

“Arne Næss’ Complex Legacy,” a report by Thomas Crowley

This summer, I put my mark on deep ecology in a literal way. On an unseasonably warm day atop Norway’s Hardangervidda plateau, I helped put a layer of thick black paint on Arne Næss’ mountain hut. Næss, coiner of the term “deep ecology,” has become a grandfatherly figure for many environmentalists, and his hut, Tvergastein, has achieved near-mythic status among his devotees. While researching deep ecology and its roots in Norwegian ecophilosophy, I spent two days at Tvergastein with Gunnar Breivik, a philosopher and long-time friend of Næss.

The cabin reveals Næss’ many interests. Old climbing shoes hang from a nail next to antiquated climbing gear, a reminder of Næss’ days as a world-class mountaineer. Little vials filled with brightly colored materials line one shelf, a testament to Næss’ love of chemistry. Behind two sagging chairs, an old record player stands witness to Næss’ passion for music; he once considered becoming a professional pianist. Books – from math textbooks to climbing reports to astronomy books to novels to (of course) philosophical works – overflow from the shelves, showing that Næss is, at heart, an academic.

Situated on a barren but beautiful mountain plateau, Tvergastein has been Næss’ refuge, a place to live the simple life in nature while contemplating semantics, skepticism, Spinoza, Gandhian non-violence, and ecophilosophy (all subjects on which he has written extensively). But while Tvergastein represents the peace and quiet beauty Naess sees in nature, it also highlights his detachment from the world of human interaction and concerns of social justice. His critics, of course, have not ignored this last point.

Næss’ legacy is a controversial one. Undoubtedly, he has been an inspiration to many. One can only marvel at his long list of accomplishments: first ascent of Pakistan’s Tirich Mir; leader in the Norwegian Nazi resistance movement; youngest person to be appointed professor of philosophy at the University of Oslo; acclaimed as a rising star by members of the influential Vienna circle; reformer of the Norwegian education system; leader in the field of environmental philosophy. However, he has his detractors, who see him as oblivious, arrogant, or worse. But while some in Norway seem to be staking their careers on smashing the idol of Næss, others have brought forth more balanced responses and supplements to his philosophy.

Much of the harsher criticism directed at Næss stems from his complex relationship with deep ecology. In Næss’ parlance, the term “deep ecology” originally denoted a deep questioning

of the philosophical and cultural roots of the ecological crisis. Deep ecology has since become associated with Næss' personal philosophy and with increasingly dogmatic American and Australian elaborations of this philosophy. Some American environmentalists now describe Næss as mythic dispenser of wisdom. This hero worship does a disservice to Næss, whose philosophy has for decades valued skeptical questioning over rigid theories, and to other Norwegian philosophers, who are forced to live in Næss' long shadow. It also provides fodder for Næss' critics, who portray him as almost a philosophical demagogue, winning over the masses but engaging in imprecise, socially detached philosophy.

When I met with other Norwegian philosophers this summer, I found that their theories, which have yet to receive much attention outside of Norway, supplement, challenge and expand Næss' philosophy while avoiding the strident criticism of his detractors. Næss' influence on these philosophers is undeniable: he has mentored four of them and served as an ideological opponent for a fifth. However, each has developed a unique philosophy that addresses gaps in Næss' own thought. Sigmund Kvaløy has emphasized the social and political dimensions of the ecological crisis. He has led Gandhian "experiments with truth," chaining himself to boulders and barricading himself inside a makeshift arctic teepee (complete with meter-thick walls of snow, ice, rocks and wire) to protest the damming of Norwegian waterfalls. Another example: Nils Faarlund, an outdoor educator, has focused his philosophical work on *friluftslif* (the Norwegian tradition of wilderness exploration), thus bridging the experiential and the philosophical in a more explicit way than Næss. As a participant in Faarlund's glacier travel course, I saw his philosophy permeate all his actions. No matter how heavy the rain or biting the wind, he would amble comfortably along, stopping to point out particularly beautiful arctic flowers and peculiar rock formations, his deep respect for nature always shining through.

Finally, Per Ingvar Haukeland, a professor of philosophy and a farmer, has combined the theoretical and the practical with his work on sustainability. Collaborating with farmers from the Telemark region, he is working to produce food that "has a story," that is not just mass produced, but lovingly (and sustainably) made. I sampled some of this food – goat jerky and a goat meat pate – as we hiked through an abandoned farm overrun with weeds and shrubs. "In a way," he tells me, "this could be seen as a triumph of nature. But I would much rather figure out a way humans can live on this land in a productive, ecologically healthy way."

Unfortunately, the diversity of Norwegian ecophilosophy, which Næss himself highly values, has been obscured by Næss' very fame. The Wikipedia entry for Næss (not an accurate academic source, surely, but a good indicator of common perceptions and misperceptions about an issue) not only puts him at the vanguard of the Mardøla dam protest, but also claims that the action was a success. In truth, Kvaløy's ecopolitical group (snm) was the driving force behind the rallies – Næss only made a cameo appearance – and in the end the Mardøla was dammed. If it was a victory in any way, it was a moral victory because it served as rallying cry for further environmental activism – a cry sounded by (snm) and only echoed by Næss.

None of these critiques, misperceptions and elaborations should detract from Næss' pioneering intellectual work and his reverence for the natural world. He remains an inspiring, charismatic proponent of ecophilosophy. A week before my trip to Tvergastein, I met Næss in his nursing home. He had just returned from northern Norway, where he had been named the "Mountain Goat of the Year" by the Norwegian Mountain Touring Association. Now ninety-four and suffering from Alzheimer's, Næss drifts in and out of conversation, easily distracted by the background music, especially the classical music he devoted so many years of his childhood to playing. Although he has lost his ability for nuanced philosophical conversation, he has lost neither his sense of wonder nor his overriding skepticism. He expresses wonder that he is still alive and that he has lived such a full life. He is skeptical, though, of his ability to draw any final conclusions from his many rich experiences.

At one point in our conversation, he abruptly stopped talking when he noticed the flower in a pot on the coffee table. "Look at that," he said. "It looks so happy. It is opening up to us. It is a shame that we cannot stop and give it its due respect, staring at it in silence for an hour."