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Arne Naess & the Union of Theory & Practice

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About the author: *George Sessions* teaches philosophy at Sierra College in Rocklin, California. He is the author of numerous articles and reviews related to ecophilosophy and also Spinoza. He is best known for the book he co-authored with Bill Devall, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, Gibb Smith, Salt Lake City, 1985.

While giving a series of Schumacher Lectures on the deep ecology movement in England in January of 1992 Arne Naess celebrated his 80th birthday. Arne's influence upon me over the last 15 years has been immense; as a friend, philosophical colleague, mentor, and fellow supporter of the long-range deep ecology movement. In many ways, our backgrounds before we met were similar: strong interests in philosophy, the philosophy of science, and ecology; rock climbing and a love of mountains and wild nature; and an awareness of the need to work out an ecological philosophy as a basis for social change and a long-range solution to the environmental crisis. Through a long intellectual and emotional journey, I finally came to realize in the late 70s that Arne had arrived at the main outlines of such a position many years earlier. Gary Snyder independently worked out a similar ecological position in the 60s, and has been an inspiration and mentor to me as well (see Jon Halper, *Gary Snyder: Dimensions of a Life*, Sierra Club Books, 1991).

Arne and I also independently shared the conviction that Spinoza, more than any of the other major Western philosophy, provided a good model and inspiration for a contemporary ecological philosophy. Arne's interest in Spinoza began as a young boy of 17 and in conjunction with early experience in the mountains; my interest developed as a result of surveying the history of Western philosophy around 1969-70. I was particularly impressed by the American philosopher Charles Frankel's comparison, in 1955, of the philosophical variation of the pragmatists, James and Dewey, with that of George Santayana (who was heavily influenced by Spinoza). Frankel pointed out that:

For James and Dewey, the future is open. Nature and the past are just raw materials for us to do with as we wish... Santayana rejected pragmatism, was irritated by it for this reason. He felt that there is, in the human environment, a certain resisting structure, a certain permanent constitution of things to which we must all ultimately bow down... [Santayana] seems more of a philosopher to me; a man more concerned with looking at the world "in the aspect of eternity," to use Spinoza's phrase... "[he] represented a kind of wisdom from which the pragmatists might have learned." (As quoted in my "Spinoza and Jeffers on Man in Nature," *Inquiry* (Oslo) 1977).

The views of Spinoza and Santayana express not only a respect for Nature, but an awareness of *limits* on human activity in Nature.

During my reading of this period, I was also impressed by the observations of Stuart Hampshire (in his 1951 book on Spinoza) which led me to believe that, in my search, Spinoza was the philosopher I was looking for:

In Descartes and in Leibniz, tone is still in various ways given the impression of a universe in which human beings on this earth are the privileged centre around whom everything is arranged, almost, as it were, for their benefit; whatever their professed doctrine, almost everyone still implicitly thought in terms of a man-centered universe... [Spinoza] had this inhuman vision of human beings as not especially significant or distinguished parts of an infinite system, which seems in itself vastly more worthy of respect and attention than any of our transitory interests and adventures. (As quoted in my "Anthropocentrism and the Environmental Crisis," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 1974).

One should not misinterpret the Spinozistic assessment of humanity's place in the cosmos and on the Earth as misanthropic, but rather as a major reappraisal of Western culture's approach to the question: "What is humanity's place in Nature?" For example, Arne sees humans as "very special beings!" The problem, in Arne's view, is that we humans "underestimate our potentialities" both as individuals and as a species. Our abilities to understand and identify with Life on Earth suggest a role primarily as *appreciators* of the biotic exuberance and evolutionary processes on Earth, rather than as conquerors, dominators, manipulators, or controllers and "business managers" of the Earth's evolutionary processes.

But from this mainly abstract metaphysical approach to developing an ecophilosophy (as a result of my classical and analytical training in academic philosophy), except for the anti-anthropocentrism, I still remained essentially within the secular mechanist modernist paradigm. The Spinozistic perspective did lead me to see, at this point, that an adequate ecophilosophy must go beyond the development of merely a new "environmental ethics" to a radically different worldview (a "paradigm change" if you will). This change of paradigm to an organic/spiritual world view began to occur for me from the middle to late 70s with the reading and digesting of Roszak's *Where the Wasteland Ends*, Capra's *Tao of Physics*, and the writings of Alan Watts and Cary Snyder on Zen Buddhism, together with my own experiences of deep connectedness with wild nature. Jacob Needleman's *Sense of the Cosmos* had a profound psychological influence on me. I had to read it many times to begin to understand it, although Needleman, in my opinion, fails to make the bridge to an identification with wild nature. I put together and taught a college course beginning about 1975, called "Rationality, Mysticism, and Ecology," using the books by Roszak, Watts, Snyder, and Needleman.

In 1973 I had heard about Arne from Joseph Meeker. Several years earlier, I had heard from a UC Berkeley student in Yosemite about a Norwegian philosopher who was teaching a course there strongly emphasizing ecology and Nature, and using poetry from Robinson Jeffers. About 1975, I was wandering around an academic hall at the University of the Pacific, named for my late grandfather, George Colliver, who founded the religious studies department there, when I by chance came across an announcement on a bulletin board calling for graduate students to study Spinoza and ecology with Arne Naess in Norway under the New Philosophy of Nature program. My interest in Arne perked up considerably at this point and we began to correspond and exchange papers. When I finally met Arne at UC Santa Cruz in 1978, I remember going out to a beach to the north, and Arne taking up with a pack of dogs, running gleefully back-and-forth in the surf playing tug-of-war with long strands of kelp.

I was now open to understanding Spinoza from a more organic/psychological/spiritual perspective. I was helped in this by the forceful and humorous personality of the late UC Santa Barbara philosopher, Paul Wienpahl, and by his Zen Buddhist organic approach to Spinoza in his book *The Radical Spinoza* (1979). A fuller appreciation of the significance of Spinoza's spiritual/psychological analysis of the free human individual (and the crucial distinction between active and passive behavior) was due to Arne. He has pointed out that:

Part Five of [Spinoza's] Ethics represents, as far as I can understand, Middle East wisdom par excellence... The free human being is a wise human being permanently and with increasing momentum on the road to still higher levels of freedom. The supremely free person shows perfect equanimity, forceful, rich and deep affects, and is active in a great variety of ways corresponding to the many "parts of the body," and all of them bound up with increasing understanding—and certainly including social and political acts... This image of the sage has in common with (a certain variety of) Mahayana Buddhism the idea that the higher the level of freedom reached by an individual, the more difficult it gets to increase the level without increasing that of all other beings, human and nonhuman... It again rests on identification with all beings." (Naess, "Through Spinoza to Mahayana Buddhism, or Through Mahayana Buddhism to Spinoza?" in Wetlesen, *Spinoza's Philosophy of Man*, University of Oslo Press, 1978).

Part Five of Spinoza's Ethics (although the earlier metaphysics and epistemology of the book provide the supporting worldview) is actually a description and guide for the spiritual/intellectual character development of a certain type of mature person. Arne exhibits this type of character and personal development to a very high degree, spiced with a delightful and everpresent sense of humor. And it is this type of "perennial philosophy" spiritual development (to use Aldous Huxley's phrase), found throughout most cultures down through history and pre-history, including primal peoples, which sets this tradition off, along with other significant differences, from the many frivolous and questionable "spiritual" activities of the so-called New Age movement. This spiritual tradition, and sense of what constitutes a mature human, also provides a sharp contrast to the secular cultural relativism of modern industrial societies, which seems to justify much of the thoughtless and callous exploitation and abuse of both humans and non-humans, thus leading to the highly immature destructive economic orientation and consumerism of modern life.

Arne's Spinozist and Gandhian perspective on human maturity and spiritual development must also be reconciled with, and tempered by, his love and respect for *diversity* (human, cultural, biological, etc.)—for example, Arne truly loves and finds fascinating the tiniest insect—and his philosophic scepticism concerning attaining ultimate human knowledge. Hence, the significance and importance placed on the endless Socratic deep questioning process in "deep" ecological inquiry. When we went to Death Valley in 1984 to work on the deep ecology movement platform, I came to appreciate his genuine open-mindedness and insistence upon a diversity of philosophic and religious positions.

In the "apron diagram" depicting the different derivational levels of the deep ecology platform, it is recognized that differing ultimate premises, and philosophical and religious commitments (and cultures) at Level 1 of the diagram are in many ways incompatible; this widely diverse situation, however, is to be desired, not deplored. Supporters of the deep ecology movement will, however, tend to agree on the main points of the *platform*, or on some similar alternative formulation (for the apron diagram and the platform, see Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*. 1985, pp. 70-73, 225-28; Naess, *Ecology Community and Lifestyle*. 1989, pp. 29-32). Arne points out that very few supporters of the deep ecology movement are professional philosophers who would work out, or subscribe to, the intricacies of a logically derived level 1 philosophical position, such as Arne's Ecosophy T, but everyone, using the deep questioning process, should attempt to make their overall world view and ultimate commitments clear, at least to themselves, thus becoming aware of how they are related to specific actions and practical decisions in environmental and everyday life situations.

Warwick Fox, in his recent book (*Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*), has suggested that Arne's philosophical approach to the deep ecology movement should be thought of in terms of the "wide identification" thesis, of a psychological widening identification with

all species—a "transpersonal ecology." But as Arne points out, Warwick's thesis is one among many kinds of alternate ecosophies, a level 1 set of commitments that not every supporter of the deep ecology movement does, or would hold. The deep ecology movement is much broader, is partly characterized by the deep questioning process and the platform, and should not be identified with any particular level 1 ecosophy.

Recently, Arne has pointed out that his philosophical work can be divided into four periods or phases. The first period, up through about 1940, concentrated on the philosophy of science. The second period, from about 1940 thru 1953, consisted of work in empirical semantics. A short third period concentrated on anti-dogmatism and the revival of "the largely forgotten classic Greek Pyrrhonic scepticism." The fourth period began about 1968, partly at the urging of his students, when his interests shifted to ecological philosophy. At this point, he tells us, he began to live his philosophy and function in part more as a "minor prophet" than as a strictly academic philosopher. In this respect, his life seems to parallel the life of a philosopher like Bertrand Russell, who began as a strict academician in mathematics, philosophy of mathematics, epistemology, and metaphysics, but, late in life, became more and more engrossed in social and practical issues such as peace, disarmament, and avoiding nuclear war. But unlike Russell, Arne has developed, and continues to develop, a unique philosophically sophisticated ecophilosophy, and his own personal level 1 Ecosophy T—a sort of unique summation of his earlier work in mathematical logic, philosophy of science, empirical semantics, philosophical/cultural anthropology, Pyrrhonic scepticism, Gestalt perception and epistemology, his important original studies and publications in Spinoza and Gandhi (a blending of the wisdom of East and West)—as a philosophic basis for his role as contemporary world ecophilosopher, promoter of the deep ecology movement, and "minor prophet."

From Gandhi (as well as Spinoza), Arne reinforced his intuitions about the equal "right" of all species to flourish on the planet (ecocentric egalitarianism) together with the Eastern doctrine of *ahimsa*—avoid causing unnecessary harm and suffering. Arne likes to tell the story about Gandhi refusing to let people in the ashram kill poisonous snakes or other creatures. In lectures, he shuffles his feet across the floor to show how the residents of the ashram avoided stepping on the snakes to avoid being bitten. And from Gandhi came theories and strategies for non-violent action and interaction with people, in word and deed. Arne is deeply committed to, and has written extensively on, positive supportive non-violent communication between people, another tie-in with his work in empirical semantics, and his life-long interest in language. Arne, in his incredibly gentle and sophisticated way, constantly reminds those of us who write in philosophical ecology not to respond in kind to cruel or unfair attacks on the deep ecology movement, and to strongly condemn ecologically destructive *acts*, such as the clear-cutting of the last ancient forests in North America, but not the *persons* who perform these acts. Many of us find this a difficult ideal to live up to, a sort of exercise in Bertrand Russell's solution to Meinong's golden mountain" paradox, but Arne is, of course, right about this.

Finally, I would like to say something about Arne's personal lifestyle, a lifestyle which goes hand-in-hand with his role as "ecological prophet;" and a role he shares with Gary Snyder (with his deep ecological exemplary bioregional living), and with Dave Brower also 80 years old, the senior statesman of the American environmental movement, and referred to as "Muir reincarnate"). At a symposium in May of 1983 at York University in Canada (sponsored by John Livingston, Neil Evernden, and the Faculty of Environmental Studies), Arne presented a short paper on the "Deep Ecology and Lifestyle." He talked about tendencies among the supporters of the deep ecology movement toward (1) using simple means; (2) anti-consumerism; (3) appreciation of ethnic and cultural differences; (4) efforts to satisfy vital needs rather than desires; (5) going for depth and richness of experience rather than intensity; (6) attempts to live in nature and promote community rather than society; (7) appreciating all life forms; (8) efforts to protect local ecosystems; (9) protecting wild species in conflicts with domestic animals; (10) acting non-violently, etc. to which he later added a tendency toward vegetarianism.

Perhaps the most striking of the tendencies he listed was (11) "concern about the situation of the third and fourth world and the attempt to avoid a standard of living too much different from and higher than the needy. Global solidarity of life styles" which was closely followed by (12), "Appreciation of life styles which are universalizable, which are not blatantly impossible to sustain without injustice toward fellow humans or other species." On these criteria, highly consumerist lifestyles in industrialist countries are totally unjustifiable in relation to the living conditions of the poor of the world, quite apart from the immense negative impact they are causing on the destruction of wild ecosystems and biodiversity throughout the world. This follows "ethically" from the degree of *identification* we experience with our fellow humans, and with other species and ecosystems (with our degree of maturity). And Arne outdoes the most ardent "social justice" proponents in industrial countries by proposing lifestyles not "too much different from and higher than the needy." While industrial societies, especially the United States under the Bush administration, resist the idea that consumption levels in these countries will have to be drastically reduced, while living standards in Third World countries must dramatically improve, together with human population stabilization and reduction among both the rich and the poor countries. It is now clear that there will be no solution to the environmental crisis without such a move.

Arne, himself lives this lifestyle. The Naess family is one of the most influential, and highly regarded, families in Norway. As chairman of the philosophy department at the University of Oslo for about 40 years, Arne was instrumental in helping give the Norwegian public school system a decidedly philosophic cast; most students have read the history of philosophy he authored, and studied his book *Empirical Semantics*. Arne has been surrounded by immense financial wealth most of his adult life; his two older brothers, who live in New York and the Bahamas, are shipping magnates, as is his nephew, Arne Naess, Jr., whom Arne raised as his son. Arne, Jr., took up Arne's love for mountain climbing, leading a Norwegian expedition to the summit of Mt. Everest before marrying the singer, Dianna Ross. At the age of 70, Arne accompanied the expedition to base camp at 20,000 ft.

In the great philosophic/religious spiritual tradition of both East and West, from Buddha and Socrates to Ludwig Wittgenstein (the famous early 20th century Viennese philosopher who gave away a large family inheritance to lead an austere philosophic life), Arne likewise leads a Spartan existence, giving away half his pension each year to worthy causes, such as reroofing a schoolhouse in Nepal. Eating Arne's diet is a humbling experience, as I discovered on our 1984 trip to the desert, and on other occasions. We stopped for breakfast one morning, walked out into the mesquite and built a tiny fire where we toasted one piece of bread apiece (no butter or anything). His favorite main course is a "stew" consisting of cut up potatoes and carrots with no seasoning. It certainly leads to robust health and stamina on his part; I have a vision of him walking off into the desert, backpack on, carrying a gallon of water in each hand. This spring, while staying with Michael Soule, the conservation biologist, Arne biked from the UC Santa Cruz campus down to the ocean and back. He commented that he must be slipping; he had a much harder time getting back up the hill than he had the year before. He made the run again, and then realized he had the bike in the wrong gear. He seemed considerably relieved.

Arne loves the deserts of the SouthWest United States and Baja California, with their incredible diversity of wildflowers in the spring. He likes to walk 2 or 3 miles from the road, build a little fire to brew some tea, hopefully by some small cliffs where he can rock climb, read philosophy, and work on and rewrite his many papers. There are pictures of him sitting in a mountain tent, high on a Himalayan peak, reading Spinoza's *Ethics*. I remember him once visiting me in the Sierra foothills, whereupon he immediately built a tiny fire out of twigs, sat down, and watched the whisp of smoke drift down toward the canyons. He once said to me, "George, you are so lucky to still have such a richness of wild areas here in the United States!" He recently visited Antarctica, camping out in the snow in his little tent for days.

When he was in his 20s, he built a little cabin high on his favourite mountain in Arctic Norway (the highest hut in Norway). His father died when he was very young, and this mountain became a kind of father-substitute for him. It is said that this hut has had up to seven roofs on it at once, held down with cables and that, in a severe storm, several roofs can fly off. Arne has spent up to 6 months at a time living up there. It is well stocked with books. The stories about the severe conditions up there are legion and the ice sometimes never completely melts inside the hut. I think Arne is happiest when he is there; doing philosophy, climbing rocks, skiing, floating on the little pond when it isn't iced over, enjoying the company of the friends and loved ones who go with him, and living his austere lifestyle. I am going to visit there with considerable trepidation for the first time this fall, armed with some of my own food and lots of down clothes.

Many of Arne's philosophical papers (both straight academic philosophy and ecophilosophy) are unpublished or are scattered around in obscure journals. By and large, Arne's tremendous philosophic achievement is unknown to the academic philosophic community around the world, although the importance of his work is well recognized in Norway. His work on the deep ecology movement, however, is now well known and has brought him to stage center in ecophilosophical and environmental circles throughout the world. Just as Russell, Wittgenstein, and Einstein were seen as the leading Western intellects of the first part of the 20th century, I am confident that when Arne's overall philosophic achievement is synthesized and published, he will be recognized as a leading philosopher of the latter half of the twentieth century. For his work in developing an ecological philosophy and paradigm, and by articulating and helping to launch the long-range deep ecology movement, he may well be recognized as one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century.

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