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Arne Naess: A Biographical Sketch

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Arne Naess' ecophilosophical work follows upon an already long and distinguished academic career in which he made substantial contributions not only to a variety of specific areas in philosophy but also to the international philosophy community in general; for example, he founded and for many years edited *Inquiry*, an innovative and internationally respected journal of philosophy and the social sciences.

Naess was born in 1912 and appointed to the chair of philosophy at the university of Oslo at the age of twenty-seven. Prior to taking up this chair, Naess had, in his early to mid-twenties, already attended meetings of the Vienna Circle, the members of which "received [him] as a new comet on the philosophical firmament"; he had subjected himself to an intense, fourteen-month, six-days-a-week psychoanalysis with Edward Hitschmann, a personal colleague of Freud's (also in Vienna); and he had worked at Berkeley with the brilliant psychologist and learning theorist E.C. Tolman, a name that should be familiar to every psychology undergraduate..1. Naess occupied the chair of philosophy at the university of Oslo until 1969. Although Naess could have held this position until 1982, his basic reason for resigning was, he told me, because he "wanted to live rather than to function."

Naess' ecophilosophical work corresponds roughly to the period since his resignation in 1969 and therefore constitutes the most recent phase of his professional work (professional work as distinct from personal interests, since the latter have included a fascination with and love for the nonhuman world for as long as he can remember). This is not to say that Naess has stopped working in other areas of interest since 1969; however, it is to say that there has been a definite emphasis in his other work on subjects that, for Naess, are intimately related to his ecophilosophical work (e.g., normative systems and the philosophies of Spinoza and Gandhi—all of which I will discuss in later sections of this chapter).

Since most of the this issue is concerned with Naess' ideas and influence, and since most non-Norwegian speaking ecophilosophers do not have much of an idea about the nature of Naess' pre-ecophilosophical work or the extent of his influence outside ecophilosophy, I will provide in this sketch some further introductory remarks on the work and character of Arne Naess. What follows is, however, only an introduction. The idea of attempting to

provide a general intellectual biography of Arne Naess is very *tempting*, since Naess' ideas have been developed in the context of an exceptionally rich personal and professional life, but it is not, and cannot be, the task of *this* article to provide such a biography. The following comments and follow-up references should, however, suffice to convey at least a general sense of the inspiring and influential person that is Arne Naess.

The entry for Scandinavian Philosophy in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* informs the reader that the philosophical milieu in Norway today [i.e., circa 1967] is determined by an internationally known and original philosopher (who is also a famous mountain climber), Arne Naess (born 1912). Naess, who became a professor at Oslo in 1939, is the originator of a radical type of empirical semantics and the leader of the so-called Oslo group....If it is correct that Norwegian philosophy has had a dead period, it is equally correct to assert that, primarily because of Arne Naess, Norwegian philosophy is now in the middle of a period of life and growth..2.

Some annotations to this entry may be helpful. First, with regard to mountain climbing, Naess is known, among other things, for having made the first ascent of Tirich Mir (7,690 meters; 25,230 feet), the highest peak in the Hindu Kush, in 1950. He was climbing in the Himalayas as recently as 1985. Anyone who knows Naess can testify to the fact that he is extraordinarily energetic. For example, having spent time with Naess at his treasured cabin in the mountains of Norway as well as in Oslo (1984), Perth (in Western Australia, 1986), and Hobart (in Tasmania, 1986), I know that discussions with Naess are always punctuated by periods of physical activity—skiing and rock climbing in Norway, for example, and bushwalking and tennis in Australia. Naess would suddenly rise from the table in his isolated cabin and say: "Enough talking for now! Time to do some skiing!" For the record, I can also testify that I have played the most vigorous two hours of tennis of my life with Naess. I was thirty-two at the time, and he was seventy-four. Needless to say, this was not an ordinary game of tennis. We played "Arne's rules," which are exhausting (but lots of fun) *and* noncompetitive.

Second, Naess' work on empirical semantics, which he developed primarily during the 1940s and 1950s, has, as the term suggests, been concerned with exploring the ways in which language is *actually* used in particular contexts. This work needs to be understood largely as a reaction against the emphasis that was placed by the logical atomists (the early Wittgenstein and Russell) and the logical empiricists or logical positivists (the Vienna Circle) upon the logical demarcation of sensical statements from nonsensical statements or, in other words, upon delimiting the ways in which language may *legitimately* be used..3.

Finally, the so-called dead period in Norwegian philosophy corresponded roughly to the last seventy years of the nineteenth century—a period dominated by Hegelianism—and is so named because hardly anything was published. While there may be no correlation between Hegelianism and a lack of publishing in philosophy, it is nevertheless interesting to note that Naess' Spinozist leanings recall those of Niels Treschow, Norway's first professor of philosophy (University of Oslo, 1813-14), rather than those of Treschow's nineteenth-century Hegelian successors (especially Marcus Jacob Monrad, who held Treschow's chair from 1845 to 1897). Naess' philosophical productivity also recalls that of Treschow, who continued to publish almost until his death in 1833.

In a detailed overview, "Philosophy in Norway since 1936" published in the Polish-based philosophy journal *Ruch Filozoficzny*, the Norwegian philosopher Ingemund Gullvag makes a similar assessment of the significance of Naess' impact upon contemporary Norwegian philosophy to that made in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

The philosophical milieu in Norway after the war is to a great extent created and—by agreement or disagreement—for a long time influenced by one man, Arne Naess (1912-). The social science that has developed in this country after the war was also, from the

beginning, in no small degree inspired by him....His works and personal influence created a new climate of philosophy as well as social research....[Indeed, Naess' work] became influential not only in philosophy and social research, but in wider circles. It belongs to the intellectual heritage of a whole generation of university trained people, because of the Norwegian system of *examen philosophicum*, requiring all students to pass introductory examinations in logic and methodology and the history of philosophy, regardless of their choice of specialized study. From 1939 till 1954, Naess was the only professor of philosophy in Norway, and in charge of organizing the courses for the *examen philosophicum* [by 1980 Norway had 33 permanent positions in philosophy spread across its four universities]. His paradigm of inquiry...soon dominated not only the courses in "logic"...but also the courses in the history of philosophy, because of his approach to the subject.... This gave rise to an "academic culture" whose influence may be difficult to appreciate for outsiders not trained in it.

Since the fifties, philosophy in Norway has developed towards increasing pluralism. There is now quite a broad spectrum of approaches: analytic and formal methods, ordinary language philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutics, Marxism, existentialism, transcendental philosophy, historical studies, etc. The pluralism as well as the interest in the history of philosophy are to a great extent due to Naess. Openmindedness in relation to different approaches and positions marks all his writings about other philosophers, and his attitude has influenced many of the philosophers now active in Norway..4.

Naess has authored a prodigious volume of work in a broad range of areas, and in a number of languages, including Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, German, and English. The most complete published bibliography of his work is contained in the *Philosophers on Their Own Work* series..5. Although this bibliography only runs up to January 1982 (and Naess has continued to be very productive since then), it records that Naess has authored 28 books; 18 monographs and articles in the University of Oslo's *Philosophical Problems* series; 143 articles in specialized, academic journals and collections (even here, the 143rd entry, for example, actually consists of *nine* replies to articles in a particular book); 45 articles in nonspecialized, general interest journals; 29 articles in newspapers; and 17 mimeographed monographs and other miscellaneous technical articles. It also records that Naess has coauthored 6 books and monographs and offers 12 examples of "other literary activity (on mountaineering and the like)."

In regard to the broad range of Naess' work, even a casual inspection of the contents of the bibliography in *Philosophers on Their Own Work* reveals that Naess' work covers general philosophical topics, including the history and problems of philosophy; various significant philosophers, such as Kierkegaard, Carnap, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Sartre; as well as much work in or on philosophy of science, philosophy of language and communication, logic, scepticism, ethics and (what Naess refers to as) *normative systems*, Spinoza, Gandhi, and *ecosophy* (a term which Naess prefers to the far more widely accepted *ecophilosophy*).

The extent of Naess' philosophical influence is attributable to a number of factors. First, as has just been indicated, there is the sheer volume, substantive range, and typically innovative quality of his work. Second, Naess' work has had an international reach for reasons above and beyond the foregoing. Special note must be made in this regard of *Inquiry*, the well-known interdisciplinary journal of philosophy and the social sciences which Naess founded in 1958 and edited until 1975. Note should also be made here of Naess' visiting professorships, "lecturing in many places, most of them beautiful and preferably near mountains or deserts (some places: Berkeley, Santa Cruz, Reykjavik, Hangzhou, Helsinki, Tromso, Peking, Canton, Hong Kong, Chengdu, Jerusalem...)," as well as his willingness to present his ideas in a variety of popular or semi-popular as opposed to purely academic contexts (examples here include Naess' debate with A.J. Ayer on Dutch television in the early 1970s; his interview for the journal of the Zen Center of Los Angeles in 1982; and his 1987 Schumacher Lecture in Britain)..6. But

above and beyond these reasons it is also clear that the extent of his influence is also very much a function of a certain spirit of genuine inquiry that pervades his life and work. In their preface to *In Sceptical Wonder*, the delightfully titled collection of "inquiries into the philosophy of Arne Naess on the occasion of his 70th birthday," Naess' colleagues Ingemund Gullvag and Jon Wetlesen comment on Naess' spirit of inquiry in the course of explaining the relevance of the *festschrift's* title:

According to an old saying by Aristotle, philosophy starts from a sense of wonder. It seems, however, that many philosophers stop wondering pretty soon, and become more preoccupied with certain answers than with the questions that gave rise to them. Some philosophers, on the other hand, manage to keep their wonder alive, to question old answers and raise new ones. This would apply to those who have a sceptical bent of mind, especially to the Pyrrhonian sceptics, or the *zetetai* as they preferred to call themselves, that is, the seekers or inquirers.

Arne Naess appears to be a philosopher of this kind. When he started an interdisciplinary journal of philosophy and the social sciences in 1958, he first wanted to call it *Zetetikos*. It was, however, named *Inquiry*. Over the years Naess has opened up many fields of research and inspired others to follow suit. At the age of 70 he continues to be a vigorous and unconventional inquirer and a major source of inspiration in Scandinavian philosophy and social science. In the eyes of many he encourages not only professional research, but also a search at a deeper level connected with what was called wisdom in the ancient traditions..7.

As this assessment implies, Naess' personality has itself been a factor in the attention that his work has received. Fons Elders makes some interesting observations about the personalities of the eight philosophers who took part in the series of four debates he organized for Dutch television (as I have noted, Naess debated Ayer; participants in some of the other debates included Karl Popper, Noam Chomsky, and Michel Foucault). In regard to Naess, Elders writes, in part:

Arne Naess skiing, Arne Naess sitting in the bath, Arne Naess climbing mountains, Arne Naess boxing, Arne Naess living alone in his mountain home, Arne Naess playing the comic, Arne Naess writing about scepticism....

Arne Naess is a radical pluralist.... I have sometimes wondered how Arne Naess would have reacted to all the philosophers of *Reflexive Water*. His philosophy would have prepared him to meet each of them on his own terms, but without accepting a final "truth" in any of their systems.... I got the impression that Naess approaches everyone, from the beginning, on the assumption that they are going to be both right *and* wrong.

I told him of my plan to write about each of the eight philosophers in a postscript, giving my impressions of their philosophies and their personalities. I also expressed my fear that to do so might create some misunderstandings at a personal level, and that I might lose the friendship or trust of some of them. He predicted that this would happen; that probably none of the eight would like what I was writing, but that I should go ahead, if I felt it to be right. I liked Naess' answer because it is at the heart of his philosophy to approach situations in a radical pluralistic way..8.

What, then, is Elder's impression of the relationship between Naess' philosophy and Naess' personality? Although he refers to Naess as "an extraordinary thinker in Western philosophy," Elders notes that "Naess is not as integrated [psychologically], and probably cannot be as integrated as his philosophy demands that he should be. How can one take seriously every different kind of philosophy without ending up like a king looking down from the top of a mountain?" Contrasting Ayer and Naess in regard to the relative integration of their philosophies and personalities, Elders reiterates this view of Naess:

Both Ayer and Naess are, in my opinion, classic examples of this paradoxical relationship [in which "often a philosophy is quite at variance with the psychology of its proponent"]: the integration which Naess defends philosophically is not matched by an equal integration at the emotional level, while the emotional integration shown by Ayer does not correspond to an equally integrated philosophy. Many philosophers seem to develop a philosophy to counteract their psychological make-up rather than as an elaboration, justification, or coherent cosmology based on and expressive of their whole life-style..9.

Elders has also drawn attention to the way in which Naess' radical pluralism informs his character, and vice versa, in the opening essay of the *festschrift* for Naess' seventieth birthday: "Arne Naess laughs a lot too, sometimes with a poker face, sometimes without, then suddenly he looks very serious. He is an actor, because he is the bearer of many perspectives, which all have certain aspects of truth for him." .10. Nor is Elders the only commentator to have made this kind of observation about Naess. For example, the final essay in the same *festschrift*, *In Sceptical Wonder*, is a humorous but nevertheless instructive treatment by Geir Hestmark of the many faces of Arne Naess. Hestmark provides an account of a meeting of "The Loch Naess Monster Research Society," which is constituted by nine, jokingly named fictitious characters who represent different aspects of Arne Naess: the scientific behaviorist, the Pyrrhonian sceptic, the Gandhian, the Spinozist, the empirical semanticist, the ecosopher, and so on. Hestmark warns us in mock seriousness at the outset that "none of the participants were deemed capable of giving an accurate account of the proceedings of the meeting." .11.

Naess is "the bearer of many perspectives" not only with respect to specific philosophical views, but even with respect to the subject of philosophical *style*. For example, in one paper he will say that "while deep ecology need not be a finished philosophical system, this does not mean that its philosophers should not try to be as clear as possible".12.; yet elsewhere he will sing the praises of vagueness:

If something is vague and open to many interpretations and precisations, it leads to discussion. And that is the most we can hope for any honest philosophy in today's world. It can become well known, and may have an influence. Within existentialism, Zapffe [a significant Norwegian existentialist] is not so well known because he is *too precise*. His ideas are so disturbing, humorous and tough, *but they are clear*. But Sartre is so vague, many people want to talk about him.... Now "Self-realization" [which, as we will see, is the central term in Naess' own ecophilosophical approach] like "non-violence," is a vague term.... It is tantalizing for our culture, this seeming lack of explanation.... Being more precise does not necessarily create something that is more inspiring (emphases added)..13.

It is at least arguable then that Naess is the bearer of so many perspectives that it would simply be impossible for him to be able to maintain them all at the same time without cutting the odd logical corner or engaging in a bit of plain bluffing here and there. Moreover, anyone who knows Naess knows that he will sometimes adopt fairly extreme positions (or do certain things!) not because he considers that his view has any privileged status vis-a-vis other views but rather in order both to provoke others to think through their own position and to encourage openness to a diversity of views. As Naess would be the first to point out, for him to seriously maintain that whatever position he had adopted was the "correct" one would, in any case, be incompatible with his Pyrrhonian skepticism.

Although it is true that Naess' character is nothing if not complex (which can lead to frustration but never to boredom!), one also realizes, over time, that Naess demonstrates a stance toward the world that is consistently open, playful, inquiring, supportive, and generous in spirit. And that kind of consistency is tremendously impressive. None of this is to say that Naess does not oppose certain things, but it is to say that in situations of conflict, including ecological conflict, Naess is as open to, cheerful with, interested in,

supportive of, and generous to those whose views he is attempting to change as the circumstances will allow. Taken together with his many and diverse achievements, this disposition adds up to a person who employs a light touch in the service of a profound intelligence and a remarkably strong will.

Finally, as this last observation no doubt suggests, Naess' work has also been influential because it has not been restricted to theory. Thus, for example, Erik Dammann, the Norwegian founder of the Future in Our Hands movement, comments on the significance of Naess' engagement in ecologically oriented nonviolent action as follows:

As we have seen, a number of academics in several countries have already given up their elite positions in order to make their knowledge available to [grassroots] movements and to use their analytical faculties in investigating the possibilities for action on the movements' premises. A Norwegian example is the philosopher Arne Naess who gave up his professorship and emerged from academic isolation in order to be freer to participate in the multitude of popular campaigns for ecology and social change. His fearless action has added weight to these campaigns, and the well-known picture of the internationally renowned professor calmly being carried away by the police from the protest camp at Mardola has certainly given many good citizens a new understanding that activists are not only "hysterical extremists." His books, perhaps especially *Ecology, Society and Lifestyle*, have without doubt strengthened many of the more intellectually oriented campaigners in their understanding of such things as the importance of a holistic approach and of value priorities..14.

Naess' interest in Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent direct action dates to 1930. Naess' experiences in actions of nonviolent resistance include involvement in the Norwegian nonviolent resistance movement to Nazi occupation during World War II and, subsequently, involvement in the peace movement (especially since 1970). In view of this, it is perhaps surprising to realize that Naess has a practical as opposed to armchair interest in boxing! (As I have said, Naess' character is nothing if not complex.) Naess claims that such experience aids in developing fearlessness for actions of nonviolent resistance. I suppose that is true, but would suggest that aikido is the martial art that is most suited to the philosophy of nonviolent participation in conflict situations. To my mind, boxing is the antithesis of aikido. (It is interesting to note in this regard that Bill Devall and Alan Drengson are both experienced practitioners of aikido.) That said, it is probably true to say that Naess has an aikido-like attitude to boxing (if that is not a contradiction in terms!).

In a paper entitled "Intellectuals and Popular Movements: The Alta Confrontation in Norway," Ron Eyerman describes another protest in which Naess was involved. The Alta confrontation took place on 14 January 1981 when "about 1,000 people, primarily members of a regional Lapp community but including a significant number of college professors, lawyers, and scientists, chained themselves together in a final effort to prevent the construction of a power-plant and dam project in the far north of Norway. During the next 24 hours, they were foreably cut from their chains and carried off by 6000 policemen in the biggest police action in Norway's history."15. Naess was one of those chained among the demonstrators and Eyerman devotes the second half of his paper to an examination entitled "The Politicized Professional: Arne Naess and the Norwegian Ecology Movement."

How, then, does an internationally distinguished professor of philosophy—the epitome of an armchair discipline in the eyes of many—articulate the philosophy that underlies what he refers to as his "participation in environmental conflicts (sometimes being arrested)"?.16. The articles in this issue help to shed light on these and other questions.

Notes

1. Naess discusses these and other experiences, including his fascination with and love for the nonhuman world since very early childhood, his psychologically painful early years and adolescence, and his teenage thoughts on the most worthwhile thing to do in life, in a candid but rarely cited autobiographical article entitled "How My Philosophy Seemed to Develop," in *Philosophers on Their Own Work*, vol. 10, ed. Andre Mercier and Maja Svilar (Bern: Peter Lang, 1983), pp. 209-26. The quotation regarding Naess' reception by the Vienna Circle is from p. 222 of this article.

2. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* s.v. "Scandinavian Philosophy," by Justus Hartnack.

3. Naess' major elaboration of his approach to semantics is *Interpretation and Preciseness. A Contribution to the Theory of Communication* (Oslo: Oslo University Press, 1953). A simpler, more popularly aimed presentation is Naess' *Communication and Argument: Elements of Applied Semantics* (Oslo: Oslo University Press, 1966, reprinted 1981). For briefer overviews of Naess' approach to semantics, see Arne Naess, "Toward a Theory of Interpretation and Preciseness," in *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Leonard Linsky (Urbana, Ill.: The University of Illinois Press, 1952), pp. 248-69; and Ingemund Gullvag, "Depth of Intention," *Inquiry* 26 (1983): 3 1-83.

4. Ingemund Gullvag, "Philosophy in Norway since 1936," *Ruch Filozoficzny* 40 (1982-83): 143-81, pp. 143-44 and 171. As Gullvag's comments here suggest, his overview of contemporary Norwegian philosophy, while comprehensive, is nevertheless dominated by discussion of Naess' work. A briefer, less detailed overview of postwar Norwegian philosophy is provided in Arne Naess and Jon Hellesnes, "Norway," in *Handbook of World Philosophy. Contemporary Developments Since 1945*, ed. John R. Burr (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), pp. 159-71.

5. Mercier and Svilar, eds., *Philosophers on Their Own Work*, vol. 10, see pp. 247-68.

6. The "lecturing in many places" quotation is taken from Naess' autobiographical notes at the conclusion of *Sustaining Gaia: Contributions to Another World View* (Papers from the Environment, Ethics and Ecology 11 Conference, October 1984), ed. Frank Fisher (Clayton, Victoria: Graduate School of Environmental Science, Monash University, 1987), p. 218. Naess has also given lectures at many other places in Europe, the U.S., Canada, and Australia in addition to those mentioned in this list.

Naess' debate with Ayer is published as "The Glass is on the Table: An Empiricist versus a Total View," in *Reflexive Water. The Basic Concerns of Mankind*, ed. Fons Elders (London: Souvenir Press, 1974), pp. 13-68. Naess' interview for the journal of the Zen Center of Los Angeles is published as "Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: A Conversation with Arne Naess," *The Ten Directions*, Summer/Fall 1982, pp. 7 and 10-12; and Naess' 1987 Schumacher Lecture is published as "The Basics of Deep Ecology," *Resurgence*, January/February 1988, pp. 4-7.

7. Ingemund Gullvag and Jon Wetlesen, preface to *In Sceptical Wonder: Inquiries into the Philosophy of Arne Naess on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday*, ed. Gullvag and Wetlesen (Oslo: University of Oslo Press, 1982).

8. Elders, ed., *Reflexive Water*, pp. 274-75.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 276-78.

10. Fons Elders, "Norwegian Perspective No. 27011230992 or the TAO of Arne Naess," in *In Sceptical Wonder*, ed. Gullvag and Wetlesen, pp. 11-21, at p. 13.

11. Geir Hestmark, "Possible Monsters in Loch Naess'," in *In Sceptical Wonder*, pp. 30)

1-14, at p. 301.

12. Arne Naess, "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects," *Philosophical Inquiry* 8 (1986): 10-31, pp. 22-23.

13. Arne Naess, interviewed by David Rothenberg, "Is it Painful to Think?: A Discussion with Arne Naess," 1986, ms., pp. 7-9.

14. Erik Dammann, *Revolution in the Affluent Society* (London: Heretic Books, 1984), p. 151.

15. Ron Eyerman, "Intellectuals and Popular Movements: The Alta Confrontation in Norway," *New Praxis* 3 (1983): 185-98, at p. 185.

16. From Naess' autobiographical notes in *Sustaining Gaia*, p. 218. Naess' reputation for ecologically oriented nonviolent direct action seems to have reached almost legendary status. For example, Dolores LaChapelle recounts a story of "one of Arne Naess' outstanding non-violent protests" in her book *Earth Wisdom* (Los Angeles: The Guild of Tutors Press, 1978, see p. 154) that Naess tells me is totally without foundation (personal discussions, March 1986).

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