



ARNE NAESS

Simple in Means, Rich in Ends

A Conversation with Arne Naess BY STEPHAN BODIAN

Arne Naess is one of Norway's most prominent philosophers and environmental activists. Before becoming full professor and head of the department of philosophy at the University of Oslo at the age of twenty-seven (because, as he so matter-of-factly puts it, "I was early eager to read thick books without illustrations"), he studied experimental psychology at UC Berkeley and underwent fourteen months of intensive psychoanalysis in Vienna. The purpose of the analysis, he says, was to make him aware of his personal weaknesses and biases in order to prevent them from having an unconscious influence on his scientific work.

During World War II, he engaged in nonviolent resistance against the Nazis and in subsequent years authored numerous books on the philosophy of science, as well as two studies on Gandhi and a two-volume history

of philosophy. In 1969, eight years before the mandatory retirement age, he left his professorship in order to devote all his efforts to the growing environmental movement—"so that I could live, rather than function," he says—and has since continued to lecture throughout the world, at the same time developing his own approach to ecology, which he calls *ecosophy*, or deep ecology.

For a man of his professional stature, Naess is disarmingly earthy and un-presupposing, with a provocative twinkle in his eye, more eager to lure his listener into a trip to the desert or to draw attention to the lifeforms in a tiny patch of earth than to talk about philosophy. Nevertheless, Naess was kind enough to answer a few questions for the editors of *The Ten Directions* after a recent conference on deep ecology at the Institute for Transcultural Studies. We would like to thank him for the generous gift of his time and insight.

STEPHAN BODIAN: Arne, how did you become involved in deep ecology?

ARNE NAESS: When I was four or five years old, I had the opportunity to explore the fjords in Norway, and I was intrigued by the fantastic variety of life forms, especially tiny fishes and crabs and shrimps which would gather around me in a very friendly way. I lived with these other beings throughout the summer, not spending much time with other children. When I was nine or ten, I learned to enjoy the high mountains where my mother had a cottage. Because I had no father, the mountain somehow became my father, as a friendly, immensely powerful being, perfect and extremely tranquil. Later, pressures from school, from society, from the man-made world, made me happy to be where nothing pressed me into behaving or evaluating in any particular way. For example, clouds talk to us, but they don't press us into believing anything. Even a work of art somehow intends something, informs us about something. But nature is overwhelmingly rich and good and does not impose anything upon us. We are completely free, our imagination is free. Of course, if we are careless, an avalanche might bury us or we might drown, but in nature, there are always warnings. I never have the feeling that nature is something to be dominated or conquered: it's something with which we coexist.

Modern astronomy, which I followed from the 1930s, indicates that the universe is growing, and I feel that I am growing with the universe. I identify with the universe—the greater the universe, the greater I am. Whereas many others feel threatened when they realize that the cosmos is so immense and we are so small. We are just as big as the cosmos, in a sense. We ourselves, as human beings, are capable of identifying with the whole of existence.

These feelings then led me into ecology when there was an international movement developing. I did not do it for fun. I think social movements are actually boring, I would rather be in nature, but I think we must all somehow contribute to saving a little of what is left of this planet—this is the last century in which we will have the chance. That is why I am in Los Angeles today and not in the mountains or the desert.

From the very beginning, then, your interest as a philosopher involved nature in some way.

Yes, because people found my interests so strange that I had somehow to label and rationalize them. And these interests also prompted me to ask deeper questions about the meaning of life. In this way, philosophy was my focus very early, and I found that I could make a living as a professional philosopher. A philosopher, in contrast to a professor of philosophy, is one whose philosophy is expressed in his or her life. I have tried to be both in the last ten years.

You coined the term *deep ecology*. What do you mean by deep ecology, exactly, and how is it different from shallow ecology?

The essence of deep ecology is to ask deeper questions. The adjective “deep” stresses that we ask why and how, where others do not. For instance, ecology as a science does not ask what kind of a society would be the best for maintaining a particular ecosystem—that is considered a question for value theory, for politics, for ethics. As long as ecologists keep narrowly to their science, they do not ask such questions. What we need today is a tremendous expansion of ecological thinking in what I call *ecosophy*. *Sophy* comes from the Greek term *sophia*, “wisdom,” which relates to ethics, norms, rules, and practice. *Ecosophy*, or deep ecology, then, involves

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a shift from science to wisdom.

For example, we need to ask questions like: Why do we think that economic growth and high levels of consumption are so important? The conventional answer would be to point to the economic consequences of not having economic growth. But in deep ecology, we ask whether the present society fulfills basic human needs like love and security and access to nature, and in so doing, we question our society's underlying assumptions. We ask which society, which education, which form of religion, is beneficial for all life on the planet as a whole, and then we ask further what we need to do in order to make the necessary changes. We are not limited to a scientific approach; we have an obligation to verbalize a total view.

Of course, total views may differ. Buddhism, for example, provides a fitting background or context for deep ecology, certain Christian groups have formed platforms of action in favor of deep ecology, and I myself have worked out my own philosophy, which I call ecosophy. In general, however, people do not question deeply enough to explicate or make clear a total view. If they did, most would agree with saving the planet from the destruction that's in progress. A total view, such as deep ecology, can provide a single motivating force for all the activities and movements aimed at saving the planet from human exploitation and domination.

It seems that, if we ask deeply enough, our questions will require us to make a radical shift in the way we see the world, what some people have called a paradigm shift.

Yes. I think it's a shift from being dominated by means, instruments, gadgets, all the many things we think will give us pleasure or make us happy or perfect. The shift comes about when we seriously ask ourselves: In what situations do I experience the maximum satisfaction of my whole being? And find that we need practically nothing of what we are supposed to need for a rich and fulfilling life. And if we make that shift toward a life

simple in means but rich in goals, we are not threatened by the plans elaborated by environmentalists. For instance, we can see that, instead of an energy crisis, we have a crisis of consumption—we have more than enough energy. There is no reason to continue increasing our consumption of energy or of any of the other material aspects of life. In countries like the United States the crisis is rather one of lifestyle, of our traditions of thoughtlessness and confusion, or our inability to question what is and is not worthwhile in life. Within fifty years, either we will need a dictatorship to save what is left of the diversity of life forms, or we will have a shift of values, a shift of our total view such that no dictatorship will be needed. It is thoroughly natural to stop dominating and exploiting and destroying the planet. A “smooth” way, involving harmonious living with nature, or a “rough” way, involving dictatorship and coercion—those are the options.

What then would you consider the fundamental characteristics or attributes of deep ecology, and how do they differ from those of shallow ecology?

One of the basic norms of deep ecology is that every life form has in principle a right to live and blossom. As the world is made, of course, we have to kill in order to eat, but there is a basic intuition in deep ecology that we have no right to destroy other living beings without sufficient reason. Another norm is that, with maturity, human beings will experience joy when other life forms experience joy and sorrow when other life forms experience sorrow. Not only will we feel sad when our brother or a dog or a cat feels sad, but we will grieve when living beings, including landscapes, are destroyed. In our civilization, we have vast means of destruction at our disposal but extremely little maturity in our feelings. Only a very narrow range of feelings have interested most human beings until now.

For deep ecology, there is a core democracy in the biosphere. The shallow ecology movement talks only about the resources of mankind, whereas in deep ecology we talk about resources for each species. Shallow

ecologists are concerned about overpopulation in developing countries but not about overpopulation in industrial countries—countries which may destroy one hundred times more per capita than a country like Bangladesh. In deep ecology, we have the goal not only of stabilizing human population but also of reducing it to a sustainable minimum without revolution or dictatorship. I should think we must have no more than 100 million people if we are to have the variety of cultures we had one hundred years ago. Because we need the conservation of human cultures, just as we need the conservation of animal species.

So diversity is of great value at the human level, as well as at the level of plants and animals.

Yes. Personally, I think that, to maximize self-realization—and I don't mean self as ego but self in a broader sense—we need maximum diversity and maximum symbiosis, that is to say, a lifestyle in which it's unnecessary and unproductive to kill each other except, as among wildlife, to keep the population within limits. Diversity, then, is a fundamental norm and a common delight. As deep ecologists, we take a natural delight in diversity, as long as it does not include crude, intrusive forms, like Nazi culture, that are destructive to others.

Such a long-range view is characteristic of deep ecology—we feel responsible for future generations, not just the first, but the second, third, and fourth generation as well. Our perspective in time and space is very long. In contrast, the shallow ecological movement repairs some of the worst consequences of our lifestyle and social structure but does not address itself to fundamental questions.

What do you mean when you say that maximum self-realization and maximum diversity are closely related?

Self-realization is the realization of the potentialities of life. Organisms that differ from each other in three ways give us less diversity than organisms that differ from each other in one hundred ways. Therefore, the

self-realization we experience when we identify with the universe is heightened by an increase in the number of ways in which individuals, societies, and even species and life forms realize themselves. The greater the diversity, then, the greater the self-realization. This seeming duality between individuals and the totality is encompassed by what I call the Self and the Chinese call the Tao. Most people in deep ecology have had the feeling—usually, but not always, in nature—that they are connected with something greater than their ego, greater than their name, their family, their special attributes as an individual—a feeling that is often called oceanic because many have it on the ocean. Without that identification, one is not easily drawn to become involved in deep ecology.

Many people have this feeling when they see a death struggle—for instance tiny animals like flies or mosquitoes fighting for their lives. When they see animals suffering, they may identify with life forms they usually don't identify with. Such situations offer us an opportunity to develop a more mature point of view. Insofar as this conversion, these deep feelings, are religious, deep ecology has a religious component, and those people who have done the most to make societies aware of the destructive way in which we live in relation to natural settings have had such religious feelings. Rachel Carson, for example, says that we *cannot* do what we do, we have no religious or ethical justification for behaving as we do toward nature. Her argument is not calculated or reasonable in the usual sense, saying that, if we continue poisoning nature, we will be less healthy or will have fewer resources, and so on. She is saying that we are simply not permitted to behave in that way. Some will say that nature is not man's property, it's the property of God: others will say it in other ways. The main point is that deep ecology has a religious component, fundamental intuitions that everyone must cultivate if he or she is to have a life based on values and not function like a computer. Whereas shallow ecology, if taken to its logical extreme, is like a computerized, cost-benefit analysis for humans.

You mention a long time frame. On the other hand, of course, the situation is critical right now—species are becoming extinct at a very rapid rate, ecosystems are being destroyed. How do you balance the need for a long time frame with the very urgent need for immediate action?

It's very natural to combine the two, because the long perspective in time and space motivates one to act. That is to say, being concerned with the whole, with the religious and philosophical background, one learns, for example, that there are practically no more rain forests on Sumatra and only six percent left on Sri Lanka, and one is motivated immediately by some deep evaluation that says, "This cannot go on, this must be changed." So the long time frame—absolutely necessary in questions of population reduction, for instance—is necessary both because of certain facts and because of the motivation we derive from eternal concerns like self-realization, identity with the universe, and other religious notions that involve millennia or even eternity, rather than five or ten years.

Deep ecology, then, is a fundamental view of the world that at the same time calls for immediate action. In addition to contrasting it with shallow ecology, can you suggest ways in which the two might work together? Can deep ecology inform movements which may be anthropocentric and may not articulate a fundamental world view yet are also large and effective?

I think that, as deep ecologists, we must cooperate with various movements, including what we call narrow or shallow environmental organizations. The Sierra Club cannot have deep ecological principles in its statutes but must include people who are very anthropocentric and think only about the maximum benefit for human beings within a ten- or twenty-year time frame. We need to work with movements whose members do not know anything about deep ecology and may not have contact with wilderness or personal relationships with animals other than cats and dogs. And of course

we can cooperate with movements that deal with related issues, such as the anti-nuclear movement and certain Christian movements for the dignity of life, at the same time trying to expand and deepen their views.

However, we must also have programs that may not be meaningful to those who are not deep ecologists—the reduction of human population, for instance. We must be flexible but never forget fundamental principles, because, like Buddhism and certain other philosophies in the Western and Eastern traditions, deep ecology is a basic view of man and the world.

Some people, particularly in this country, have great faith that, once we've perfected our computer technology and can process all the available information, we'll be able to make informed decisions. You, on the other hand, have spoken about the importance of admitting that we don't know, admitting our ignorance in the face of the complexity of nature, and at the same time trusting our intuition, being willing to stand up and say: "I know in my heart that this is what we need to do."

I think that, one hundred fifty years ago, in government decision making in America and in Europe, more information was available in proportion to the amount needed than is available today. Today, we are using thousands of new chemicals, and we don't know their long-range effects. We interfere a million times more deeply in nature, and our ignorance is increasing in proportion to the information that is required.

In other words, many more questions are being raised, but fewer answers are being provided.

Exactly. One indication is that, if you take the number of scientific articles published each year with neat, authoritative conclusions and divide it by the number of questions posed to scientists by responsible persons concerned with the consequences of our interventions in nature, you will find that the quotient approaches zero. That is, the number of questions is becoming

infinitely large very quickly, whereas the number of answers is increasing very slowly indeed. And, in any case, within a hundred years, we'll run out of paper to print the billion articles that supply the relevant answers needed each year.

So you don't think that, if we just perfect our technology, our answers will somehow catch up with the number of questions being raised?

On the contrary, technology is more helpless than ever because the technology being produced doesn't fulfill basic human needs, such as meaningful work in a meaningful environment. Technical progress is sham progress because the term *technical progress* is a cultural, not a technical, term. Our culture is the only one in the history of mankind in which the culture has adjusted itself to the technology, rather than vice versa. In traditional Chinese culture, the bureaucracy opposed the use of inventions that were not in harmony with the general cultural aims of the nation. A vast number of technical inventions were not used by the populace because it was simply not permitted. Whereas here we have the motto, "You can't stop progress," you can't interfere with technology, and so we allow technology to dictate cultural forms.

In connection with that, it has been pointed out that the hazardous nature of the materials used to generate nuclear power will have unforeseen political consequences.

Yes. Security, for instance, is a major problem. And even more important, such technology presupposes a tremendous, centralized society, whereas, in more ecological, defensible societies, energy creation, energy sources, would be decentralized and widely distributed, with small groups in local communities in control of their own resources. As it is now, we have increasing centralization, which means diminished self-determination for individuals and local cultures and diminished freedom of action. The more centralized our energy sources, the more dependent we are on centralized institutions hundreds of miles away.

There's no reason to believe there won't be another war. On the contrary, the statistics give us every reason to believe we will continue to have wars in the future. During World War II, people were highly self-sufficient—they could raise pigs, they could burn wood—whereas, in a war today some nations could be conquered almost immediately because all resources are centralized. We don't know how to grow food, we don't have anything to burn. In the year 2000, we will be so dependent that, if an aggressor were to take over the energy sources and the political institutions, ninety-nine percent of the population would have to surrender, whereas in the last war we were able to continue our culture. Deep ecology is concerned with these long-range problems, particularly with the question of war and peace, because, of all ecological catastrophes, nuclear war would be the most devastating.

This brings us back to the question of information versus intuition. Your feeling is that we can't expect to have an ideal amount of information but must somehow act on what we know?

Yes. It's easier for deep ecologists than for others because we have certain fundamental values, a fundamental view of what's meaningful in life, what's worth maintaining, which makes it completely clear that we are opposed to further development for the sake of increased domination and an increased standard of living. The material standard of living should be drastically reduced and the quality of life, in the sense of basic satisfaction in the depths of one's heart or soul, should be maintained or increased. This view is intuitive, as are all important views, in the sense that it can't be proven. As Aristotle said, it shows a lack of education to try to prove everything, because you have to have a starting point. You can't prove the methodology of science, you can't prove logic, because logic presupposes fundamental premises.

All the sciences are fragmentary and incomplete in relation to basic rules and norms, so it's very shallow to think that science can solve our problems. Without ba-

sic norms, there is no science. Of course, we need science—in fact, a thousand times more than we have—if we are to answer the questions politicians ask about the consequences of our actions. As it is now, we have to say, for the most part, that we don't know. And since politicians give priority to increased progress, growth, and consumption, their reply is, "If you can't tell us what the bad consequence will be, we'll go ahead and do it." For example, they may give us so many dollars to discover the effects of oil spills on plankton. And after a year, we may have to say that we don't really know, we are just beginning to understand. But common sense and intuition tell us that, if we continue to dump more oil into the sea, we will cause the destruction of life forms on a vast scale.

Nowadays, people have been trained to defer taking a stand on an issue until all the facts are in. As an example, some experts say that nuclear reactors are unsafe, others say that they are safe, and people are bewildered.

I tell people that, if they make clear their fundamental assumptions about what is needed for a life simple in means and rich in ends, they will necessarily come to the conclusion that it is not lack of energy consumption that makes them unhappy. They can then oppose nuclear power without having read thick books and without knowing the myriad facts that are used in newspapers and periodicals. And they must also find others who feel the same and form circles of friends who give one another confidence and support in living in a way that the majority finds ridiculous, naive, stupid, and simplistic. But in order to do that, one must already have enough self-confidence to follow one's intuition—a quality very much lacking in broad sections of the populace. Most people follow the trends and advertisements and become philosophical and ethical cripples.

What do you consider the priorities for action in the deep ecology movement over the next twenty-five years?

Each of us has to act on a different part of a very broad frontier. One of the most important activities for the next five to ten years will be to disseminate the knowledge we have—regarding the destruction of the tropical rain forests, for example, or the climactic changes and other global factors that are now getting out of hand. Communication is crucial, and all of us can do something. In deep ecology, another major question is how to get along with the various religious populations—Christians, Buddhists, and others—in which a minority, especially among the young, is completely aware of the destruction of the planet and believes that it must not be permitted. We must cooperate with these religious movements because, as I've mentioned, the motivation for strong action must come from deep sources in philosophy and ethics.

In the matter of political action, I am very much inspired by the Gandhian approach of maximizing the communication on a friendly footing—that is, even if people don't want to talk with you at a certain moment, try to be personally helpful and to make personal contact. Another way to make contact is to canvass from house to house. I think the personal approach has not been sufficiently explored, especially with labor organizations. Many actions in Norway have been unsuccessful because the intellectuals and the middle class have not communicated with the working classes. Laborers are concerned about unemployment and think ecology is a kind of fad among the upper classes, whereas, in an ecological crisis, laborers and others with limited economic means will actually be the hardest hit. The credibility and the effectiveness of the ecological movement will remain low as long as we don't make contact with working people. We must learn to speak to them in language they are familiar with. Canvassing should not mean that we go around to other people who think like us.

The head of the machinists' union at an aerospace company involved in a great deal of defense contracting recently made a similar point. He

stressed that, if the disarmament movement wanted to join with workers in the arms industry, it would have to emphasize the conversion of weapons manufacturing to peace-time industry. Otherwise, it would be threatening their livelihood and would never win their support.

That relates also to what we are doing now in Norway. In trying to compete with Japan, Singapore, and various other countries, we have had to build large, centralized, automated factories. Instead, what we need to do is to drastically reduce our import and our export, convert our big factories into small-scale, labor-intensive industry that makes products we need, and continue to sustain our culture as it has been, rather than trying to compete on the world market. Then we will have very little unemployment, and work will be much more meaningful. If we come to the workers with this kind of program, they will be more receptive than if we come from our upper-class residences and talk to them in our language about our rather abstract concerns.

How important do you feel it is for individuals to practice deep ecology in their own lives? And I was wondering how you practice it in yours?

I think that, in the long run, in order to joyfully and wholeheartedly participate in the deep ecology movement you have to take your own life very seriously. People who successfully maintain a low material standard of living and successfully cultivate a deep, intense inner life are much better able to consistently maintain a deep ecological view and to act on behalf of it. As I sit down and breathe deeply and just feel where I am, I can ask myself where and when I really enjoy my life and what would be the minimum means necessary to maintain these enjoyable feelings and situations. For

example, I myself have been too eager to go climbing in the Himalayas, whereas the peculiar satisfaction I have as a mountaineer could be had in Norway. If you concentrate on what gives you satisfaction, you will find that it can be obtained much more easily and simply than we are educated to believe in our society, where bigger, more elaborate, and more expensive are always considered better.

I like what you said recently about spending an hour or two just looking at a little patch of ground.

Yes. Look at this (holding up a flower). If you took the forms, the symmetries, and made them into a painting, you would win first prize in any competition.

I have relatives in England who take endless delight in climbing the same mountains in Wales and the same hills near their home.

That's right. The development of sensitivity toward the good things which we already have in sufficient quantity is the true goal of education. Not that we need to limit our desires. I'm not for the simple life, except in the sense of a life simple in means but rich in goals and values. I have tremendous ambition. Only the best is good enough for me. I like richness, and I feel richer than the richest person when I'm in my cottage in the country with water I've carried from a certain well and wood I've gathered from the forest. When you take the helicopter to the summit of a mountain, the view looks like a postcard, and, if there's a restaurant on the top, you will complain that the food is not properly made. Whereas if you struggle up from the bottom, you have this deep feeling of satisfaction, and even sandwiches mixed with ski wax and sand taste fantastic.