

“On Being Fair And Accurate Toward Arne Naess” by George Sessions

In the summer of 2006, Yale University undergraduate Thomas Crowley visited Norway and Arne Naess and reports in the *ISEE newsletter* on the philosophical situation in Norway as he understands it. While he discusses Naess’ many achievements, he also places Naess in a bad light which he does not deserve, repeating negative comments about his personal traits and suggesting that Naess has been a loner and a misanthrope, living a solitary existence in his high mountain hut, Tvergastein. My 30 year experience of Naess, and those who know him best, indicate pretty much the opposite.

Along these lines, Crowley refers to what he describes as Naess’ “detachment from the world of human interaction and concerns of social justice,” mentioning that critics have faulted him and the deep ecology movement for their apparent lack of concern with social justice issues. This is neither fair to Arne nor is it accurate. Naess’ evolving philosophical positions (particularly during his most recent ecophilosophical phase since the late 1960’s) are widely misunderstood. In *The Trumpeter* festschrift celebrating his 80th birthday (9:2, 1992 --available online in *The Trumpeter* archives along with all past issues) there are excellent papers by Warwick Fox and Michael Zimmerman describing his philosophical development. There is a paper by Naess (“The Three Great Movements”) describing the relation of the deep ecology movement to the social justice and peace movements. Arne has been a long-time member of Amnesty International. In my paper in the festschrift “Arne Naess and the Union of Theory and Practice,” I point out how Naess has identified with the poor in Third World countries, arguing for a “global solidarity of lifestyle” with the poor. He has given away half his pension each year to worthy social causes such as reroofing a schoolhouse in Nepal. Naess likes to tell the story of walking for a week with the leader of a poor Buddhist Himalayan community to deliver a petition to the King of Nepal urging protection of their sacred mountain. In his 1991 paper, “Politics and the Ecological Crisis,” Naess reviews the platform of the Norwegian Green program and faults it for not identifying sufficiently with the plight of the Third World poor. He calls for a tenfold increase in fighting hunger among the world’s poor, especially the children.

What Naess and deep ecology theoreticians have been concerned about is that Marxist-inspired social justice movements have generally misunderstood and downplayed the nature and urgency of the rapidly developing global ecological crisis. In their zeal for promoting social justice, they have taken over ecological organizations and insisted that their social justice agenda be given primary concern. This occurred in the U. S. with the Green movement and Earth First! (I detail these issues in my reassessment of the deep ecology movement, “Wildness and Cyborgs” *The Trumpeter* 22 (2006) online; see also my review of Martha Lee’s Earth First! In *The Trumpeter*, 13, 1996). In his book on Norwegian deep ecology, David Rothenberg describes how these social justice takeovers also happened in Norway even to the major activist group SNM (founded by Sigmond Kvaloy and referred to by Crowley) which ignited Norwegian ecological activism in demonstrations for protection of the Mardola waterfall and later, the Alta river, in which Naess participated (see Rothenberg, *Wisdom In The Open Air*, pp. 234-36).

A second major issue raised by Crowley is his reporting of the claim that Naess' main concern with deep ecology is as a skeptical enterprise concerned with questioning the roots of the crisis, whereas American and Australian deep ecology theorists have become dogmatic, focusing on his personal philosophy (Ecosophy T), and seeing Naess not as a skeptic, but as a "dispenser of wisdom." This criticism was made by Peder Anker and replied to by Naess in Witozek and Brennan, *Philosophical Dialogues* (1999). But again, this fails to understand Naess' philosophical development and position.

Naess has described his philosophical development in four phases, beginning with the philosophy of science, and then semantics, to a "short third period concentrating on anti-dogmatism and Pyrrhonic skepticism," and then, about 1968, resulting in a major shift to ecological philosophy. Naess tells us, at this point, he began to see himself not only as a professional philosopher, but also as a "minor prophet" of the ecology movement (see my "Arne Naess and the Union of Theory and Practice"). Initially, he claimed to prefer the word "ecosophy" (ecological wisdom) to "deep ecology" and only shifted over to the latter when it came into wide usage. Without abandoning a healthy skepticism, which all philosophers no doubt should subscribe to, this no longer was his dominant orientation. In developing his ecological philosophy, he was also, at the same time, attempting to return the practice of philosophy to its origins as a "love of wisdom." Naess claimed in 1970 that while we need specialized academic philosophers, we also need "old fashioned maximal perspective philosophers" with a total view who act from this perspective (see my "Arne Naess' Conception of Being a Philosopher," *The Trumpeter* 13, 1996). After the Nazi occupation of Norway, his interests turned to the peace movement and to Gandhi's nonviolent techniques.

This also involved an interest in Gandhi's Hinduism and spiritual non-dualism. This led, in turn, to a search for a philosopher in the West with high levels of maturity and wisdom which he found in Spinoza, a philosopher he has admired since a teenager (see Naess' 1973 paper "The Place of Joy in a World of Fact"). In his 1978 paper, "Through Spinoza to Mahayana Buddhism or Through Mahayana Buddhism to Spinoza," (*Selected Works Of Arne Naess*, vol. IX, pp. 256-7) Naess claims that Part V of Spinoza's ETHICS "represents, as far as I can understand, Middle Eastern wisdom par excellence." Naess reinterpreted Spinoza's philosophy to reflect a contemporary ecological perspective. Most Australian and American deep ecology theorists have agreed with Naess' return to the original wisdom tradition of philosophy and, in various ways, have followed him in this endeavor. At the same time, they have accepted Naess' more philosophically neutral Eight Point characterization of the deep ecology movement. Naess is not the "founder" or "father" of the deep ecology movement. Naess refers to Rachael Carson as the founder of the movement, and this should also include Aldo Leopold, David Brower of the Sierra Club, and Paul Ehrlich and many other ecologists beginning in the 1950's in the United States.

Naess seemed to tire of writing books in the mid-1980's, and so the careful refinement of his position during the late 1980's and 90's are scattered in hundreds of published and unpublished papers. Some of these papers are found in the recently published *Selected Works Of Arne Naess*, especially vols. IX and X. But there exists no really comprehensive, up-to-date

statement of his philosophy—a truly monumental task for some enterprising scholar. Harold Glasser, the editor of the *Selected Works Of Arne Naess*, was a Fulbright scholar who worked with Naess for a number of years in Norway. He provides perhaps the best contemporary summary of Naess' philosophy in his introduction.

Naess has been walking a number of philosophical tightropes, one of which is his advocacy of a diversity of philosophical positions, claiming that Ecosophy T is just his personal philosophy. But at the same time he also seems to advocate a number of universal characteristics for this philosophy (albeit in a nondogmatic way). His advocacy of non-dualism seems to be one such universal (see my "Wildness and Cyborgs" paper). Another universal property he seems to claim for his ecosophy is the distinction he makes between the contents and the structure of reality (see his paper "Ecosophy and Gestalt Ontology" in my *Deep Ecology For The 21st Century*, 1995). For Naess, gestalts are the rock bottom contents of reality whereas theoretical science provides the structure of reality. In advocating a return to the roots of philosophy in a search for wisdom, he has argued that Western academic philosophy in the 20th century has taken a wrong turn. In his 1983 paper "How My Philosophy Seemed to Develop" (reprinted in *Selected Works*, v. IX), he claimed that "the turn of philosophy in this century towards language rather than cosmos, towards logic rather than experience ... is a turn into a vast blind alley ..." In a reply to Michael Zimmerman's characterization of his ecosophy, ("Heidegger, Postmodern Theory and Deep Ecology," *The Trumpeter* 14, 1997) he points out that his position is not a form of phenomenology. He claims that "my gestalt ontology is a sort of ontological realism in the sense that we have direct access to the contents of reality in our spontaneous experiences." He also critiques Derrida and the postmodernists. He concludes by saying that "I hope the next century will not be so preoccupied with language, and philosophical research more than postmodern, small narratives and cultural conversations." In another critique of hermeneutics and postmodernism ("How Should Supporters of the Deep Ecology Movement Behave in Order to Affect Society and Culture," *The Trumpeter*, 10, 1993), he sees postmodern (just as with the earlier infatuation with logical positivism, existentialism, the late Wittgenstein, and ordinary language philosophy) as the latest philosophical fad.

Global warming is now proceeding much faster than scientists thought possible, with all the ice around the world melting at an accelerating rate and ecosystems worldwide being severely disrupted. Global warming has dramatically refocused attention on the ecological crisis, the issue of the survival of humanity, and the ecological state of the Earth in a way that biodiversity and wild ecosystem loss alone has been unable to do. The deep ecology movement has been most closely allied with a scientific understanding of the crisis, and with prescriptions by scientists such as Paul Ehrlich for dealing with the crisis (see the Ehrlich's *One With Nineveh*, 2004). Derrida has often been cited as the most important philosopher of the latter half of the 20th century. In my "Wildness and Cyborgs" paper, I critique the postmodernists for their approaches to Nature, and survey and critique the various contemporary ecophilosophical positions. Without engaging in what Crowley refers to as widespread "hero worship" for Naess, I think that an accurate and comprehensive assessment of Naess' work in ecosophy, in returning

philosophy to its roots in the “wisdom traditions” of the East and West with Gandhi and Spinoza, and in characterizing and promoting the deep ecology movement, would qualify Naess to be considered the most important and relevant philosopher of our time. An adequate and comprehensive ecophilosophical approach to dealing with our overwhelming contemporary social/ecological predicament seems necessary to guide us through the perilous 21st century.

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