“Letter to the Editor” by Thomas Crowley

To the editor:

I feel compelled to reply to the four responses to my report “Arne Naess’ Complex Legacy.” First, I want to repeat the apology of the ISEE editor regarding Arne Naess’ medical condition. Since writing the report, I have learned that Naess has not been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. I am sorry for any confusion this has caused.

I intended my article to be a nuanced but positive portrayal of Naess (I did, after all, call him an “inspiring, charismatic proponent of ecophilosophy” who has done “pioneering intellectual work”); nevertheless some of Naess’ supporters read my article as a way, in Bill Devall’s words, “to discredit the scholarship of SWAN [the Selected Works of Arne Naess] and to personally attack Naess’ integrity,” surely not my intention. My report did mention Naess’ critics and their criticisms, but the respondents amplify the criticisms, reading my descriptions of Naess in the worst possible light. I worry that the one-sided responses to my article confirm the trend I described therein: people either venerate Naess or despise him, failing to see him as a real human being with both strengths and weaknesses. The responses also confirmed another of my report’s findings: that Naess’ fame has overshadowed the important work of the Norwegians he collaborated with and inspired. None of the responses mentioned (except once, in passing) the other Norwegian philosophers I discussed. While Naess has not sought out this fame, and he has actively promoted the work of his colleagues, many keep the limelight focused solely on Naess. As Naess himself reports (Rothenberg 1993: 133), he did not have a major role in the Mardøla protest, but the media needed a star, so they choose the well-known Naess. However, the notion of Naess as the mastermind of the protest still persists (see, for instance, LaChapelle 1978: 154).

To address a few of the respondent’s specific concerns:

In his letter, Tim Quick criticized my lack of sources, stating that because I did not directly cite any of Naess’ critics, he was “suspicious as to the legitimacy of [the critics’ claims].” I chose not to include sources because I considered my report to be an informal sketch of Naess and his Norwegian colleagues, not because such sources do not exist or are not legitimate. Such sources include Anker (2003), who criticizes Naess directly, and Guha (1989) and Bookchin (1987), who criticize the larger deep ecology movement that Naess supports. While I do not agree with all the arguments of these critics, it is important to recognize their
place in Naess’ legacy. Indeed, Naess himself has welcomed criticism and eagerly responded to it, as in the exchanges chronicled in Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy.

In his response, Alan Drengson criticizes those who conflate Naess’ personal philosophy (Ecosophy T) with the deep ecology movement, implying that I have made such a mistake. However, my original report actually bemoans this conflation, which, as I noted, “does a disservice to Naess…and provides fodder for his critics.”

George Sessions, in his response to my article, takes issue with my claim that deep ecology became more dogmatic when it crossed the Atlantic. While Sessions never directly counters the claim that deep ecology is more dogmatic in its American incarnation, he does argue that Naess himself has become less skeptical and more devoted to fixed philosophies. While Naess has certainly moved away from strict Pyrrhonic skepticism, his current philosophy is perhaps suffused with more doubt and questioning than Sessions admits. During my visit with Naess, when I asked him to reflect on his own ecosophy, he said it was hard to comment because even now his ecosophy was ever-changing.

Finally, all of the responses took issue with my claim that Naess’ mountain cabin, Tvergastein, “highlights his detachment from the world of human interactions and social concerns.” As is typical of the responses, the respondents make my claim seem more extreme than it is. Devall for instance, says, “Crowley states that Naess does not have empathy with poverty and the starving people on this planet.”

The respondents to my article describe one side of Naess: someone who invites guests to Tvergastein, who writes extensively about social issues and their relation to environmental issues, who was extremely active in the Norwegian underground during Nazi occupation, who goes on walks and climbs with his friends and acquaintances, who is, in short, concerned about social justice issues both in theory and in practice.

Naess, though, ever his own harshest critic, describes another side of his personality. In one interview, he says, “I think I am to some extent a coward when it comes to fighting with people. Why did I never ‘raise hell’? ….If I had done that, I’m sure they would have listened very attentively and I could have really accomplished something, but I was just resigned to my strange view, alone” (Rothenberg 1993: 132). In the same interview, Naess freely admits to hating attending activists’ meetings (Rothenberg 1993: 133). Further, in a very positive
biographical sketch of Naess (the title, *Meeting with a Giant*, gives a good sense of the tone), the author describes Kit-Fai Naess (Arne’s wife) and her first few visits to Tvergastein: “She said, ‘as soon as Arne would get there, he would go out and I would stay alone most of the time.’ It took her years to adjust to it and realize that Arne was going to the mountain to be with the mountain, Kit-Fai said.” (Notario 2006: 110).

I believe that Naess is neither the detached recluse described by his critics nor the gregarious activist described by his most ardent supporters; the truth lies somewhere in between. This leads me back to the point I made in my original report: Naess is a great man who has accomplished and written great things, but he is only human and his legacy is open for debate. As the educator James Loewen (1995) notes, “We seem to feel that a person…can be an inspiration only so long as she remains un controversial, onedimensional. We don’t want complicated icons” (25). Loewen goes on to argue for complicated icons, stating that only when we recognizes people’s complexities, yes, even their flaws, can we see our heroes as real people we can actually emulate. So I say, here’s to Arne Naess, a complicated icon!

--Thomas Crowley, Yale University

Works Cited: