over depleting their resources? Therefore, a species that wanted to safeguard against this evolutionary possibility should attempt some measures to secure against it. Examples of this kind of research would include the over farming of land and the pollution of fields and streams. These are relevant environmental concerns. In this respect environmentalism may certainly be viewed as *conservative* but not, necessarily, as religious. Foss responds by asserting, "No one has shown any danger to our species. There are ever more of us, living ever longer, more healthy lives". However, this objection misses the point, while managing to reassert the problem. It is precisely the fact that we are increasing our numbers and life span so dramatically that leads to concerns about the possibility of outstripping our resources. While we may not have shown any danger to the species as such, we have witnessed the effects of over farming on land, and the subsequent effects of this problem on the populations that inhabit them. Ethiopia *was* once known as the "breadbasket of Africa" after all. The leap, logically, from localized environmental degradation to global degradation is not so great that it should not engender both concern and effort to ensure that that kind of disaster does not take place on a global scale.

Foss is completely aware of this kind of environmentalism. He, in fact, endorses it at the end of the paper. He goes on to caution environmentalists against violence or assuming the right to impose their views on others. He reminds us that "we are, every one of us, equally, children of the environment, whether rich or poor, multinational executive or green farmer" [9]. However, and I believe this must be said, it is not clear that it is the environmental groups that need to be reminded of this. Incidents like the accidents in Bhopal, India, or Chernobyl, or like the Exxon Valdez crash, or, perhaps most importantly, like the bombing of the Green peace vessel the

Rainbow Warrior by the French government indicate that corporations and governments are quite capable of making horrific mistakes, or in taking overt violent action, at the cost of human and animal life and suffering. This evidence, surely, justifies the public taking an aggressive, if not too aggressive, stance on their multinational roommates. They are people just like us, yes. But that is a double-edged sword, and we *know* they are not *all* innocent. Once again, I do believe it is reasonable to be suspicious of multinational corporations, simply because of human nature (not original sin) and the vast quantities of money involved, even if it is not reasonable to be violently confrontational with them. Foss responds to these criticisms by stating that "environmentalists usually argue that there should not be pesticide manufacturing or fossil fuel use *in the first place*. They do not try to see that accidents are avoided -- rather they call for the death of multinational industries, banishing the W.T.O. etc.". However, this point is irrelevant to the issue of whether or not beliefs of this kind are characteristic of environmentalism, as a whole.

In conclusion I should say that I have not offered any substantive refutations of Foss' position. It is quite clear that it is important that his arguments are relevant to many environmentalists. Furthermore, Foss himself endorses a kind of environmentalism. I have, however, attempted to show that it is not the case that environmentalism is exhausted by his arguments. It is not entirely clear that Foss intends for this to be a sweeping indictment of environmentalism in general. He does offer his own account of an environmental ethic. However, the 'over-generalized' interpretation is suggested, both, by the title and by the fact that Foss repeatedly states "environmentalism is a religion" [1]. This is in fact his primary thesis. If this is so, I believe that this is a mistake. In his final comment to my paper Foss asks "But what remains of environmentalism [under this construction] is not quite like any version I've ever seen before. What is a Christian without Apocalypse and sinful human nature? Environmentalists need this too." Is this true? Are environmentalists to be equated with fundamentalists who will brook no change in the basic tenets of their faith? I do not believe, yet, that there is any evidence that this is the case.

However, from this comment, perhaps, we can see a guideline emerging. For it is if and only if environmentalism does *foster* varying perspectives, some of which that are incompatible with the generally accepted view, that it will indicate that it is not a social phenomenon such as a single unified religion with a dominant set of prescribed tenets. In such cases, we should see that environmentalism is best perceived as a subset of ethical theory -- on a par with biomedical ethics, or the ethical treatment of animals. Just so, it is precisely when it does not foster such debate that environmentalism may be viewed as constituting, essentially, religious thinking. In such a case we would be enjoined, as with all religious groups, to be, respectful of a genuine human conviction, while remaining mindful, both, of the possibly irrational or nonscientific conclusions of the thinkers and the subsequent actions of their overzealous followers. Whether or not it is the first or the second kind of environmentalism that is accepted by the majority of its adherents, or over time, remains to be seen and is, as a matter of fact, a purely contingent matter. It is certainly true that environmentalism can be religious, and unscientific, and reactionary and, quite simply, conservative; however, this does not, necessarily, make it the case that it is *always* these things. Nor, that was ever best understood as those things, in the first place.