

“Open Letter to Thomas Crowley” by Tim Quick

Dear Thomas:

I was glad to read in the *ISEE Newsletter*, 17.3, that you got to visit Arne Naess. He is certainly one of the twentieth century’s pre-eminent thinkers. I have had the privilege twice myself – once in October, 2002, and once in April, 2006, shortly before your visit. Both experiences have been formative in my understanding of Naess’s work, especially this last visit.

However, I was rather dismayed at your portrayal of Arne, and several inaccuracies must be corrected. Someone with as complex and sophisticated a character as Naess must be scrutinized with care and deserves a much more thorough representation than what you’ve done.

First, you wrote that the time Arne spends at his mountain hut on Tvergastein “highlights his detachment from the world of human interaction and concerns of social justice.” This is absolute nonsense! Statements like these belong in *The National Enquirer* and should never have been put into print by ISEE. Naess has been arrested several times in Norway for both environmental and social justice causes; he took early retirement (age 57) to focus on environmental and social justice issues; he has lectured in many countries around the world making a special point of how both the environmental and social justice movements are motivated by compassion; the central focus of his adult life has been to inspire other human beings to cultivate their own personal ecosophies (ecological wisdom).

Of course Arne has critics. But you mention none by name, which leaves me suspicious as to the legitimacy of their claims. As a philosophy undergraduate you must know that not citing a source undermines your position, demoting it to mere opinion. We may as well just use gossip columnists as “sources.”

I’m also puzzled by your claim that Arne suffers from Alzheimer’s. Perhaps, but he did just turn 95 years old (January 27). But neither Kit-Fai, Arne’s wife, nor anyone else mentioned it during my April visit. One of my talks with Arne took place on the patio of his apartment where we enjoyed a warm, sunny Oslo afternoon and had an extended discussion on ontology while Kit-Fai made us dinner. Arne was lucid and focused the entire time (about 45 minutes). He did not “drift in and out of conversation” (p. 25) as you think he did with you. It’s more likely that Arne was bored. He does not engage in small talk; he has a mind like a thoroughbred race horse: it needs to run! To portray Arne as senile, “easily distracted by the background music” is really unfortunate as in all likelihood you were unfamiliar with his tactics.

One thing we should note is that there is always a pedagogical dimension to Arne's writings and behaviour, especially when he is talking with students. If he "abruptly stopped talking when he noticed the flower in a pot on the coffee table," (p. 25) it was most likely meant to draw your attention there too, to contemplate its existence, to try to identify with it. There is only so much we can talk about (especially deep, philosophical ideas). Behaviour is perhaps the most sincere articulation one's values.

Thomas, please reconsider your experiences with Arne. Naess, his work, and his legacy deserve much more care and attention than what came across in your "Report from the Field."

Sincerely, Tim Quick

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