

## The Self of Stars and Stone: Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology, and the Ecological Self

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### Abstract

*This essay examines Arne Naess's conception of the ecological self in connection with the work of ecofeminist Val Plumwood and claims that Naess's thought is able to avoid some of the criticisms of deep ecology that Plumwood voices. Following an analysis of Plumwood's position, it is argued that Naess does not subscribe to what Plumwood terms the "indistinguishability thesis," but that the notion of identification appears problematic due to its tendency to emphasize sameness in relations to others. The paper ends with a discussion of comments made by Naess in a recent interview that can be seen to respond to this problem.<sup>1</sup>*

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### Introduction

Ecofeminism and deep ecology have been in dialogue for some time now, and while the debate between them has been very fruitful over the years, the exploration of their relationship remains important. This is particularly true for those interested in the idea of an 'ecological self,' because the exchange between deep ecologists and ecofeminists has made significant contributions, both to our understanding of the

relevance of questions of selfhood for environmentalism, and to our understanding of the complexities that such questions involve. Ecofeminists and deep ecologists often diverge, however, in their accounts of the ecological self, and at times this divergence appears to be so sharp that one may legitimately wonder if these philosophical streams could ever convene.

Although there are, admittedly, important differences between ecofeminism and deep ecology, it is my contention that the notion of the ecological self as articulated by Arne Naess is potentially compatible with the work of some ecofeminists, and that certain ecofeminist objections to deep ecology do not appear to be applicable to Naess's view. To demonstrate this, I examine Naess's account of the ecological self in conjunction with the work of Val Plumwood.<sup>2</sup> I begin with a review of Plumwood's analysis of dualism and its role in the egoist understanding of the self and discuss her version of the 'relational self' that is proposed as an alternative to it. Next, I examine aspects of Plumwood's critique of deep ecology and Naess, paying attention to the ways in which her analysis of dualism—particularly the concept of "incorporation"—figures in this critique. Drawing on a number of Naess's works, I argue that his version of the ecological self avoids several of the mistakes Plumwood points out, but that his emphasis on "identification" remains problematic from an ecofeminist standpoint due to its over-emphasis on similarity and sameness as the basis of respect for others. I conclude by suggesting that certain comments that Naess made during an interview that I recently conducted with him can address this issue.

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## **I. Dualism and Self/Other Relations**

Unlike a lot of deep ecologists, some ecofeminists have made the concept of dualism an integral part of their analyses of the self and its relations to others. Dualism is often discussed by ecofeminists in terms of 'value dualisms,' which conceptually organize the world in terms of disjunctive pairs and place greater value on one of the disjuncts.<sup>3</sup> Such disjunctive pairs have included, among others, reason/emotion, male/female, and human/nature. Plumwood expands this analysis, however, identifying five features of dualism that make it "more than a relation of dichotomy, difference, or non-identity, and more than a simple hierarchical relationship."<sup>4</sup> These features are backgrounding, radical exclusion, incorporation, instrumentalization, and homogenization.

“Backgrounding” signifies the refusal of dualism to recognize that the devalued term of a disjunctive pair contributes in any important way to the privileged term. Strategies for backgrounding can include downplaying the contributions of the ‘lower’ disjunct, or simply refusing to acknowledge any contribution whatsoever. “Radical exclusion” or “hyperseparation” refers to dualism’s attempts to magnify the differences between disjuncts, which promotes a view of them as different not merely in degree but in kind. “Homogenization,” as a corollary of radical exclusion, involves minimizing differences among those associated with the devalued class of terms, thus helping to confirm the binarism of dualism and to ensure that the members of the devalued class are regarded as having a common ‘nature’ that warrants similar treatment. “Incorporation” or “relational definition” describes the manner in which the characteristics or virtues associated with one side of the dualism are taken as primary, and the other side is defined in terms of its lack of these qualities. In this scheme, one disjunct is either devalued because of its failure to meet the standards set by the privileged side, or recognized only if it can be made to conform to those standards; difference is not tolerated, and any failure to be ‘a part of’ or ‘like’ the privileged side results in exclusion. A corollary to incorporation, “instrumentalization” views those associated with the inferiorized pole of the dualism as having meaning, purpose or function solely in relation to those which are privileged, treating the ends, goals, or activities of the former as instruments to the activities of the latter.<sup>5</sup>

These features of dualism fall into two categories: those that deny the relation and continuity between disjuncts, and those that deny the independence of that which stands at the inferiorized pole of the dualism, both of which are evident in self/other dualism and the definition of the self in terms of egoistic individualism. On the egoist model, “no internal relations of interest or desire bind people to one another, and primary goal sets are exclusive, without overlap.” Thus the egoist self is hyperseparated from others, regarding its ends as entirely self-contained, discrete, having “no non-eliminable reference to or overlap with the welfare or desires of others.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to exclusion, this model exhibits features of incorporation, viewing others as having ends that are valuable only when conjoined with those of the self: insofar as egoism presumes interests to be discrete and to concern only the self, others will be regarded either as obstacles to the self’s projects, or positively acknowledged only if it is shown that they are somehow important to the satisfaction of the self’s own interests. That is, others are recognized only when they are “assimilated to the self, or incorporated into the self and its systems of desires and needs.”<sup>7</sup>

The alternative to the dualistically defined self is variously referred to by ecofeminists as the 'self-in-relationship,' 'relational self' or, specifically referring to the connections between the self and the natural world, the 'ecological self.' Talk of a 'relational self' is not meant to imply, though, that the dualistically conceived self is devoid of relations. Rather, it is a self that relates to others through the lens of dualism, and thus the relational self stands as an attempt to redefine relations between self and other by reversing dualism's patterns.

Such a reversal requires, in the first place, an understanding of the self as "essentially related and interdependent, and the development of the self as taking place through involvement and interaction with the other."<sup>8</sup> This acknowledgement of the contributions of others to the self and rejection of the hyperseparation of self and other further involves the recognition that the self has "interdependent interests and needs which make *essential* and not merely accidental or contingent reference to those of others."<sup>9</sup> This is to say that the interests of others are not to be regarded as exclusive of those of the self, and the pursuit of others' flourishing should not be viewed as only contingently connected to that of the self. It is rather the case that neither can be sought in isolation from the other.

Acknowledging the relationship between and the dependence of self upon the other, however, is only one half of what is needed in response to dualized self/other constructions. This is because "recognizing relationality, embedment, and continuity overcomes hyperseparation of selves, but does nothing to counter incorporation, the definition of the other in terms of the self's realm of agency."<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the resolution of dualism requires a double movement

to recognize both the relationship and continuity denied by backgrounding and radical exclusion, and also to affirm the difference and independence of the other denied by incorporation and the definition of the other in relation to the self as lack and as instrument.<sup>11</sup>

This demand for an affirmation of otherness requires that we recognize self and other as "distinct centers of striving and resistance," as relatively distinct beings with relatively distinct and potentially dissimilar needs.<sup>12</sup> Without such a recognition, the logic of dualism is not adequately challenged, and the danger of a self that colonizes others remains.

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## II. Arne Naess and the Self of Deep Ecology

While ecofeminists have certainly made reference to the ecological self, the term is most often connected to the philosophical perspective of deep ecology, something that might be explained by the fact that many ecofeminists have expressed serious reservations about deep ecologists' portrayals of the ecological self, and voiced concerns about the process of 'identification' that is often promoted as the means to its realization.<sup>13</sup> In Plumwood's own critique of deep ecology, she argues that deep ecologists' discussions of the self and its relations to others tend to reflect problems of the "distortion of difference associated with incorporation,"<sup>14</sup> which is to say that deep ecologists tend to construe otherness in ways that assimilate difference and bring others into the sphere of the self. Let us turn, then, to consider the thought of Arne Naess in light of several variants of this critique, beginning with a look at Plumwood's discussions of the "indistinguishable self."<sup>15</sup>

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### A. Ontological Indistinguishability

As the name suggests, the "indistinguishable self" is a self that regards itself as entirely indistinct from others; it is a self that "rejects boundaries between self and nature."<sup>16</sup> Plumwood's claim here is that deep ecologists seek to redress the bifurcation between self and other, humans and nature, by developing an ontology that involves "the obliteration of distinction"<sup>17</sup> between them, a viewpoint in which self and other belong to a "seamless whole."<sup>18</sup> On this telling, to 'identify' with an other amounts to erasing its difference from the self, seeing the other as ontologically indistinct from the self. Plumwood cites several deep ecologists, including Naess, who lean toward this ontology of the One, and promote an excessively holistic or gestalt outlook that, in Warwick Fox's words, "dissolves not only the man-in-environment concept, but every compact thing-in-milieu concept."<sup>19</sup> This sort of "indistinguishability" represents a clear case of incorporation, for although it firmly rejects the radical separation of self and other, it fails to acknowledge the other's independence from the self. Instead of seeing self and other as essentially *related* this view posits that they are *merged* into an all-encompassing, capital S "Self" in which the otherness of the other is lost.

Is Naess a proponent of such a self? In beginning to formulate a response to this question, we should first acknowledge that Naess does indeed speak in some of the terms cited by Plumwood, espousing the "relational, total-field image" and rejecting the "compact thing-in-milieu concept."<sup>20</sup> It is not certain, though, that his articulation of this

position commits the error of the indistinguishability thesis. In *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, for example, he praises “relationalism” for its ability to “undermine the belief in organisms or persons as something which can be isolated from their milieux,” arguing against the idea that such things are “*completely* separable” from the networks of relations in which they exist.<sup>21</sup> That is, existents are not radically isolatable in the way that the “compact thing” model suggests; they are not discrete entities whose relations are accidental to what they are.

This explains why, in his numerous discussions of gestalts and gestaltism, Naess frequently warns of the problems with the language of “parts” and “wholes,” and entreats us to “think more strenuously about the relation between wholes and parts.”<sup>22</sup> Instead of “parts” and “wholes,” he suggests that we talk in terms of “subordinate” and “superordinate” gestalts in an attempt to rid ourselves of the notion that there are “parts” understood as “completely separable” elements.<sup>23</sup> It also explains why, in his continual search for new formulations of the old gestaltist motto, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts,” Naess suggests that an acceptable alternative is, “The part is more than a part.”<sup>24</sup> For Naess, “parts” must be understood in the context of relationships, and thus his gestaltism is in part an attempt to promote the view that individuals are what they are by virtue of their relations to others.

Embracing relationalism, however, does not mean that individuals are erased and one is left only with “wholes.” Naess’s attempts to avoid such a holism are evident in various places: at one point he says that to claim that humans are a “part” of nature in the sense of being “drops in the stream of life” could be “misleading if it implies that individuality of the drops is lost in the stream.”<sup>25</sup> In another place he says that identification does not transform self and other into an indistinct “mass” or “one single, integrated being.”<sup>26</sup> In what is perhaps his most telling comment on the subject, Naess says that in his understanding of gestaltism,

the whole is more than the parts, but also the parts are more than the whole, because there’s nothing left if you just have the whole. You have to continue, like in the nature mysticism of Spinoza, to keep the most subordinate gestalt you have. You keep them all. You cannot say, “Now I am free of the particulars.”<sup>27</sup>

Here we find Naess again cautioning against a superficial reading of the holism of gestaltism, and continuing to refer to the individual elements of gestalts as “subordinate gestalts,” but we also find a clear refusal to regard parts as being dispersed into wholes in such a way as to lose

their individuality. Indeed, true to the lessons of gestalt theory, for Naess, the absence of differentiation between parts does not leave one with a homogenous whole, but rather nothing at all—“there’s nothing left if you just have the whole.” Hence while there are no “parts” that exist completely independently of relations, it is equally true that there are no “wholes” in the absence of relatively distinct parts—one is never “free of the particulars.” Thus we can see that, for Naess, a gestaltist conception of self and other, humans and nature, denies neither relationships nor the differences between those in relation.

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### **B. Interest Indistinguishability**

Yet even if Naess may not be subject to the criticism that he views self and other as ontologically indistinct, Plumwood fears that he may still subscribe to a thesis of *interest* indistinguishability, the position that “selves may not be fused, but interests are.”<sup>28</sup> To embrace this version of the indistinguishability thesis would be to claim that when one identifies with an other, one comes to recognize that its needs or interests are identical to one’s own, a view which would again represent a case of incorporation insofar as it fails to respect the other’s difference from the self: denying that the other’s needs are relatively distinct from those of the self. And this failure shows itself to be particularly problematic if we keep in mind Plumwood’s observation that the indistinguishability thesis assumes that the union of self and other will guarantee respectful treatment of the other since the self will take the other’s needs as its own, “but there is nothing to guarantee this—one could equally well take one’s own needs for its.”<sup>29</sup>

The problem of ‘interest indistinguishability’ in Naess’s work arises specifically in relation to his formal definition of identification: identification is “a spontaneous, non-rational but not irrational process through which the interest or interests of another being are reacted to as our own interest or interests.”<sup>30</sup> While this statement is open to a variety of interpretations, it is true that Naess sometimes precises it in the direction criticized by Plumwood. In his reply to Peter Reed, for example, he claims that when one is identified with others one “is not aware of . . . interests as being potentially different.”<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, though, he writes that “[a] high level of identification does not eliminate conflicts of interest,”<sup>32</sup> which suggests that, in identification, the interests of self and other remain distinct, perhaps even sharply so.

There is an obvious tension here, but it is one that might be resolved if we were to situate Naess’s understanding of identification in the phenomenological context from which it appears to be derived. In his

debate with Alfred Ayer, Naess explained his use of the term “identification” by hypothetically positing that he responded empathetically to Ayer’s being hurt, and described this situation by saying that “phenomenologically there would be ‘one’ hurt, which was not yet ‘my’ experience.”<sup>33</sup> The latter half of this claim (that the hurt is “not yet ‘my’ experience”) highlights for us the tendency to analyze experience in terms that sever self and other and treat them as having essentially isolated interests, while the former (that “there would be ‘one’ hurt”) suggests that a more phenomenologically accurate analysis would describe a situation of ‘feeling-with’ in which one is not disconnected from the trials of the other. Something strikingly similar is expressed when Naess says that one might reformulate the claim, “This place is part of myself” by saying, “If this place is destroyed *something* in me is destroyed.”<sup>34</sup> In this formulation, it is not that what happens to the other is *identical* to what happens to the self, but rather that the self is *not indifferent* to what happens to others, that the well being of others is experienced as essentially (and not accidentally) bound up with that of oneself. These phenomenological reflections lead, then, neither to an account of self and other as individuals whose interests are entirely discrete, nor to an account in which the interests of self and other are completely merged. What we are led to is, instead, a relational account of the self in which self and other are intertwined such that their flourishing cannot be radically isolated, where the other’s attainment of its ends is experienced as an integral part of the self’s own well being.

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### C. Identification and Similarity

But even if Naess’s version of identification does not propose that the interests of self and other are indistinct, it clearly emphasizes the ways in which they are similar. This is particularly apparent in his oft-repeated story of witnessing the death of a flea that had jumped into some acid on a microscope slide. Recalling his empathic reaction to the scene, Naess claims that his response was made possible by the fact that he saw in the flea something like himself: “If I had been *alienated* from the flea,” he reports, “not seeing intuitively anything even resembling myself, the death struggle would have left me feeling indifferent.”<sup>35</sup> This ‘resemblance’ is not mere physical likeness, but rather the resemblance of the other’s needs to one’s own, a point made clear in another of Naess’s examples in which children are encouraged to see that the ‘preferences’ of an insect are akin to theirs.<sup>36</sup> Hence we can see that the term “identification” is not meant to function simply as a description of the inter-relation of self and other, but as an explanation of how such mutuality is possible: identification is the recognition that there is in others “something similar or identical with oneself” that

allows for one to respond to them in certain ways, which is why we are told that “solidarity with others already presupposes a process of identification.”<sup>37</sup>

Ultimately, therefore, this view still represents a kind of incorporation insofar as it proposes that others must be significantly similar to the self to warrant respectful treatment. It proposes, that is, that those to whom one is not indifferent are those whose interests are thought to resemble one’s own, and this is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it seems to limit involvement with others who are so different that one cannot readily discern in them interests similar to one’s own, or even interests at all (a point that is particularly relevant when we are asking about involvement with other-than-human others). Second, it too quickly assimilates or incorporates the differing needs of others to a framework that assumes that those needs are fundamentally similar to those of the self, and thus responds to others on a presumed similarity of interests. But interests are not always so similar—even among those beings that would elicit the sort of identification described here.

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### III. The Self of Stars and Stone

Thus far, we have suggested that even though Naess avoids some of the problems associated with the incorporation of others, his thinking about the basis of relationships and how they flourish apparently does not, emphasizing the ways in which the self ‘sees itself in others’ but neglecting the ways in which the self sees, and responds to, others *as* other. Recently, however, I had the opportunity to interview Naess at his home in Norway, and I would like to finish with some reflections on comments that he made that I believe can respond to this problem.

At one point in our talks, I asked Naess to say a few words about the ecological self. In his writings, of course, the ecological self is often discussed in conjunction with identification, but instead of turning the conversation in that direction, he described some of the experiences that inform his thinking about the self.

At Tvergastein I have the experience that Tvergastein does not belong to me but I belong to it. Of course Tvergastein is alive, and the stars are just outside the window of my hut, and they peek in at night. My relation to these things is intimate, internal; they are part of myself. So I start from this oneness.<sup>38</sup>

A few moments later, Naess said again that for him the rocks at Tvergastein were “alive,” and explained that this belief was in part inspired by his appreciation of their life histories:

There are some very big rocks near my hut at Tvergastein—they are a part of Hallingskarvet—and I was interested in why they were there. There are large fissures in the rock above Tvergastein, and they expand as water freezes in them. Every year they grow a little, and after so many years the rocks fall down. Gradually they lose their very nice position at the top of the mountain with a tremendous view, and tumble down to a flat place. Learning about the history of these big stones near the hut and what has happened to them—it's a way of experiencing even rocks as alive.

One could, of course, take this as an example of the sort of thinking of which we have been critical, presuming a great degree of similarity between self and stones (i.e., that the stones are others whose experience is structured in manner similar to that of the self). However, when I asked about the seeming anthropomorphism of these comments, Naess said, "People say I am unduly anthropomorphic, 'humanizing' the stone. But in another way I am also 'stoning' the human. The movement is mutual; it goes the other way also." The significance of this remark is that it emphasizes that self and other are mutually defining in a way that the notion of identification does not, for although it maintains that one 'sees oneself in the other,' it clearly rejects that this movement is one-directional: one both 'sees oneself in the other' *and* 'sees the other in the self,' understanding that it is not only the self that defines others but that others are defining of the self, being productive or revelatory of certain dimensions of the self.

But perhaps even more important than this affirmation of the ability of others to define the self, Naess's remarks also appeared to me to affirm the otherness of those with whom the self is in relation. "I have known the rocks at Tvergastein since I was very young," he told me, "and they *look* at me. I *look* at them and they *look* at me." A short while later he said:

With the stones at Tvergastein, how could I possibly move them? I am something that contains in me those stones, and have for so many years, that I couldn't possibly move them. As I feel the sense of belonging to Tvergastein my motivation is always, without any reflection, adapted to this feeling of being-there-together.<sup>39</sup>

Here the stones are spoken of not as "one" with the self, nor as beings who have interests akin to the self that elicit an empathic response. Rather, they "look," which is to say that they approach the self from across a distance, from 'foreign soil.' To call these beings "alive" is not to demand that we think of them in the same terms as the biologically living; it is to assert that they are active forces in the world, expressive entities that exert a kind of 'elemental influence' on their surroundings,

imposing themselves on the landscape and making certain demands of those in their presence. These are beings that tell different stories and present different perspectives that must be taken into account, navigated, and integrated into the life of the self; they are others whose unique patterns and ways of being shape those of the self. And the ecological self is the self that is in dialogue with these differences, the self that does not carve its name on things but is itself carved out by them, “contains” them. This is a self that has ‘internalized’ its relations to the world such that it can only be portrayed as a being who has as its very mode of being “being-there-together.”

These remarks begin to show us, therefore, a version of the self that recognizes others as other, as unique presences with a certain density, an opacity in relation to which the self’s own boundaries are shaped and defined. It is a model of ecological selfhood that, in Plumwood’s words, allows for both “the tension of sameness and difference” and for “the other to play an active role in the creation of self in discovery and interaction with the world.”<sup>40</sup> Such a self is perhaps not best described in terms of identification, but as a self that, as Naess put it, is “together” with others, “intimate” with a multitude of beings. Let us conclude, then, by following Naess’s lead and suggesting that the ecological self is a self that is formed in intimate contact with myriad others, from those who dwell upon rocky soils to those encountered in the starry skies; it is a self of stars and stone.

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## Endnotes

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T1 This essay was written under a grant from the Pace Institute for Environmental and Regional Studies, Pace University, New York. I would like to thank the faculty and staff at Pace for their help and support, and for their input at our meetings. Particular thanks go to Dr. Robert Chapman, who was of great assistance, and whose efforts made the present work possible.

I would also like to thank the reviewers at the *Trumpeter* for their helpful commentary on an earlier version of the paper.

2 I am focusing on the work of Plumwood because her critique of deep ecology is both well developed and widely recognized. In addition, her work has become integral to that of other ecofeminists. See, for example, Warren 1999; Gaard 1997; Davion 1996.

3 Mary Mellor writes that “most ecofeminists follow radical feminism in identifying patriarchy, particularly western patriarchy, as the main source of global ecological destruction. The central dynamic of western patriarchy is seen as the division of society into hierarchical dualisms” (1997, 5). For examples of ecofeminists who have made the concept of dualism integral to their analyses of self/other relations, see Gruen 1993; Warren 1990.

4 Plumwood 1991, 47.

5 *Ibid.*, 48–55.

6 *Ibid.*, 144.

7 *Ibid.*, 52. See also 141–7.

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- 8 Ibid., 153.
- 9 Ibid., 153–4.
- 10 Ibid., 154.
- 11 Ibid., 66–7.
- 12 Ibid., 154.
- 13 See, for example, Kheel 1990; Cheney 1987.
- 14 Plumwood 1991, 173. In what follows I focus on the problem of “indistinguishability,” which is only one of several criticisms of deep ecology that Plumwood voices. Elsewhere, however, I have addressed other aspects of Plumwood’s critique as it pertains to Naess (Diehm 2002).
- 15 Ibid., 176
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., 177.
- 18 Ibid., 176.
- 19 Fox 1984, 1. This text is cited by Plumwood (1991, 177).
- 20 Naess 1973.
- 21 Naess 1989, 56 (emphasis added).
- 22 Ibid., 58.
- 23 Ibid. See also Naess 1995a, 243.
- 24 Naess 1995a, 242.
- 25 Naess 1989, 165.
- 26 Ibid., 173.
- 27 Rothenberg 1993, 159–60.
- 28 Plumwood 1999, 208. This issue is also addressed in Plumwood 1991, 180.
- 29 Plumwood 1991, 178.
- 30 Naess 1993, 29.
- 31 Naess 1999, 200.
- 32 Naess 1993, 29.
- 33 Naess, Ayer, and Elders 1999, 20.
- 34 Naess 1995b, 231 (emphasis added).
- 35 Ibid., 227.
- 36 Naess 1989, 171–2.
- 37 Naess 1993, 29. See also “Self-realization,” where Naess says that “there must be identification in order for there to be compassion . . .” (1995b, 227).

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38 All of the citations in this portion of the paper are from an as yet unpublished interview conducted on December 15 and 16, 2001. I would like to thank Arne Naess for his time and thoughtful comments, Kit-Fai Naess for her help in arranging the meeting, and Geir Gronflaten for his invaluable assistance while I was in Oslo.

Regarding this particular statement, it should be noted that Naess again chooses the language of “oneness” as one way of articulating his intuitions. While not ignorant of this, I believe that the comments that follow are not as problematic as this term might suggest.

39 These statements appeared in response to my question, “Is the way in which a rock is alive different from the way in which a tree or an animal is alive?” Naess began his answer by saying, “There are differences, I guess, but ...” and then proceeded with his remarks about the stones ‘looking’. It is clear here that Naess is trying to justify applying the term “living” to things such as rocks and mountains, but I do not think that this must be understood as an example of incorporating the non-living to the living. It seems to me that Naess is here making room for a certain kind of continuity between the living and the non-living without assimilating the latter to the former. My comments that follow explain why I think this is the case, and I take as further evidence of this interpretation a comment Naess made in response to Karen Warren, in which he wrote that “I do not do anything strictly for water’s own sake” (Witoszek and Brennan 1999, 272). Here Naess clearly is not thinking of the non-living world in terms such as needs or interests that are more appropriate for organisms.

40 Plumwood 1991, 176.