

# Ecophilosophy as a Way of Life

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## **Philosophy Today, and Its Defection from Wisdom**

Where are our philosophers now that we so urgently need them? Where are our wise ones, wrapped in the mystique of an ancient tradition, beckoning us towards a path that can save us, a path that can bring our civilisation back from the brink? We have our scientists, yes, clear-eyed truth-tellers who bravely lay out the facts of the case, the nuts and bolts of biosphere breakdown and decline. We are dependent upon them to explain to us the mechanisms underlying the new regime of climate instability and ecosystem collapse that is currently in train, and to figure out how, if at all, these biophysical mechanisms might be adjusted or corrected. But scientists make no claim to wisdom. They are as captive as the rest of us to the mores and conventions that have brought us to this pass. And yes, we have our religious leaders, guardians of faith and virtue. But they are bound to creeds, to conventions of their own, laid down long before the human impact on the biosphere became the matter of utmost concern that it is today. Indeed, these creeds were generally of axial provenance, giving definitive expression to the newly human-focused mindset that marked the early agrarian era and set the stage for the supreme anthropocentrism that has pitted our present industrial civilisation against the biosphere. As such, these ancient canons may be of limited use in guiding us towards a post-anthropocentric outlook. Where then are those whose vocation is simply wisdom, who do indeed take the trouble to understand the facts of our planetary predicament yet who also seek to free themselves from the creeds and conventions that hem us in, shaping our cultural identities and informing our social consciousness in ways that render us complicit in the forces that will destroy us?

In the West, it was traditionally the province of philosophers to encompass the knowledge of their time yet to free themselves, through a highly trained critical faculty, from the cultural conditioning that scripted the lives of their contemporaries. It was philosophers who cut through the cant and conceits of their society to hold a mirror up to maladaptive patterns of social life. Unfazed by the label, “eccentric,” untempted by high office, immune to the lure of fame or celebrity, scornful of popularity, in thrall to no pre-defined ethic, dogma, or method, they lived by the light of their own inner powers of reflective thought.

Where are they now, these sceptics who thumb their noses at public opinion and dare to be free, who follow the argument to its logical conclusion and dare to be true, in their own lives, to the consequences, opening up for the rest of us paths less trodden? People described as philosophers do of course inhabit the halls of academia. They pursue inquiries that derive from questions

handed down from philosophers of old: what is truth; what is goodness; why do we suffer; how is knowledge possible; what is the origin and nature of the universe? Unlike ancient philosophers, however, today's academic thinkers break these questions down into discrete areas of often highly specialised technical analysis. They treat such questions as predominantly *theoretical*, thereby separating them from wider, more practically oriented conversations about everyday conduct.

As paid professionals employed by an institution, academics are bound to the expectations, norms, and mores of their institution. These expectations, norms, and mores inevitably also infiltrate an academic's personal aspirations and ambitions: the quest for grants, tenure, promotion, and reputation within a chosen sub-discipline may come to dominate their professional agenda. Since the norms and mores of an institution will likely reflect the norms and mores of the economic sectors that fund them, and since academic institutions are generally funded by either the state, corporate patrons, or their own corporate initiatives, these institutions tend, at an organisational level, to internalise the corrosive values of a corporate-capitalist system premised on market values, instrumentalisation of human and non-human resources, and an ethos of competitive individualism—values that academic institutions reproduce in the protocols they apply to their employees.

In a word, while academic thinkers may be nominally free to think and publish what they like, however critical these ideas might be of the corporate-capitalist formation of which their institution is a part, they are at the same time personally captive to a mesh of tacit institutional pressures. These pressures act to discourage them from conducting their own lives in ways at odds with the structural values that their institution has internalised from the corporate-capitalist system. Whatever the academic thinker may choose to “profess” then, in face of current environmental and climate challenges to our modern industrial civilisation, they are likely to continue conducting their own life consistent with the flawed normative premises of that civilisation. As long ago as 1854, Henry Thoreau complained of this disjunction. As he put it in Chapter 1 of *Walden*, “there are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers.”

More recently, historian of ancient philosophy, Pierre Hadot, quoted this line of Thoreau's approvingly as he contrasted the figure of the contemporary philosopher with its ancient prototype.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Hadot famously spent his entire career detailing the ways in which ancient Greek philosophers—especially the Stoics and Epicureans—pursued philosophy not as the salaried pursuit of questions of a strictly theoretical tenor but as an exemplary *way of life* counter

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<sup>1</sup> Hadot, Pierre; Aaron Simmons, J; Marshall, Mason. 2005. “There are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers.” In *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, 3: 229-237. New Series, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2005).

to the social norms and conventions of their time.

It seems then that in the matter of forging a new relationship with Earth in face of the era of unravelling that is now upon us, the exclusively theoretical and institutionalised mode of thinking that currently passes for philosophy is unlikely to carry the conviction that comes from authenticity. Indeed, we have already had forty years of such thinking—under the rubric of environmental philosophy—and the state of the environment has only continued to worsen. Where environmental issues are concerned, it seems that philosophy qua purely theoretical endeavour fails to touch the psychic underlay of human motivation. Logical refutations of the anthropocentric, instrumentalist presuppositions of modernity may persuade students of environmental philosophy to commit intellectually to an ecological alternative, but rarely does this translate into changed patterns of everyday life consistent with what the Earth needs—at any rate in more than token ways. For all the professing that is going on—not only in environmental philosophy but across many environmental discourses—there are few individuals currently choosing a way of life that does not, directly or indirectly, compromise the lives of other species, and this disjunction undermines the ecological message. It is like a whisper, under the professor’s breath, that though the crisis is presented as real, it is not really real. Such schizoid inconsistency between the professed and the enacted wraps the whole present crisis in a miasma of delusionality that arguably—if we look around us at the current widespread retreat from truth—has whole populations secretly questioning the sanity either of themselves or their societies.

However, before we write philosophy off as a potential tool of remediation in our current era, let us return, with Pierre Hadot as our guide, to that historical moment in which philosophy did reveal its genuinely subversive potential—the post-classical, Hellenistic period in which the Epicurean and Stoic schools first flourished.<sup>2</sup>

### **Ancient Philosophy as a Way of Life**

Epicureanism and Stoicism were amongst the major philosophical schools of the Hellenistic period (late 4<sup>th</sup> century to late 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE). Like the other major schools, Platonism and Aristotelianism, which had come to prominence in the classical period, Epicureanism and Stoicism originated in Athens. All four schools were offered, according to Hadot, as paths to more enlightened ways of living, but they qualified as distinctively philosophical—as opposed to religious—inasmuch as they were based on reason rather than on faith, persuasion, revelation,

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<sup>2</sup> In section 2, I shall follow Hadot’s account of the two schools. See Hadot, Pierre. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Oxford, Blackwell: Oxford, 1995, translated by Arnold I. Davidson; and Hadot, Pierre. 2002. *What is Ancient Philosophy?*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, translated by Michael Chase.

or authority.

The broad aim of each of the schools was essentially to help people find composure, equanimity, and self-determination amid politically and militarily turbulent times. Where the Platonic and Aristotelian schools were relatively elite in their pitch, appealing to serious thinkers as well as catering to emerging young leaders of society anxious to enlarge their minds, the Epicurean and Stoic schools were open to everyone, including women and slaves. In none of the schools did the founding teachers charge fees: under their rule and the rule of their successors, the centres relied on the voluntary services of students as well as on private patronage for maintenance and administration. In this sense, these centres were genuinely dedicated, not to profit or the personal advancement of teachers, but to general enlightenment.<sup>3</sup>

Epicureanism and Stoicism each rested on its own distinctive set of metaphysical premises, its own doctrine concerning the nature of reality. From these premises, further implications were drawn concerning ethics and human psychology. Teachers explained and tried to justify these metaphysical doctrines, teasing out their logical implications for human behaviour. Students, in turn, were expected to memorise the teachings and regularly meditate upon them, measuring their own day-to-day conduct against them. To this end, students often lived and ate together, in the company of the teacher, forming convivial colonies of “friends” or companions, supporting one another in their shared endeavour to live rationally in accordance with their philosophical principles. As practitioners of such a principled way of life, long-term students or disciples were eventually treated as philosophers in their own right, regardless of whether or not they ever taught or authored philosophical treatises of their own.

It was expected that a thorough training in the teachings of either Epicurus or Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, would result in a genuine transformation of consciousness, a transformation that would enable disciples to respond adaptively and with equanimity to the contingencies of their times. It was by no means assumed, however, that such a change would be brought about merely by reason: a variety of experiential and physical exercises were also integral to the training. These included meditations, visualisations, acts of imagination as well as gymnastic routines in addition to the more narrowly rational arts of analysis and debate. To appreciate the roles of these various faculties in the training of philosophers, let us canvas in a little more detail—still under the guidance of Pierre Hadot—the specific teachings of Epicureanism and Stoicism respectively.

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<sup>3</sup> Minority schools, such as Skepticism (Pyrrhonism) and Cynicism, shared the basic aim of the major schools to free people from the chaotic cultural conditioning of the times, enabling them to achieve a greater degree of self-determination. The Sophists, by contrast, operated right from the start as professional teachers offering vocational training to the sons of the ruling classes. In the brief space available here, I shall focus only on Epicureanism and Stoicism as the schools most relevant to my argument regarding ecophilosophy.

It was agreed by both schools that human misery springs mainly from the judgments we make about our lives rather than from the biological reality of those lives themselves. Both schools accordingly agreed that it is our habitual value schemas that need to be suspended or revised. For Epicurus, this revision starts with an analysis of desire. Desire for pleasure is, he thought, the basis of all value. If we are to live reflectively, such value schemas must be scrutinised: desires for genuinely life-enhancing pleasures must be distinguished from, and valued above, desires for pleasures that are in the long term likely to cause suffering. Life-enhancing desires are the natural desires for necessities, such as food, water, and shelter, which are in normal circumstances easily satisfiable. Unnatural and unnecessary desires include those for goods that are beyond our reach, such as longings for wealth, fame, or celebrity, as well as desires that leave us always wanting more, such as the desires of appetite and ambition.

Natural and necessary satisfactions can be secured, and unnatural and unnecessary longings avoided, by adopting a modest, simplified life. To this end, Epicurus initiated small communities in which followers could share a convivial regime of material simplicity, contenting themselves with plain but nourishing food, clean water, and unpretentious accommodation in settings endowed with the beauties of nature and conducive to the lively pleasures of companionship and conversation.

Even such simple pleasures tend, however, to be shadowed by the prospect of death, since we cannot help but be aware that death will eventually extinguish pleasure *per se*. In order to deal with this deeper source of disquiet in life, Epicurus appealed to metaphysics in the shape of his famous doctrine of atomism. According to atomism—first advanced by the presocratic philosopher, Democritus, a century earlier—the universe consists of nothing more than material particles arranged by chance in aggregate formations in space. This materialist reduction applies as much to our own existence as to everything else: we are made, both body and soul, of atoms. When we die, our souls disintegrate, just as our bodies do: we cease to exist. This leads to the conclusion that “[a]s long as we are here, death is not; and when death is here, we are not” (Quoted in Hadot 2002, p 120). So what is there to fear? We will never experience the cessation of pleasure. True, Epicurus concedes, the gods exist. But they did not create the world and have no role in it, nor do they have any interest in human affairs. There is thus nothing to fear from them by way of an after-life of punishment or reward.

Secured against physical forms of suffering such as hunger, thirst, and cold, while also released from the manifold distractions thrown up by false desires and from anxiety with regard to death, we are finally freed to experience what Epicurus considered the ultimate *true* pleasure, namely the pleasure of simply *being*, of savouring the reality of our own existence. We can settle down inside our own skin, so to speak, to bask contentedly in the fulsomeness of our own self-presence, a contentment heightened by awe at the unlikeliness of our existence in an entirely accidental

cosmos.

Although the Epicurean preference for a particular way of life was underpinned in this way by a fully-fledged theoretical metaphysics, an Epicurean education also, as I have indicated, involved experiential arts and disciplines. These included various forms of meditation, such as the just-mentioned routine of directing one's awareness to the reality of one's own being and a further exercise of contemplating the mind-expanding infinity of the universe. Immersion in the sensory delights of nature and a practice of recalling and reliving the many pleasures of the past also figured as part of the training. Central to the whole project, however, was the art of conversation since a transformation of consciousness as deep as the one that Epicureanism sought to induce could surely only be accomplished in a communicative and socially supportive environment.

The contentment that would accrue from the Epicurean way of life, lived in comfort but without adornment, close to nature, in colloquy with intelligent companions who share the practitioner's path, seems hard to deny. Plausible too is the central intuition that in tailoring ourselves to the often exaggerated or arbitrary conventions and expectations of society, we are likely to miss the central point of life, which is simply to register and rejoice in the reality of our existence. To register the reality of our existence may indeed be to experience a sense of sufficiency and plenitude that no other experience can begin to equal. The Epicurean way of life then surely retains its relevance and appeal today.

Let us turn now to Stoicism and consider to what extent, if at all, it also retains relevance and appeal. The first thing to note is that its prescribed way of life rests on a contrasting set of doctrinal premises. Key to human flourishing, from a Stoic perspective, is not the seeking of pleasure but the seeking of the good, in a moral sense of goodness. True happiness is attainable in all circumstances only if we are, in our actions and attitudes, guided by moral intentions. This premise is, like the Epicurean premise, articulated against a backdrop of metaphysical postulates. Although also fully materialist, as is the Epicurean doctrine, Stoic physics posits a universe that is, firstly, holistic rather than atomistic, and secondly, deterministic rather than suffused with the slight frisson of spontaneity that characterises Epicurean atoms. Indeed, in the Stoic scheme of things, everything is so interconnected and inter-determining that this mesh of interconnectivity adds up to a greater unity that is not merely contingent but "self-cohering." By "self-cohering," the Stoic philosopher means that this greater unity is so structured as to preserve its own existence and integrity. Self-coherence, in this sense, may be understood by analogy with ourselves, for we too, together with all other living things, share this special characteristic—we are physically organised in such a way as to sustain and perpetuate our own identity and integrity. It is the self-coherence of the universe as a whole that explains the fact that this universe holds together and unfolds in a predictable fashion rather than disintegrating into chaos at every turn. The Stoic then sees this principle of self-coherence, ensuring the ongoing integrity of the

universe, as the reason for its existence—as its informing Reason.

Such Universal Reason, as the condition for ongoing orderly existence, is identifiable as the source of the good. Since we humans are part of this living unity that is observable to us as a universe extended in space and time, the Universal Reason that underpins this unity must also inform us: human reason must mirror, on our own finite scale and through the lenses of our own creaturely understanding, the principle that shapes the greater whole. This means that human reason will always guide us not merely towards our own individual self-coherence but towards the like self-coherence of that greater whole. In other words, human reason will guide us towards the “common good” just as categorically as it guides us towards the preservation of our own selves. To serve the common good, where the common good is inclusive of our own good, is the strictly rational purpose and logos of human life. We could call it—though Stoics themselves do not use this word—our immanent or informing moral Law.

It is hopefully clear from this brief account of Stoic physics why Stoics insisted that the key to human flourishing was reason and that reason coincided with moral intent: in practical contexts, reason would invariably incline us towards serving the common good and hence towards moral outcomes. However, such insistence on moral intent may seem to clash with the strict determinism that is also a hallmark of Stoic physics. If all human conduct is predetermined by endless chains of inter-causality, can a person elect to choose the good? Won't their choices, whether moral or immoral, be pre-set?

While Stoics emphasise that much that happens in our lives lies outside our control, in the sense that it is predetermined by material circumstances, they point out that it is nevertheless we who assign significance to these events, heavily value-loading our representations of them. When we adopt the standpoint of reason, however, and strip back these loadings, trying to perceive events just as they are in themselves rather than in subjective, emotive, and value-laden terms, we shall become much more reconciled to whatever happens. Such an attitude of objectivity applied to oneself and one's environment, combined with recognition that external circumstances are largely beyond one's control, helps one to acquiesce without protest in one's fate. An attitude of acquiescence—the proverbially “stoic” attitude—acquired through Stoic analysis, will nevertheless shift the pattern of one's conditioned responses to some extent, eventually rendering one's entire pattern of behaviour less reactive. In this way, a change merely in one's thinking will entail significant shifts in the outer course of events. At the same time, Stoics' awareness that they navigate their life by the light of reason—which is to say, by way of a faculty they take to be derived from the universal principle of self-coherence—reassures them that in all matters they are true to the good, and hence to themselves—and that nothing more can be asked of anyone than this.

Armed with this moral reassurance, Stoics are more likely than their Epicurean counterparts to play an active role in public affairs. Since they see the basic promptings of human nature as emanating from the universal principle of self-coherence and hence as morally sound, they are free to follow these promptings in their own lives, provided they remain guided in all their conduct by reason. This means they can engage in politics or other aspects of public life as well as in marriage and other normal aspects of private life.<sup>4</sup> If, or rather when, as a result of external circumstances beyond the individual's control, things do go awry, the practitioner can find refuge quietly and unobtrusively in their Stoic convictions. They are thus more equipped to live in the thick of things than Epicureans, whose metaphysical outlook inclines them towards life in a counter-cultural community of like-minded companions.

The fact that Stoics were likely to be out and about in the workaday world makes them all the more reliant—as the famous *Meditations* of Stoic Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, testifies—on assigned exercises for cultivating and sustaining their Stoic consciousness. These included, again, a variety of meditations and visualisations, such as closely examining one's inner life for subjective biases and value loadings, imagining all that could go wrong in the future course of one's life so that one is mentally prepared for misfortune, and visualizing all the objects and beings in one's environment as in a constant state of metamorphosis—decaying, decomposing, dispersing, and recomposing into new forms—so that one thereby becomes habituated to the idea of death.

One exercise shared by all the ancient schools, the “view from above,” perhaps provides a thread that unifies their disparate perspectives. To adopt the view from above was an exercise in visualisation: one was to imagine oneself travelling the star fields of outer space, on and on eternally, encountering world after flaming world without end. By way of this exercise, one's consciousness would be opened to the exhilarating immensity of the cosmos, affording relief from the pettiness of one's own and others' daily worries. At a certain point, one would arrive at our solar system, and gazing down on Earth, observe humans scurrying hither and thither like swarming ants, intent on their small ends, oblivious of the precipitous depths of the cosmos falling away on every side. Marcus Aurelius describes the exercise as follows: “Watch and see the courses of the stars as if you were running alongside them, and continually dwell in your mind upon the changes of the elements into one another; for these imaginations wash away the foulness of life on the earth. When you are reasoning about mankind, look upon earthly things below as if from some vantage point above them.”<sup>5</sup> This was the quintessentially philosophical

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<sup>4</sup> As evidence of this openness to engagement, we can look to the most famous of the ancient exemplars of Stoicism, Marcus Aurelius, Emperor of Rome, no less, whose reign was judged both by contemporaries and by historians as one of the most just in the annals of Rome.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Hadot, 1995, op cit, p 244.



exercise, according to Hadot, helping Stoics, Epicureans, Platonists, and particularly the minority school of Cynics to “rid themselves of superfluous desires, and to reject social conventions, and the whole of artificial civilisation, as being nothing but a source of worries, care, and suffering.”<sup>6</sup>

Hadot chronicles how the golden period of philosophy as an art of living, grounded in such meditations and experiential exercises, started to fade with the end of the Hellenistic period in the first century BCE and the advent of the Roman Empire, the Imperial period of ancient history. That this transition was indeed a gradual process is evidenced, again, by the example of Marcus Aurelius, who practised a seemingly very authentic form of Stoicism despite living in the 2nd century CE. The four major schools persisted into the Imperial period, but philosophy gradually became institutionalised. Centres of philosophical instruction popped up in cities right across the Roman Empire, often funded by government, but personal lines of transmission from the founding masters to successors ceased to exist, and paid professors took the place of thinkers whose own lives had previously formed the template for, and texture of, the teachings. These paid professors taught the ancient texts, but they saw their task merely as exegesis of, and commentary upon, these now canonised “authorities.” Eventually, philosophy became scholastic in tenor, the province of scholars, its centres of instruction elite establishments devoted to intellectual pursuits that we would describe today as academic.

### **Ecophilosophy as Rebirth of an Ancient Tradition**

Philosophy is arguably the very root of Western civilisation. It was in those early centuries—the classical and Hellenistic periods—that philosophy, at the heart of Athenian culture, produced an irrepressibly questioning mindset that sparkled with a wit and liveliness that has rarely since been equalled. This sparkle of open-mindedness, admittedly subsequently almost quenched by a thousand years of Christian dogmatism, is still, one dares to hope, the positive hallmark of the Western outlook today. However, the scholastic, exclusively abstract and theoretical turn that philosophy took post the Hellenistic period arguably, along with Christianity, paved the way for the dualistic tendency that has been such a fatal feature of Western modernity, underpinning the techno-industrial era and thereby spawning the current crisis of the biosphere.<sup>7</sup> Instead of

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<sup>6</sup> Hadot 1995, op cit, p 247.

<sup>7</sup> I have written extensively elsewhere on the way in which *theoria*—the process of theorising—enacts, at a phenomenological level, a subject/object split that informs all the subsequent mind-matter binaries that structure the Western tradition. This is not to say that *theoria* is the root cause of dualism—I argue that this dualistic tendency can be traced back to the separation of human praxis from the larger sphere of nature that occurred with the advent of agrarianism. It is to say, however, that this dualistic tendency was uniquely reinforced, amongst civilisations, by the ancient Greek discovery of *theoria*. See, for example, Mathews, Freya. 2017. “Invoking the Real: From the Specular to the Ontopoetic.” In *For a New Naturalism*, edited by Arran Gare and Wayne Hudson, 144-159. New York: Telos Press.

dwelling on this pessimistic aspect of the history of philosophy however, we could instead choose to look to its original potential, as demonstrated by Epicureanism and Stoicism, to develop in a different direction. Might it be possible today to pick up that Hellenistic thread? Might that potential to develop in a different direction prove to be a seed of redemption buried in the soil from which Western civilisation has grown?

In this connection, it is worth remembering that though environmental philosophy, as a branch of contemporary academic philosophy, has been largely captive to academia and hence captive to the corporate capitalist state rather than providing a genuine prospectus for the living of a more ecologically attuned life, there has been a subset of environmental philosophers, dating back to the 1980s, whose ecological thinking was always grounded in, and directed towards, an ecological way of life. I am referring of course to the ecophilosophers. Original protagonists of this school included, amongst others, Arne Naess, Alan Drengson, Bill Devall, George Sessions, David Abram, Dolores La Chapelle, and Doug Tompkins.<sup>8</sup> Early ecophilosophy circles in Australia included Val Plumwood, Patsy Hallen, John Seed, and Warwick Fox; I was also a member of these circles.<sup>9</sup> Although most of these thinkers were indeed trained in contemporary academic philosophy, and in many cases, taught philosophy themselves in universities, they also tended to be avid walkers, trekkers, campers, canoers, or climbers, often taking students along on excursions into rugged landscapes. Some of these ecophilosophers built houses or lodged in cabins in remote locations. Most were ecologically literate, with a close knowledge of the botany and zoology of local environments. Invariably activists in conservation campaigns, they joined direct actions, protested, picketed, and blockaded. In all these respects, ecophilosophers deviated from the academic norm: their inquiries, as philosophers, were prompted not merely by scholarly questions but by personal experiences of fulfilment and self-transcendence undergone in nature and by a consequent passion for nature protection.

I should pause to explain that by describing ecophilosophers in this way, I am implicitly drawing here a genre distinction between *ecophilosophy* on the one hand and *environmental philosophy* on the other. While ecophilosophers were indeed amongst the key architects of the discourse that came to be known as environmental philosophy, other contributors to this discourse included members of philosophy departments whose interest in the topic was exclusively theoretic. For these latter philosophers, inquiries into the validity of anthropocentrism, the criteria for moral considerability, or the varieties of intrinsic value were important as

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<sup>8</sup> There were of course a great many notable thinkers of this period who were aligned with ecophilosophical themes and ideas but were exploring these by way of other disciplines and literary genres. My focus here is restricted to those who were committed to a specifically philosophical approach.

<sup>9</sup> I would like to include John Martin here. He published the Deep Ecology Newsletter out of a small town in rural Victoria during the 1980s. As I did not know him personally however I cannot comment on his way of life.

philosophical ends-in-themselves rather than as levers by means of which entrenched positions in policy or politics might be shifted. Frameworks for discussion were drawn from the scholarly literature rather than from intuitive insights arrived at by way of personal experience. For the purposes of this essay then, I am describing philosophers who adopted an exclusively academic approach to environmental questions as “environmental philosophers,” whilst reserving the term, “ecophilosopher,” for the philosopher with the engaged approach (where to make such a distinction is not of course to deny that there were plenty of philosophers whose approach fell between the two genres).

Within the academy, all philosophical thinking about the human relationship with nature tended to fall under the heading of environmental philosophy, so ecophilosophers were also classified at an institutional level as environmental philosophers. But there was an informality, an edginess, perhaps indeed a “wildness” to the descriptor, *ecophilosophy*, that environmental philosophers with exclusively academic intentions were not particularly anxious to claim, since ecophilosophers were often happy to position themselves as marginal to the academy.

### **Examples of Ecophilosophical Practice**

Let us sample in a little more detail some of the practices by way of which ecophilosophers cultivated their bond with Earth and attempted to induct others into such experiential awakening. Arne Naess legendarily led the way in this connection, effectively providing the early prototype of the ecophilosopher. Although he achieved great eminence as a philosopher in Norway in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he in no way led a typical scholar’s life but spent much of his youth, and a large part of his mature life as well, adventuring outdoors, particularly climbing mountains, where this involved many other wilderness skills, such as skiing, trekking, and the navigation of treacherous waterways. In his twenties, he built a remote hut for himself at a place called Tvergastein, perched in the lee of a cliff high on a mountain, Hallingskarvet, in northern Norway. Throughout his life, for approximately three months of each year, he retreated alone there, to climb, ski, and write. Access to Tvergastein was via a three-hour hike from the nearest village, so necessities (including building materials) had to be backpacked or carried up by horse-drawn sledge. Conditions were spartan, but it was in this environment that Naess felt his consciousness expanding into the exhilarating landscape that stretched away boundlessly in every direction. It was here, under the tutelage of this mountain, that he penned much of his work.<sup>10</sup> When eventually he developed his own ecophilosophy—or “ecosophy” (ecological wisdom)—revolving around the idea of such an expanded consciousness (the “ecological self”), he called it “ecosophy

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<sup>10</sup> For a vivid, first-hand account of Naess’s life at Tvergastein, see Rothenberg, David. 1993. *Is it Painful to Think: Conversations with Arne Naess*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

T,” in honour of Tvergastein, hinting at the powerful influence that this landscape had had upon his thinking. It is perhaps doubtful that ecosophy T, or deep ecology more generally, could ever have taken shape in the absence of this influence, or like influences. Naess was himself in fact explicit on this point. According to his biography on the Open Air Philosophy website, he did not consider himself an academic philosopher. His aim was emphatically to *live* his philosophy. Apparently, the thought of merely being an academic philosopher—leading a life only of the mind—made him acutely uncomfortable.<sup>11</sup>

The ecosophical way of life that underpinned and exemplified Naess’s thinking was not limited to such regular forays into mountain vastnesses. Although he was from a wealthy family, he practised a marked frugality, even when in town, and in dress and demeanour, his conduct often departed from middle-class expectations. A strong advocate of non-violent resistance, he also participated in direct actions on environmental causes. In his later years, he travelled the world popularising the ideas of deep ecology, partnering with eco-activists to develop a range of ecological consciousness-raising exercises, notably the extended ritual that became known as the Council of All Beings.<sup>12</sup>

Alan Drengson also played a major role in creating the distinctive culture of ecophilosophy. He too was an avid mountaineer and hiker throughout his life. As a teacher of mountaineering skills, he observed the integrative effects that learning to negotiate wild places had on the personalities of practitioners: as they became more reliant on themselves for their self-preservation, they gained more assurance not only in wilderness but in their daily lives. Faculties of attention and attunement were indispensable in ensuring that one could negotiate wilderness safely—one had to be alert to all manner of subtle cues in the landscape, such as those pertaining to weather, avalanches, wild animals, and plant habits, as well as those that might arise from one’s own body, heralding illness, injury, or hypothermia, not to mention cues that might be lurking in one’s group of fellow hikers, portending conflict or other deficits. Such faculties of attentiveness and attunement are largely ignored in Western education systems, where an emphasis on abstract, theoretical ways of knowing prevails. These latter ways of knowing lead not only to a focus on ideas rather than the particularities of the natural world but also to a lack of in-touchness with the personal self. Via this insight, Drengson was led to view “wild journeying,” as he dubbed it, as a path not only towards restoration of the human-nature connection but towards the healing of the modern, dissociated self.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://openairphilosophy.org/arne-naess/>. See this website too for a wonderful introduction to the less well-known Norwegian ecophilosophers, Sigmund Kvaloy-Setreng and Peter Wessel Zapffe.

<sup>12</sup> Seed, John; Fleming, Pat; Naess, Arne; Macy, Joanna. 1988. *Thinking like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*. Philadelphia: New Society.

<sup>13</sup> For a full account, see Drengson, Alan. 2004. “The Wild Way.” *The Trumpeter*, 20, 1.

In order to enhance the efficacy of wild journeying as a path of self-determination, Drengrson gradually added other practices to the core practice of wandering and surviving in wilderness. These included dedicated disciplines of attentiveness and attunement found in various martial arts, such as taiji, that train the practitioner to become aware of the flow and pattern of energies and forces in their own bodies and in the immediate environment. Shamanic rituals that open consciousness, through trance and ceremony, to spiritual aspects of nature were also incorporated. By assembling a repertoire of related practices, Drengrson developed the idea of the Wild Way as an integrated training in knowing and being, offering it as an experiential underlay for the philosophy of deep ecology—an experiential path towards transition to ecological consciousness.

In line with this recognition that ecological consciousness requires the integration of our various faculties—sensory experience with intellect, body with mind, feeling with cognition, and both aesthetics and imagination with theory—Drengrson saw the need for a journal of ecophilosophy that reflected, insofar as this was possible in mere text, such a holistic outlook. With its beautiful blend of drawing, poetry, narrative, first-person testimony, and philosophical reflection, *The Trumpeter* was launched in 1983 as an expression of, or aspiration towards, such cognitive integration.

Most of the early ecophilosophers broadly shared Naess and Drengrson’s faith in landscape as a teacher of expanded epistemological capacities conducive to ecological consciousness. Dolores La Chapelle taught deep ecology experientially at her Way of the Mountain Centre in Colorado, aided by large doses of taiji and other Daoist practices and liturgies. In the *Ecophilosophy Newsletter No 6*, authored by George Sessions in 1984, Warwick Fox quoted Bill Devall as saying that “deep ecology is ultimately grounded in a sensibility (i.e., an openness to emotions and impressions) rather than a rationality (i.e., an openness to data...and logical inference but an (attempted) closedness to empathic understanding).”<sup>14</sup>

Here in Australia, Val Plumwood built a stone house with then-spouse, philosopher Richard Routley, deep in an undisturbed rainforest. There she proceeded to live and write, frugally if not self-sufficiently, for the rest of her life. Patsy Hallen disappeared annually on epic, intrepid treks into some of the remotest parts of the West Australian outback with her partner, Peter Summers, practising the arts of survival prescribed by Drengrson as key to an integrated consciousness. John Seed helped to launch a legendary organisation, the Rainforest Information Centre, that spearheaded campaigns around the world to protect remaining remnants of old-growth rainforest. His own life was grounded in the counter-culture of northern New South Wales that was based on bioregionalism and material self-sufficiency. From this base, he disseminated—and

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<sup>14</sup> Ecophilosophy Newsletter No 6, 1984. Authored by George Sessions. <https://iseethics.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/sessions-george-ecophilosophy-newsletter-6-may-1984.pdf>.

continues to disseminate—the teachings of ecophilosophy widely, touring the country with a Deep Ecology roadshow and workshops that feature meditational, somatic, and ceremonial practices, often centred around the Council of All Beings. From the start, these teachings, and all the activities associated with them, have depended for their economic support largely on donations or nominal payments, often churning any economic surplus into rainforest protection projects around the world.

I was also part of this rich early culture. Together with colleagues such as John, Patsy, Val, and many other friends, I helped to organise “bush schools,” ecophilosophy camps and discussion groups, and, in 1985, one of the earliest ecophilosophy conferences. This is not the place to detail my own ecophilosophical adventures, but I would like to add to the examples of ecophilosophical practice already canvassed here one that I have found particularly conducive to the awakening of ecological consciousness. This is the activity of land care or healing. My opportunity to embark fully on such a project did not occur until the early 2000s when I was introduced to a granite mount or outcrop in semi-arid northern Victoria. Eventually, via a happy train of circumstances, I became co-carer of a 350-acre conservation estate on the shoulder of this outcrop, and the work of revegetating, restoring, and rehabilitating began. This ushered in a new phase of my life: I was finally able to leave behind my old regime of “working for the man” (i.e., the University) and launch instead into a new, revitalizing phase that I described to myself as “working for the Mount.”

The rocky outcrop in question and its environs had, for more than a century, been thrashed by cropping and sheep farming as well as by mining, though this country was also blessed with good remnant vegetation and an abundance of old hollow-bearing trees. After such historic battering, it was in need of extensive ecological remediation. Ministering to it involved, and continues to involve, hard and sometimes hazardous work, but as one immerses oneself in such work, one gradually begins to sense the country’s response. Bereft of its traditional Djaara custodians and companions—decimated as they were a century ago by colonisation—the land reaches out to humans, to those who seek to reinhabit it with due solicitude for its interests and sensitivity to its cues. With such aspirants, it seems ready to engage, awakening in them new faculties of human cognition and feeling by way of which they become progressively more able to discern the inexhaustible secrets of its ecology. As the landscape starts to recover vitality and wholeness, so too do its human carers, its companions. As one who has become such a companion, I can only say that I cannot imagine what either I or my life would have amounted to if this induction had not been granted to me: it has been home-coming, not only to Earth and to the cosmos, but to myself. This work at the mount has been, for me, what I would call, following Gary Snyder, the *real work*—the real work being work that “make(s) the world as real as it is, and (that enables us)

to find ourselves as real as we are within it.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, a few years into my time there, after so much on-the-ground learning, initiation, and induction into new, more expansive epistemic modalities, and after having already been tested by so much joy and considerable terror, I erected a painted sign inside the front gate that read “Welcome to the Real World.”

It is my experience of working for the Mount via the discipline of what might be described as purposively and collaboratively “walking the land,” in acknowledgment of its Indigenous affinities, that leads me to suggest such walking of the land as an additional layer of ecophilosophical practice. Allow yourself to be called by land to reinhabit it. Answer the call by committing to a particular place long-term as its ecological carer, collaborating with it, physically, epistemically, and dialogically, in the cause of its revival.<sup>16</sup> Through this service you will not only become initiated, gradually, over a lifetime, into the inexhaustible ecological layers of that land and the mysteries of its onto-poetics, but you may, as Aboriginal people here say, “become family with Country.”<sup>17</sup> In Aboriginal English, “Country” signifies sentient terrain, terrain that has presence, purpose, and meaning of its own and is disposed to enter into communicative relationship with prospective interlocutors.<sup>18</sup>

As becoming family with Country, or relating to country as kin, is core to Indigenous consciousness,<sup>19</sup> it follows that by prescribing practices that reinforce such ties of reciprocal belonging and obligation, we are adding to ecophilosophy a quintessentially Indigenous dimension. In other words, from this perspective, it is important not merely to navigate one’s way through and across “wildernesses,” à la Naess and Drengson, but also to commit to a particular location and enter into intimate relationship with it through a collaborative project of ecological remediation. Such a perspective seems closer to the bioregional than to the deep

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<sup>15</sup> Snyder, Gary and Geneson, Paul. 1980. “The Real Work.” In *The Real Work: Interviews and talks 1964-1979*, edited by W. S. McLean, 55-82. New York: New Directions. Quote p.81-82.

<sup>16</sup> For a fuller account of this practice, see Mathews, Freya. 2020. “‘Walking the Land’: An Alternative to Discourse as a Path to Ecological Consciousness and Peace.” In *Towards a Just and Ecologically Sustainable Peace*, edited by Joseph Camilleri and Deborah Guess, 97-118. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>17</sup> For onto-poetics, see, for example, Mathews, Freya. 2017. “Invoking the Real: from the Specular to the Onto-poetic” in *For a New Naturalism*, edited by Arran Gare and Wayne Hudson, 144-159. New York: Telos Press. For ‘becoming family with Country’, see Woollorton, Sandra; Poelina, Anne; Collard, Len; Horwitz, Pierre; Harben, Sandra; and Palmer, David. 2020. “Becoming family with place.” In *Resurgence*, 322 (Sept/Oct).

<sup>18</sup> “Country is living, responsive and caring, and [the word] is capitalised to denote an Indigenous understanding of one’s place, which connects people, socio-economic systems, language, spirit and Nature through interrelationship.” Woollorton et al, 2020, *ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> There is now a large literature exploring the idea of kincentric ecology. For an early account, see Salmond, E. 2000. “Kincentric Ecology: Indigenous Perceptions of the Human-Nature Relationship.” In *Ecological Applications*, 10, 5: 1327–1332; for a recent elaboration as it pertains to rivers, see Martuwarra RiverOfLife et al. 2021. “Hearing, Voicing and Healing: Rivers as Culturally Located and Connected.” In *River Research and Applications*. 38, 3: 1–13.

ecology end of the ecophilosophical spectrum; it gravitates more perhaps to the permanence of reinhabitation than to the transience of wild journeying, though wild journeying will also no doubt retain a revelatory role.

In any case, having once become family with a particular Country in this way, you are likely to find yourself reorienting to the wider world, on the understanding that all landscapes are emanations of the same deeper source that animates your own Country and renders it capable of responsive relationship with its inhabitants. Such a profound reorientation will result in abhorrence towards all unnecessary violence against the biosphere, so that to limit one's own consumption and choose a form of "right livelihood" consistent with the needs of Earth becomes a felt, familial imperative rather than merely an ideological obligation, easily rationalised away.

Finally, in any account of ecophilosophical practices, I think it is also crucial to mention the indispensability of groups, even though this is not particularly emphasised in the ecophilosophical literature. If an individual is to undergo and subsequently sustain the kind of wholesale transformation of consciousness that ecophilosophy implies, a social context will generally be required: an affinity group, a dedicated, Epicurean-type colony of friends, a consciousness-raising circle, a cooperative inquiry group.<sup>20</sup> We are likely to need feedback, advice, affirmation, reassurance, and extensive cross-referencing of experiences if we are to unsubscribe from prevailing cultural norms. Part of the challenge of such a transformation will also surely be practical: how are we to support ourselves and our families if we disengage from the exploitative, ecocidal, global economic system? To do so, we may need to ally ourselves with cooperatives or networks experimenting with alternative economies, perhaps in line with the currently burgeoning commons movement.<sup>21</sup> Any journey into ecophilosophy as a way of life is, in a word, surely more likely to succeed in the context of fellowship, just as individuals in the ancient world expected to become philosophers in the Epicurean sense only in the company of like-minded companions.

In their different ways then, different ecophilosophers have pointed to different practices that can bring the psychic and physical being of the practitioner into line with their intellectual convictions, motivating them not merely to advocate for Earth on an ideological level but to exemplify in their own lives the social transformation for which they are calling. In this sense,

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<sup>20</sup> For a wealth of recent work adapting the cooperative inquiry model of research to a panpsychist context for the purpose of engaging communicatively with a world construed as sentient and alive, see Reason, Peter. *Learning How Land Speaks*, substack, ongoing, <<https://peterreason.substack.com>>; Kurio, Jacqueline and Reason, Peter. 2022. "Voicing Rivers through Ontopoetics: A Co-operative Inquiry." *River Research and Applications*. 38, 3: 376-384; Poelina, Anne; Perdrisat, Marlikka; Wooltorton, Sandra; Mulligan, Edwin Lee. 2023. "Feeling and Hearing Country as Research Method." In *Environmental Education Research*. Forthcoming.

<sup>21</sup> For an accessible and penetrating introduction to this thriving literature, see Bollier, David and Helfricht, Silke. 2019. *Free Fair and Alive: the Insurgent Power of the Commons*. Gabriola BC: New Society.



ecophilosophy is *prefigurative* in its approach to politics. Prefigurative politics is a concept with its origins in the socialist and anarchist traditions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> From a prefigurative perspective, activists who seek to change the world are also expected to prefigure in their own lives the changes they advocate. Ecophilosophy offers prospective eco-activists a rich repository of pathways towards this end. By following such pathways, advocates can add conviction, authenticity, and plausibility to their message, while also continually reinforcing their own commitment to the ecological cause and gaining greater insight into the more global transformations that are needed.

### **In a Dark Time, Can Philosophy Return to Its Ancient Role as a Path to Wisdom?**

Is ecophilosophy then a school that could perhaps reproduce today some of the elements of ancient schools like Stoicism and Epicureanism? It certainly picks up key insights of both, notably the Epicurean ethos of voluntary simplicity and living close to nature, and the holistic emphasis of Stoicism that gives rise to its cosmically conceived ideal of the “common good.” From an ecophilosophical perspective, Stoic holism would today be articulated in ecological terms: our own “self-cohering” would be seen as a function of the “self-cohering” of our local ecosystem, and, at a further remove, of the biosphere, and ultimately of the cosmos itself. The “common good” would accordingly be understood as the flourishing of the ecosystem, of the biosphere in which ecosystems are nested, and of the cosmosphere in which biospheres are nested. To live in accordance with Universal Reason then would be to commit not merely to justice in interpersonal and social matters, as the Stoics did, but to ecological justice—to the flourishing of each of those nested levels of reality.

By simplifying our desires in accordance with Epicurean teachings and living close to nature, we would be renouncing the consumerist lifestyles of the modern industrialised world and thereby aligning ourselves with the common (ecological) good. The Epicurean reward for choosing such a way of life—the opportunity it provides for truly grasping the reality of one’s own existence and basking in the incomparable plenitude of this experience—could likewise be reinterpreted

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<sup>22</sup> Boggs, Carl. 1977. “Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers' Control.” In *Radical America* 11 (November); and Boggs, Carl. 1977. “Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy, and the Dilemma of Power.” In *Theory & Society* 4, 3: 359-93.

The idea of prefigurativism is rooted in the old question of whether the end justifies the means; it insists, in response to this question, that political activists should exemplify in their own lives and in their political operations the ends they advocate. As one exponent explains, prefigurativism is “based on the premise that the ends a social movement achieves are fundamentally shaped by the means it employs, and that movement should therefore do their best to choose means that embody or prefigure the kind of society they want to bring about.” Leach, Darcy K. 2013. “Prefigurative politics.” In *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, D. A. Snow et al., 1004-6. Malden MA: John Wiley.

through the lens of Stoic/ecological holism: this experience would now be expanded to encompass the being of Country. It would consist in savouring the reality of one's own corporeality suffusing and being suffused by the interlayered, sentient dimensions of Country. One would, in other words, experience the quiet pleasure of being deeply present to, in communion with, the psychophysical existence (and eternity) of Country. Habitual access to this state would anchor practitioners firmly in reality, thereby protecting them from the storm of ideas, ideologies, hysterias, and anxieties currently sweeping our globe into chaos. Ecophilosophers, like their Epicurean forebears, seek direct, unmediated contact with the real, taking their direction from reality, rather than from the cacophony of words and social messages swirling around them.<sup>23</sup>

Had either of these ancient schools originated today, it seems plausible then that they might have taken ecological form and furthermore that, viewed through an ecological lens, they would have largely converged. Epicurean atomism would likely have been displaced altogether, as untenable, and replaced by Stoic-type holism, duly ecologised; but the frisson of spontaneity at play in Epicurean atomism would have been imported into Stoicism, loosening the chains of its determinism a little, allowing for spaces of quantum irruption into the everyday. Desire as basically a force for the self-coherence of the organism would have been rehabilitated as good in the Stoic schema provided it remained under the guidance of (ecologised) Universal Reason, in which form it would largely prescribe the original Epicurean way of life. Both Epicureanism and Stoicism would, however, have become significantly Indigenised, placing not just "closeness" to nature but custodial care of nature at the centre of their way of life.

It seems then that the figure of the ecophilosopher potentially ties philosophy back to its ancient, life-giving but now lost history as the root-tradition of Western civilisation. This was a tradition intended not primarily for social elites or professional classes but for the reflective everyman and everywoman. As a latter-day expression of such a root tradition, the figure of the ecophilosopher could, in a contemporary Western setting, claim considerable authenticity, authority, and gravitas. For those of us wishing to defect from modern, techno-industrial civilisation, an identity as a philosopher might grant us social licence to flout cultural norms and push back against social pressures. Turning up to our workplace or to social gatherings looking home-spun, gap-toothed, dressed in simple, perhaps second-hand, attire, without vanity, oblivious of the fads and trends

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<sup>23</sup> I remember being deeply struck more than thirty years ago by a point that Aboriginal (Kombumerri/Wakka Wakka) philosopher, Mary Graham, made in an interview with Caroline Jones on ABC Radio National. The point was that "land is all there is." Europeans, she said, live in their heads, in a world of ideas and ideologies, believing now this, now that—now scientific materialism, now Christianity, now Marxism, now Buddhism, now environmentalism..... A European, she said, is never so European as when he is critiquing and repudiating European thought in favour of some other "ism". But in the end, all these "isms" are just that, ideas. And ideas are not real. The only reality is land. And it is on land, not in the world of ideas, that Aboriginal people dwell.

of the day, we could retort to those disposed to dismiss us as eccentric that no, we are not eccentric, but ecocentric—we are proud ecophilosophers. By assuming this badge of identity, making it genuinely our own through strict regimes of rigorous reflection and experiential practice, we could, in other words, proclaim our supposedly “deviant” way of life as an exemplary rational choice—in our view, the only rational choice—rather than as defective.

In the West today, a whole generation is waiting in the wings for a chance to unsubscribe from a civilisation that they perceive, correctly, as having betrayed them, and, even worse, betrayed the entirety of Earth-life. To make such an epochal break and to cultivate the depth of consciousness that would be required to sustain it, these young people need badges around which they can constellate new identities, new aspirations, and join together as a cohesive force. Large-scale intervention in the economic and political machinery of society is of course indispensable if the integrity of the biosphere is to be saved: vast changes in policy and in economic norms will be necessary. But if political agitation on behalf of such ends is to be effective, it may need to emanate from a standpoint that is genuinely *inhabited* by those who advocate for it. Only by exemplifying in their own lives the radical changes upon which they insist will such demands carry conviction. At present, activist attempts at political intervention ring hollow because they emanate from a standpoint that is not, by and large, inhabited by the activists themselves. For young people raised within Western cultural parameters, ecophilosophy perhaps offers a badge and names a path that can anchor activism in their own tradition while at the same time psychically arming them, individually and collectively, against a future of unimaginable loss and uncertainty.