

Richard Pickard
University of Victoria, Canada

Jeffrey E. Foss, *Beyond Environmentalism. A Philosophy of Nature* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009), xii+325 pp.

When I finished reading Jeffrey E. Foss' *Beyond Environmentalism: A Philosophy of Nature*, one recent evening, I walked out of my house, across the street into the local golf course. It was late, so there was little natural light as I padded through the grass and over the rocky outcroppings, working my way around the swashing sprinklers that keep the fairways lush and greens receptive. On arriving at the course's dark centre, not far from the pond to which my dog occasionally vanishes and from which he's subsequently flushed by cranky golfers, I stopped to stare upward for as long as my neck could manage it.

The Perseid meteor shower. With more than eighty large fragments per hour, it's truly a magnificent spectacle, offering little material significance for the planet but great pleasure to humans observing it. This year, however, in spite of my admittedly feeble efforts, I was not one of its observers. Although the skies were clear, the bowl of suffused light rising from the streets around the golf course meant that I couldn't locate a single one of the meteors. The stars, and the world, weren't the way they'd been last August.

The traditional environmentalist reading of this experience would involve a critique of the simulated nature in which I tried to experience unmodified nature; a lament or attack on the sources of light pollution; and possibly a dismissal of my naivety in looking skyward for unmodified nature, rather than taking action against the wanton modification of nature all around me. What, though, would Jeff Foss' reading be, given the confrontational tenor and oppositional title of his book?

And make no mistake: *Beyond Environmentalism* is directly confrontational. Most chapters begin with a folksy story attesting to Foss' love for nature (caring for his aged dog, camping on a glacier with his brother), but inevitably they move on to explicit objections to environmentalism's core principles. More than that, many chapters contain what Foss calls "case studies," in which he explains why the environmentalist understanding of a particular circumstance is mistaken: eight pages on the lack of science behind recycling programs, fifty-five pages explaining why global warming "is insignificant—a nuisance, not a catastrophe," if it's happening at all (164). Throughout, Foss tries both to assert his love for nature and to tear down the value claims of those with a similar love but a dissimilar philosophy. Those who share his vision will, I think, find *Beyond Environmentalism* compelling and exciting reading; those who do not, will at best find the book difficult to finish.

It's rarely wise to debate logic with a philosopher, but at bottom, the book's logic is what troubles me. Early on in the book, Foss makes a distinction between what he calls "pure environmentalism" and "mixed environmentalism," remarking that in the

pure form, “the good of the environment is of value in and of itself, [...] and all other values are valuable as means to it” (42). While this may sound uncontroversial, in fact Foss sees pure environmentalism as a “transcendent objective,” something so intensely valued that it can motivate humans to engage in destructive, even murderous behaviour. Given this understanding, it makes sense that Foss would go on to argue that “[if] we want to understand environmentalism, we need to study it in its pure form” (43). Reasonable so far, except that Foss has already made a significant caveat: “Actual environmentalists tend to practice some form of *mixed environmentalism*, in which environmentalist values as such are just one set of values among others, a part of their value system that does not dominate the system as a whole” (42, emphasis in original). What these opening arguments clarify, it seems to me, is that Foss’ principal argument is not with actual (mixed) environmentalists, but with this construct of pure environmentalism.

As a result, the confrontational tone of the book feels misplaced, because the confrontation it will spark is with individual environmentalists, not with environmentalism as such. If Foss feels that actual environmentalists follow mixed rather than pure environmentalism, then why not engage with mixed environmentalism? If certain environmentalist tenets are founded on inadequate scientific information (such as recycling programs or global warming protocols), why attack the actions’ supporters, rather than arguing straightforwardly that the actions should be conclusively assessed? While the book’s principle suggests an argument with pure environmentalism, his tone outside the chapter openings seems calculated to upset a reader self-identifying as an environmentalist. As Foss notes early on in the book, he has long been engaged in conflict over these ideas at his (and my) home institution; the approach taken in this book will do nothing to soothe that conflict.

In some ways, *Beyond Environmentalism*’s confrontational approach is likely to have the unfortunate effect of masking what might be a truly revolutionary core concept, which would otherwise be the basis for assessing the book’s worth. After all the case studies attacking popular environmentalism’s articles of faith, after the stinging critiques of key figures in environmentalism’s canon (Rachel Carson, David Suzuki, J. Baird Callicott), Foss concludes by elaborating at length on an idea mentioned briefly in an early footnote: “We now have the potential to become the nervous system of the planet, in the same way that neurons became the nervous systems of animals. This we should do for the good of the whole, which has struggled valiantly, but blindly, until now. We can give it sight” (45, n.2).

Foss very deliberately argues this point throughout the book’s final chapter. Only when we are truly free from conditions of want, he proposes, can we ever be expected to act on behalf of those who might compete with us for the things we want: “Our struggle with nature must be won before we can sympathize with our former competitors” (295). Once humans around the globe are in a state of natural freedom—comparatively free from work, suffering, and death—then humanity can, and perhaps must, move fully into the role of the planet’s nervous system. Just as the human brain

uses the human body's assorted abilities in the service of survival, so would humanity use the planet's assorted abilities and tendencies to support the planet's own survival.

If there is innately no ultimate meaning to existence, except perhaps for achieving the consciousness of existence itself, then there may well be great honour in taking on the three-part role of collecting information about the state of the Earth; storing and assessing that information; and taking all possible actions in response to those assessments (274). For example, if global warming is happening (though Foss doesn't believe that it is), and if it threatens the continued existence of the Earth as a biologically rich place (though Foss believes that it doesn't, to the extent that it's happening at all), then we should use all of the planet's resources, including our most advanced technologies, to reverse global warming. Only through consciously taking on this role of planetary nervous system will we "justify our existence from the point of view of environmental values" (278).

In the end, though, this concept of a planetary nervous system, which appears at first possibly revolutionary, is difficult to assess. Not long before the book's end, Foss almost offhandedly remarks that this imagined role may not be "so different from being wise stewards of the Earth, with the exception that we are self-employed and are among the things we tend" (296). The book's philosophy is rigorously utilitarian, too, using a strict calculus of pleasure and pain that so privileges consciousness as to render humanity almost entirely separate from nature, in spite of his repeated insistences that humans are a natural species: just one of the animals, so to speak. Humans need to be privileged because of "our special place in the natural order," an assessment that Foss considers "not selfish or arrogant" (299), because we're the only ones capable of giving meaning to the planet's existence. Taken together, these very traditional assumptions undermine the nervous system concept, because they suggest that it may be simply a metaphor that updates (without changing) our inherited self-centredness as a species.

If Foss is serious about articulating this concept further, and in future work can avoid sliding into new-age phraseology (phraseology that's pleasantly absent from *Beyond Environmentalism*), then he will need to explain how it differs from these older traditions of stewardship and human exceptionalism. As it stands, *Beyond Environmentalism* appears torn between moving toward a new understanding of the human place in the world, and returning to an older view of the human place in the world that sees environmentalism as a destructive, unfortunate detour.

None of which, mind you, affected the visibility of the Perseid meteor shower that night, or indeed on the nights since then. The meteors still flash across the sky, I hear, though one cannot see them from my house.