

Interpretation

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Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Translated and edited by David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xiii + 223 pp., cloth \$49.50, paper \$17.95.

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Over the past thirty years what has come to be mainstream environmentalism has been characterized by a serious ambiguity. As often as it has been a virulent critic of this or that particular result of modern science and technology, it has always relied on modern science and technology as the means by which environmental problems are to be solved. Indeed, that very rubric—that there are finite “problems” in man’s relationship with nature with definite “solutions”—testifies to the fact that environmentalism is deeply rooted in modernity.

The success of this movement is an issue hotly contested between those of more and less environmental fervor (for today, we are all environmentalists). But those most committed are not so impressed by their accomplishments that they are unwilling to entertain the possibility that their failures stem from not having thought through environmental problems in a sufficiently radical way. In the 1950s and 1960s it was sufficiently progressive to question that we were always in every way brought better living through chemistry. But the cutting edge has moved on.

We are told now, by a movement that calls itself “deep ecology,” that to deal with environmental problems it is necessary to question the very premises of modernity. Such an enterprise will hardly shock readers of this journal; indeed, for many it might be *prima facie* evidence for giving deep ecology a serious hearing. The volume reviewed here provides an excellent occasion for such consideration, as it is largely written by the spiritual and philosophical father of deep ecology, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess.

David Rothenberg, who is something more than an editor and translator of *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, but less than a coauthor, characterizes Naess’s work as a “system” that provides a “new ontology” for man’s relationship with nature (p. 2). If “fully understood” this ontology makes it “no longer possible . . . to injure nature wantonly, as this would mean injuring an integral part of ourselves” (p. 2). Yet at the same time, he notes that “Naess’ result is not a work of philosophical or logical argumentation—‘It is primarily intuitions’, he says” (p. 2). As a result, to have an “ecosophy” or philosophical ecology, is to have “a personal system, a personal philosophy” (p. 5).

Rothenberg introduces three important themes in these remarks. In what way

is deep ecology a philosophically based movement; what does it understand philosophy to be? How is its philosophical character reconciled with its personal, intuitional basis? And how do philosophy and intuition combine to teach us what “wanton” harm to nature is, and why it should be avoided?

As a movement, deep ecology prides itself on what it sees as a high degree of philosophical sophistication. This sophistication is what makes it an advance over the previous “shallow” or “reform” environmentalism, with its too ready acceptance of the perspective of modernity. Deep ecology is radical in part because it is philosophical; because it claims to question whatever is to a depth hitherto unreached by environmental theorists.

What does deep ecology question about? Philosophy is stressed because our environmental problems represent a crisis of values. Although there is “no articulated world-view which endorses mankind’s current [destructive] role in the ecosphere” (p. 87) there is a “deeply grounded ideology of consumption and production that is unecological” (p. 104). This ideology must be challenged by the forceful articulation and defense of alternative norms. Ideally, these norms are to be part of a system, an “ecosophy.” “A system is a structured assemblage of statements, all provisional and tentative. An all-encompassing philosophical system is meant to express all *fundamental* (or *basic*) premises for thought and action and to suggest some areas of concrete application” (p. 73). The development of such a system seems to be *the* philosophical task.

It may seem odd, then, that throughout the book, questions Naess admits are important philosophical issues are raised only to be dropped or deferred. The provisional and personal character of much of what is discussed is, as in the above quotation, freely admitted. Indeed, Naess withholds the articulation of the system upon which this book is based—his personal ecosophy, called Ecosophy T—until the final chapter, and even there he notes that the “complete formulation of an ecosophy is out of the question . . .” (p. 196).

Such modesty could be understood as called for by the philosophical enterprise itself, and Naess appears genuinely to have his share of that modesty. But that is apparently not always its source. A hint of an alternative purpose is that the bulk of the book is more a political handbook, or even tract, than it is a philosophical text. But Naess is concerned lest deep ecology appear to have a rigid ideology. Thus, while Chapter 1 contains an eight-point platform of the deep ecology movement, it is highly general in tone. It speaks of the importance of “richness and diversity” of life on earth, the need to limit human interference with this richness and diversity as much as possible, and the way in which such limitation will require fundamental changes in “basic economic, technological and ideological structures” (p. 29).

The book as a whole is an explication of this platform, but in so explaining one message comes across with perfect clarity: the deep ecology movement must seek the widest circle of allies possible. To do so it must be prepared both to confront its (probable) enemies in ways most likely to make them friends,

and also be careful not to alienate those inclined to be friends by insisting on ideological conformity. Naess's philosophical "method" of "precisation"—beginning with very general formulations such as those in the platform, and only slowly and in stages exploring more precise meanings—is well designed to produce the maximum level of consent to deep ecology's propositions and minimize conflict. In Naess's forest there are many glades. For example, he takes pains to show from an examination of selected passages that "A person's opinion about the ecological movement cannot be derived from the fact that he or she 'believes in the Bible'" (p. 187), the presumption being that such people are not likely to be sympathetic. Deep ecologists can even learn something from economists, normally considered the hereditary enemy of environmentalists.

One might argue in respect to these observations that to a becoming philosophical modesty Naess has added a certain necessary prudence. What makes both these interpretations doubtful is what Naess understands philosophy to be doing when it contributes to systemization and precisation. He presents his ecosophy with the "main goal" of emphasizing "the responsibility of any integrated person to work out his or her reaction to contemporary environmental problems *on the basis of a total view*" (p. 163). Furthermore, he says of the final, philosophical chapter "a basic positive attitude to nature is articulated in philosophical form. It is not done to win compliance, but to offer some of the many who are at home in such a philosophy new opportunities to express it in words" (p. 164). The platform is designed to suggest views that are "basic," but not "in an absolute sense, but basic among the views that supporters have in common" (p. 29).

There seems to be less to the questioning stance in principle taken by deep ecology than meets the eye. Far from being a way of life that questions all opinions, it seems philosophy for Naess is to be used to articulate a total view that is compatible with pre-existing attitudes or "reactions." It questions in order to find justifications. Far from challenging all the decisive premises of modernity, Naess's deep ecology falls into the modern instrumental employment of philosophy. The system is a tool of the political reform program.

Another reason grounded in principle explains the highly personalized way in which Naess presents his philosophical speculations. The centerpiece of Naess's ecosophy turns out to be "Self-realization!"—the exclamation point indicating the existence of a moral imperative. "Self" here is certainly not to be understood narrowly, as an isolated ego. The burden of much of the work is to show how Self must be understood in all its manifold connectedness to Other, or as a certain perspective on the totality of what is. Self-realization means knowing that "[t]he identity of the individual, 'that I am something', is developed through interaction with a broad manifold, organic and inorganic. There is no completely isolatable I, no isolatable social unity. To distance oneself from nature and the 'natural' is to distance oneself from a part of that which the 'I' is built up of" (p. 164).

This observation suggests that what we become depends on all becoming. It readily develops into an equality—in principle at least—of all becoming, or the “*unfolding of life*” (p. 165). There is “the universal right to live and blossom” (p. 166). Naess knows full well that the blossoming of some requires the harm of others, a point we will return to shortly. But if the properly understood Self is so deeply connected with everything else, why must philosophy be so particularized in light of who is philosophizing? Presumably because the Self does not arise by virtue of a self finding its place within a larger, perhaps ordered, whole. Instead, the Self is founded in whatever “manifold” it happens to find itself in. Despite Naess’s denial of an isolated social self, the Self appears to be radically isolated in its dependence upon the contingent circumstances of its particular situation.

The best example is the fact that Naess labels his ecosophy “Ecosophy T.” Rothenberg notes, “The name T is said to represent his mountain hut Tvergastein (cross the stones) but it is its personal nature that is most important. It suggests that there might be many other ecosophies (A, B, C, . . .)” (p. 4). Ecosophy T unfolds from the particular circumstances of Naess’s life, as his very Self unfolds. Presumably, it is on the basis of this unfolding that Naess’s intuitions have developed. Now, it may be expected, and indeed we know it to be true, that at some level, those with differing experiences can come to similar intuitions, if the level of generality is kept sufficiently high. But for that reason, no philosophical *system* can ever be anything more than personal, as the attempt is made to articulate the full meaning of those intuitions. Philosophy must at best become “love of wisdoms,” but more likely simply love of one’s own opinions, as one endlessly articulates their ramifications.

We pass over the historicism implicit in this stress on particularity in order to examine how it serves as a foundation for the green political arrangements that Naess describes—if politics properly speaking can be built at all on such foundations. Highly critical of the nation state for its centralizing propensities, Naess outlines “certain properties which are considered positive” that have been developed by “green communities” (p. 144). These include small geographic size, population small enough so that members of the community can know each other, direct democracy, economic self-reliance (with education being primarily directed to this end, i.e., education in the arts and trades), small income and wealth differentials. In addition, “Counteracting antisocial behavior is done directly with friendliness. There is little direct influence from the outside which interferes with that order inside” (p. 144). In other words, as Naess later makes clear, orderliness is maintained primarily through intense social pressures (p. 159).

Once again, a suggestion that the ancient city had certain virtues will hardly shock readers of this journal. As in the case of deep ecology’s philosophic pretensions, the willingness to consider such a radical political alternative to modernity might even be all the more grounds for giving it a serious hearing.

Unfortunately, it is not clear Naess appreciates the extent to which he is revising Aristotle. It may be for that very reason that he is curiously silent about the well-known defects of such communities that arise from the constraints of nature and human nature: their instability, their tendencies toward tyranny and oppression, their tendencies to war and imperialism.

There are vague hints that Naess may be content to “let nature take its course” in respect to such ills, that he understands the hard side of the politics he describes. At one point he says, “The world’s health organisations are perhaps in need of an ideology influenced to a greater extent by the health evidenced in nature” (p. 194). Since the story of medicine is the story of overcoming the health evidenced in nature, this passage may suggest a means by which the drastic global population cut Naess recommends (albeit to take place over many, many generations) may be achieved.

Or again, we have already spoken of “the universal right to live and blossom” (p. 166). Naess understands that such a right, in isolation, would be completely untenable. Harm and killing are necessary. He tends to focus his arguments against those who fear that any such right would be too protective, that human beings would suffer by it (p. 170). But how much protection the right is intended to afford is actually problematic. It is part of a strong condemnation of animal testing of consumer products (p. 171). But it produces the following remarkable statement about intrahuman relations: “The ecological viewpoint presupposes acceptance of the fact that big fish eat small, but not necessarily that large men throttle small” (p. 195). Not necessarily?

One reason for this rather half-hearted formulation may be that Naess is against attempting to justify violations of the right to live and blossom on the basis that some beings have greater intrinsic value than others—either because they are ensouled, or rational, or self-conscious, or higher on an evolutionary scale. But this cuts both ways; neither would these qualities be grounds for a special respect for human life.

. . . it is against my intuition of unity to say ‘I can kill you because I am more valuable’ but not against the intuition to say ‘I will kill you because I am hungry’. In the latter case, there would be an implicit regret. . . . In short, I find obviously right, but often difficult to justify, different sorts of behaviour with different sorts of living beings. But this does not imply that we classify some as intrinsically more valuable than others. (P. 168).

Such passages seem to suggest Naess’s reluctance to see in the unfolding of life any sort of ordered whole in which specific human capacities might find their proper place, purpose and limits. Rather, if big men do not necessarily throttle small, it may be because for the most part big men do not want to eat them.

But despite such hints at a rather hard world, it seems more likely that Naess believes that such problems can be overcome. A motto of deep ecology is “simple in means rich in ends.” Of this motto Naess says, “It is not to be

confounded with appeals to be Spartan, austere, and self-denying” (p. 88). (This having tried to link deep ecology with Aristotelianism, Buddhism, Confucianism—all of which seem to call for a high degree of austerity and self-denial.) I will argue that despite the hard conclusions his arguments sometimes point to, Naess relies on another key premise of modernity, a belief in the human conquest of nature, to avoid them.

That there should be any such acceptance is in the highest degree ironic, since the legitimacy of this premise is under attack in deep ecology. “The great Western emphasis upon the subjugation of nature goes against this insight of unity” (p. 194). Or again,

This glorification of human beings at the expense of nature becomes ecosophically relevant when it is manifest in value priorities. To the extent that it serves to depreciate, or blind us to, [n]on-human realms, it has an obviously negative ecological effect.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages . . . [o]ur depreciation of the ‘physical’ reality continued, now in the form of exploitation. *Nature came to be interpreted as both slave and raw material*. Like the slaves, nature could revolt, and the expression ‘struggle *against* nature’ has been in continuous use since then. (Pp. 190–91)

Yet when Naess says “to the extent it serves to depreciate,” an important qualification is already suggested. How is it developed?

As Naess presents the “systemization” of his personal ecosophy, he discusses the proposition that “The higher the level of Self-realisation attained by anyone, the broader and deeper the identification with others” (p. 197). This hypothesis is crucial to understanding the proposition summarized at the beginning of this review, that human beings could hardly harm nature when they come to view it as part of themselves. Such identification, a product of Self-realization, is to replace calculation as the hallmark of human relatedness to nature (p. 175). Naess comments that those “who feel at home” with this hypothesis, will hardly be pleased with what they see in nature:

They see a lonely, desperately hungry wolf attacking an elk, wounding it mortally but being incapable of killing it. The elk dies after protracted, severe pains, while the wolf dies slowly of hunger. Impossible not to identify with and somehow feel the pains of both! But the nature of the conditions of life at least in our time are such that nothing can be done about the ‘cruel’ fate of both. The general situation elicits sorrow and the search for means to interfere with natural processes on behalf of any being in a state of panic or desperation, protracted pains, severe suppression or object slavery. But this attitude implies that we deplore much that actually goes on in nature, that we deplore much that seems essential to life on Earth. In short, the assertion of [the hypothesis that higher Self-realization leads to higher identification] reflects an attitude opposed to any unconditional *Verherrlichung* of life, and therefore of nature in general. (Pp. 198–99)

The sentiment Naess describes will surely be familiar to many of us; what is remarkable is not the sentiment but what he does with it. When he says that “at least in our time” nothing can be done about the situation of the wolf and elk, there is an implication that perhaps there will come a time when something *can* be done. This inference seems to be confirmed by the fact that he goes on to discuss what might be done in the way of improving on nature. It may or may not be that in speaking of slavery, suppression, and panic Naess is engaging less in identification than in anthropomorphism. But in any case, the “pacification of existence” implied in this passage may be on a level well beyond anything ever imagined by Bacon, since it extends to the benefit of all beings, rather than to the comfortable self-preservation of human beings only.

This passage about the elk and wolf makes clear in a practical way the ideal of a humanized nature that can now be made explicit on the theoretical level. As Naess recognizes, the human capacity for Self-realization is at least far beyond that of any other being, and it may be unique. While all things might be able to unfold to their specific capacities (p. 166), only human beings seem to have the ability to see in those capacities something that transcends them—intimations that are crucial to the prospect for identification (p. 175). Other beings may realize themselves; only humans can *speak* about Self-realization. While this capacity for a discursive account may at times seem suspect to Naess (p. 179), the fact of the matter is his project would be evidently self-contradictory if he did not see its importance. And even if more or less realized Self-realization turns out to be only a *sentiment* of the oneness of all, it would still seem it could only be appreciated as a sentiment by human beings.

The uniqueness of *Homo sapiens*, its special capacities among millions of kinds of other living beings, has been used as a premise for domination and mistreatment. Ecosophy uses it as a premise for a universal care that other species can neither understand nor afford. (P. 171)

Any way you look at it, Naess’s world turns out to be a humanized world, built to our measure—at least until some higher type of being comes along (cf. pp. 169, 192). He likens the desired relationship to nature as a whole to that between dogs and the humans who feel very close to them. But of course, the dog is commonly classified as a “domesticated” animal.

Thus, any appeals to what sounds like the ancient city come in the context of a belief in overcoming natural constraints on a scale that is entirely alien to ancient political thought. But calling for a love of nature like the love of pets is not the only strand of thought in this part of Naess’s account. His recourse to the language of “rights” liberalism may be an attempt to reconcile his “harder” and “softer” teachings about nature. For, despite the pretense throughout the book that liberalism barely exists as a meaningful political philosophy, and the near dismissal of it as a positive political force, rights are important to Naess.

We have seen how he recognizes that the principle of the equal rights of all

beings is not a “practical norm about equal conduct towards all life forms,” since life forms must injure and kill each other (p. 167). This conflict of rights evidently recapitulates the problem posed by natural rights in the state of nature. Thus when Naess speaks about working out the particular accommodations and limits that need to be placed on killing, is he not articulating the need for a “civil society” that will adjust these conflicting demands? In effect, the “international politics” of our current relationship with nature is to be replaced by a “domestic politics” that does not end conflict, but softens and regulates it. If so, then Naess is asking that all beings be included under that great human artifice, the social contract.

As the rights of man seem to be realized ever more on the global political scene, is it then indeed time to turn our attention to the rights of beings? The small communities of the future green world, each of whose character is determined by the particular circumstances of its relatedness to its surroundings—is this the ultimate step in liberal self-determination? Is there a third form of the end of history, which is neither the universal and homogeneous state nor the sinking of humanity into natural contingency? It would appear ungrateful to a book that raises such important questions to complain because it does not provide definitive answers. But has Naess provided the most fruitful context for attempting to come to grips with them?

Perhaps Naess should be judged by his own standards. He laments the limits that our imaginations place on thinking about what a green utopia might be like. Has he really stretched his own imagination to the limit? A world where humans and animals live peaceably side by side, where nature flourishes under such control that elks need not fear wolves, nor wolves suffer lack, a world that is not defiled by waste, and where the inevitable frictions of life are taken care of less by police than by expectations, a world in which human diversity is celebrated, and cultures live peaceably side by side—is this world so unimaginable? As compared with the Norwegian landscape he so evidently loves, Naess surely recoils from Disney World. But he may share more with that Magic Kingdom than he cares to admit.