



SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

Inside Nature

BY SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

The debate in Norway over whether we should join the European Community has taken so much time, effort and emotion that it has been like a mental block, a constraint against writing for this collection, even though I have very much wanted to do it. Many of the participants at the “Future of Progress” conference are striving for the same thing that I am, and have the same analysis and passion.

Reflecting on this, my thoughts wander to A.N. Whitehead, whose ontology takes facts as emotionally imbued and value-laden. This is a radical departure from the Western mythology of a quality-free reality and is an integral part of his process philosophy.

The task of philosophy is to look through the grid of conventional concepts. The task of ecophilosophy is to do so in a way that strengthens the observer’s roots in

the Earth. The grid to be penetrated now is one that has grown dangerously abstract in relation to human needs: the urgent task now is to regain *concreteness*. To Whitehead—as well as Buddhists and Western process philosophers central to the development of ecophilosophy—the concrete world is a value-saturated, creative process.

The value-laden array of facts spread before me today, like any day, consists of several layers. One of them contains the elements for my discursive writing, another has to do with the priorities of my daily existence, a third one concerns my life in total. The second breaks into the first at short intervals, and once in a while the third erupts.

We normally keep these layers strictly separated, and our academic tradition trains us to do that. Process philosophy teaches us to be at least *aware* of how these layers function and mix, and how we can benefit

from that awareness. When we are considering a crisis of existence, it becomes a necessity to let the layers of our life's value-laden facts interpenetrate, because what is needed is a *total* grasp.

This juggling of the layers of my life-stream has now pushed the political struggles over the European Community to the background to make way for reflections on “sustainable development”—a star-studded catchword ever since the publishing of the Brundtland Report. The concept is so feebly non-defined that it has led politicians and the public straight back onto their mechanistic track. Brundtland only talks of material conditions. But concrete experience all over the world should have taught us that sustainability has to start with human society and *its* sustainability, because it has become abundantly clear that the constitution of that society determines how nature and her gifts will fare. And I want here to stress as strongly as I can that the few European process philosophers that we know of—Hegel, Bergson, Whitehead, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, our Norwegian Dag Osterberg, and a meagre additional few—ought to be compulsory reading for the people who yearn for a radical and concrete alternative to the cliché-like abstractions of Brundtland.

Processes of sustainability have to activate all the layers of human existence as part of nature's existence, otherwise these layers will in due time mix abruptly, leaving us with shreds in the wind and chaos instead of sustained creation. Experimenting, in this vein, at being myself and simultaneously observing myself, I shift right now from my overloaded EC situation to the ecophilosophical reflections asked of me by this book.

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

Right now, I am typically torn between two alternative action programs for my day, the first day of 1992—the last year before Brussels turns loose the inner market of the EEC. I can either strap on my skis and wander off to a little cottage in the Saetereng forest, or stay

here with my typewriter. The first tempts me strongly, since it quickly leads me into Nature. As I know from old experience, that course would enable me to enter a realm of intense happiness—the concrete, inside “life world” of the human individual. The feeling springs from a view opposite to conventional thinking, where we go *out* into nature. My worldview is one in which we move *inside* when we leave the modern concrete house or the city (or the EEC) and enter Nature.

The alternative to that is to stay “outside,” without my skis, in the dry and cold realm where the typewriter belongs, communicating with other, similar parts of this outside world. This is the sort of communication that presupposes the irrelevance of emotion and value, by accepting a world that is an abstraction in relation to the concrete life-world of human beings—the world that made them and keeps them living. This is the thinking of Whitehead and his initial inspiration, Bergson, and in general of all the process philosophers. But how is this relevant to a conference on ecologically oriented development?

THE EURO-CARTESIAN WORLDVIEW

The human being grows and expands and matures through movement of her body, through concrete activity. The wonder of the human being is not her intellect, but her endlessly complex body (or “body-mind,” if you must). Without the body and its movements in concretely moving nature, the world would have no color or sound or touch or shape or rhythm. Without qualities like these, no sense of beauty-versus-ugliness could be built. Worse, there could be no sense of good-contrasting-bad, and worse still, no quest for comprehensive meaning. In other words, without the human body, there is no aesthetics, no morality, no religion, and no philosophy. This is why “artificial intelligence” is the wrong track: the computer can have no body. Altogether, this concept of the essential, organically created body is the extreme opposite of the mainstream, Cartesian, Eu-

ro-American (and more and more, Japanese) worldview.

The Euro-Cartesian culture is a unique phenomenon in human history, in that its world is static. That fact is reflected right now here at the Saetereng farm, where some carpenters are erecting an enclosed porch to my 200-year-old house; I struggle with them every day, because their straight angles contrast so sharply with the soft, rhythmic lines of the old building. They are reflecting the influence of the Western, outside world, while my house speaks to us of being inside Nature. “Inside” is, in fact, where the global eco-social crisis is now forcing us to return, so I say to my carpenters: “You are already old-fashioned.”

Luckily, they understand, since they and I live in a community which is full of buildings attuned to Nature. Carpenters in Oslo—the Norwegian bridgehead of what I call the “Advanced Competitive Industrial Dominion,” or ACID—would not understand. But the major part of my country-folk do, and that’s also why we still have a majority which is against moving “outside” to be lost in the static desert world of the so-called European Community.

The northwestern part of my house, built from heavy timber, has spent two hundred years sinking slowly into the ground, and doing it with grace. It was built rhythmically, without architects. The carpenters—torn between two worlds—say they want to jack it up and make it straight. Without knowing it, they want to stop time, and make the house conform to a Platonic ideal. But since they are not completely caught up in the European-Cartesian world, they understand when I say that a house should wither like everything else in Nature.

Then we discuss the EEC, and they express hatred towards our prime minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, who is the main individual pushing Norway “outside” into homelessness, to become an integral part of the European Superunion. She is the head of the World Commission for Environment and Development, too, and she believes in economic growth to cure our Earth’s illnesses. She is one of those barriers trying to stop Time, which is also Nature. The carpenters hate

her, because her program would eliminate their existence as small mountain farmers.

It encourages me that it still doesn’t take much coffee and pipe smoking to make these connections clear in my country. The carpenters and I reach an agreement that the northern part shall be permitted to continue its sinking and that we shall try to hang on a few more historical seconds, surviving as the EC pyramid crumbles. They have left, it’s snowing softly, it’s night and I am listening to Billie Holiday. She is the future, sinking into the earth. Inside.

The parts of my own Norwegian nation-landscape that have preserved the inside relationship to Nature are essentially parts of “the Third World.” Twenty years ago I arrived in another part of the Third World—the Plow Furrow Valley of Nepal—where within a few days I was drawn into the untourist-like task of getting a female yak out of the scree. The contact with their world was immediate and compelling. Many years later, a youngster from the valley spent a half year at my Norwegian farm, and then some time in Oslo. He concluded: “In all the things that matter to people and their animals there is a closer relationship between your village and mine than between your village and Oslo.”

MEANINGFUL WORK

Oslo, our capital, is ACID’s bridgehead in Norway, and shares ACID’s uniqueness among all humanity’s cultures. Whitehead, Bergson, and a few other Western philosophers that I mentioned earlier tried to break out of that uniqueness, and in the attempt they felt compelled to develop a language that is almost incomprehensible in Western terms. The languages of ACID presuppose a static, quality-free world, where individuals grab and dislocate objects.

The basic difference has to do with meaningful work as the very basis that society is built upon. The Third World has that, the First World has lost it. Meaningful work is a constant interchange with living nature. Thus

it has to be a creative process—with human beings inventively meeting challenges to the totality of their bodies, maturing throughout their lives into the manifoldness of Nature. Since Nature's body is an enlargement of our own body, just separated by "semipermeable membranes," this kind of maturing brings deep satisfaction.

Maturing of this sort can only happen through serious work—through activity that is necessary for your material survival. In that respect it is basically different from leisure activity or participation in Western-style education. Human maturing has to happen as a response to compulsion from a non-human authority with which you cannot

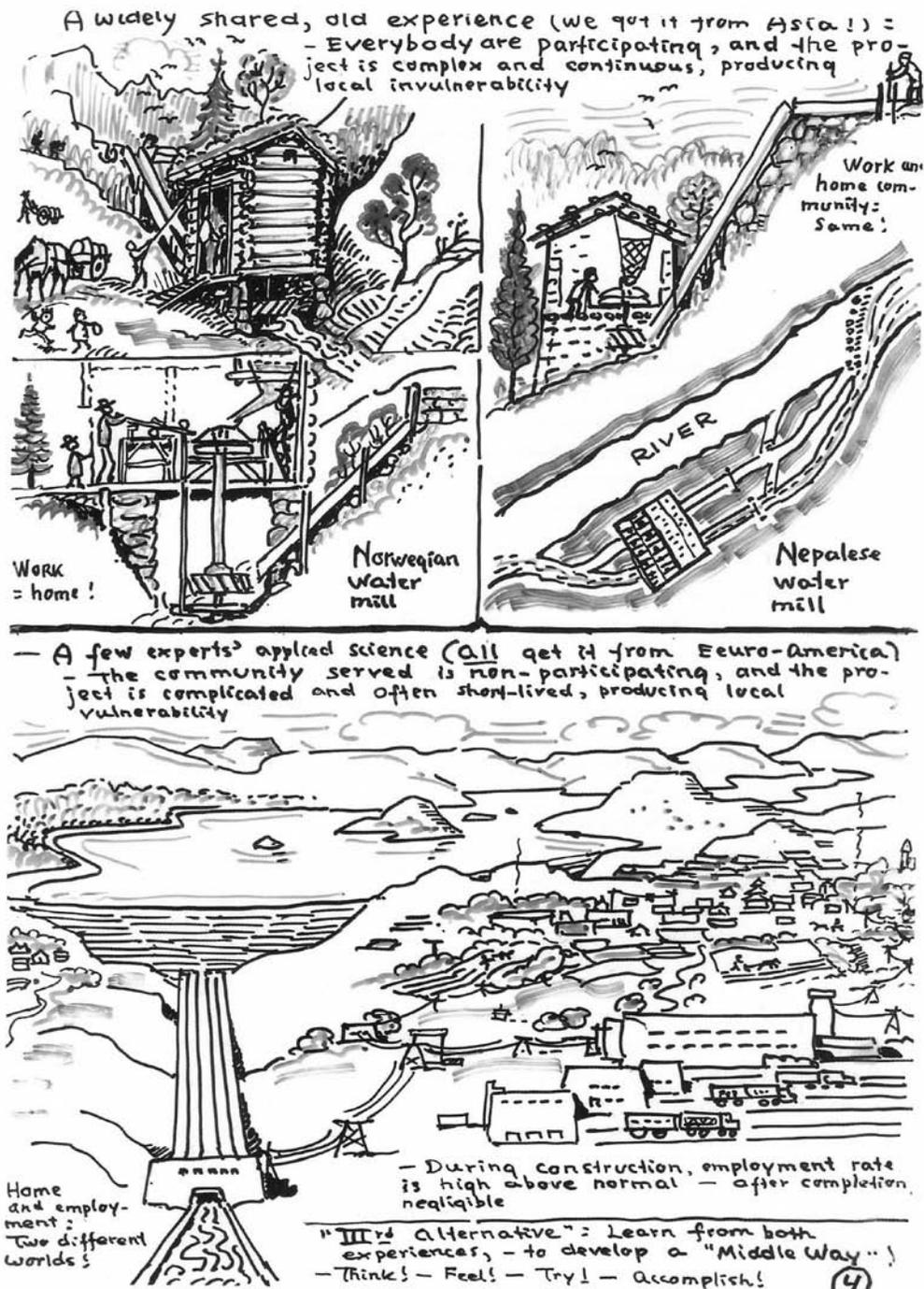


ILLUSTRATION: SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

argue. In a viable human society, Nature sets the ground rules while politics—human rules—are secondary.

In the First World, it's the other way around, due to our over-powering technology. Material abundance has the effect of putting politics first, and human maturing does not occur. In other words, a genuinely human society will blossom only if its resources in materials and energy are meagre and hard to extract, and where the methods available to extract them entail the complex use of the human body in direct and concretely active involvement.

All of this means process as reality, and the mind-body dichotomy as a misunderstanding. And the Western dictum that “ethics comes first” is also a misunderstanding: our values we have in common, what divides us is our worldview. The latter is what needs to be cleared up, and then morality falls into place by itself.

Let me now give a more formal definition of “meaningful work”:

- It is an activity necessary for the person's material existence, giving it a direction and practical seriousness not shared by any other human activity.
- Its products (material objects, services and various thought structures) are such that they do not cause damage to the continuance of life's organizational complexity (either in the ecosystem or in human culture) without time limits.
- It poses enough challenges that the potential talents and capabilities in the human individual and her/his group are brought to bloom.
- It demands of its partakers the building of solidarity and loyalty, as well as the practical techniques of cooperation.
- In general, it engages children, not as play only, but in ways needed by society.

EDUCATION THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

This last point is important, since I am now giving the socializing and naturalizing role back to work, remov-

ing it from the outside realm of schools and Disneyland leisure where ACID—the great aberration—has put it in the last generation. The main elements constituting human personality are put in place before the child reaches the age of six or seven. If personality is mainly built through meaningful work, then children have to participate in work.

Here my opponents will object by referring to the classic example of children pulling carts through the British coal mines—a picture that was in everyone's history book. I counter by describing child-rearing among the Sherpas and among my grandparents in Norway. In those cases, the tasks given to children were always quite carefully selected to ensure that the children would succeed and thereby build up self-assurance. These child-rearers were not part of ACIDic society so it would never occur to them to put a child in front of coal cart. Without knowing it, my critics are opposed to ACID, not to tasks that earnestly treat a child as a responsible and highly valued member of society.

My contention is that we have removed our children from a trusted role as serious contributors to society's survival, treating them instead as playthings or investments in a remote future through training programs outside of society and nature. This goes a long way toward explaining why we are left with a society that is sliding unawares into eco-social catastrophe. Steering away from this path will require people with identity within their own culture, self-assuredness, inventiveness in the practical sphere, originality of approach, and willpower. We have systematically removed the training basis for such individuals, who—anchored in their culture—function well only in socially cooperative contexts. What we have instead are masses that are easily molded by commercial mass media—for instance to say “yes” to the EC just because of its cheaper sirloin and the possibility of getting cheap liquor everywhere.

ACID is a type of society where work (or “employment” in this case) does not fulfill the above-mentioned characteristics of meaningful work. This is very reveal-

ing of ACID's nature, since it puts into sharp focus how it is an aberration: by and large, human societies around the world have had their economy based on meaningful work.

ACID removes its citizens from a concrete relationship with nature and teaches them to accept being clients of an abstract dream-world. Contrasted with that, societies based on meaningful work teach their members in a systematic way from early childhood to understand and feel their manifold dependence on the natural world, and so teaches them to take care not to harm Nature.

Another aspect to take note of regarding such a society is that it flourishes on meagre and hard-to-get-at energy and material resources. An easy abundance of such resources tends to put it on the track towards its own destruction. This is a course that brings society away from an inside relationship to nature.

A GLIMPSE OF LIFE INSIDE NATURE

On a simpler level, I have just experienced part of such transition—from the “inside” of nature to the “outside” of my typewriter, having returned on skis from work in the Saetereng forest. I have been cutting birch trees for firewood and at the same time thinning the forest so that the little trees may receive more sunlight and space for their roots. The snow here in this part of the world is still full of animals and their tracks, and today I saw a mother moose with her calf. She had used my frozen ski tracks from yesterday to reach a better feeding place and to protect her child from struggling in the deep snow.

Where I had felled trees yesterday, the snow was marked by the mystical but purposeful patterns of a family of hares that had been feeding on the twigs of the trees I had made available to them. Inside that pattern, there was also the very purpose-laden tracks of a red fox, so I must be making things available for his sustenance, too.

Nothing around me is the same as last year, not

even the same as yesterday. The snow bends down my trees: the mountain ashes, the alder trees, aspen, willows and their smaller relatives, the withie—I even have a few clumps of bird-cherries. They all bend differently. They will be permanently shaped by it, and while I am skiing past them, I try to guess how they will appear when spring has arrived, and how they will grow into a new balance.

I just said I *have* these trees, but I don't—it's more like they have me. I know all their places and their particular histories of the last fifty years, and that has given me an idea of what they are trying to do and what relation they bear to the various families of animals, birds, and insect colonies that together make up a place on this earth that has got me. It's a place that I can never leave, because most of the activity that is my activity, my body's involvement, is actively part of the process that is this forest even when I (i.e. another body-activity of “mine”) am removed to the Plow Furrow in Nepal. When that part-person is away, the trees and the animals and the flowers I have planted around the farmhouse are all taking care of my activity-stream here. And it's also taken care of by my human neighbors, busy with projects that are also my ongoing projects.

The skis I am using are the wide jumping skis that were once made for me by my uncle, the one who took care of Saetereng before me. I remember trying to help him, but he never gave me any specific instruction. If I asked for guidance, he just told me to keep my eyes open and to try to develop an awareness and alertness that ACID's children—through their dependence on instructions or on machines to do things for them—never get. These days, I use my wide “uncle skis,” because they don't sink deeply into the snow. I need that since I have no fixed tracks, but have to go to different places to do my work every day. Sliding home in the evening, I surf on the top of the snow! Down the hill-sides, curving around trees, I am in for new challenges and surprises every evening.

I am back now in the outside world, struggling at the typewriter, searching for words that I often don't

find. My own language, my mother's *Tronder* dialect, is a language of the meaningful forest work that I am trying to describe. I cannot do anything more than try to give my readers a glimpse or hint of life in a particular, concrete society that even today possesses the much coveted quality of sustainability.

HUMANS AS MACHINES: A STANDARDIZED MONOCULTURE

The “basic need” that is the key term of the Brundtland definition of “sustainable development” is never defined in the Brundtland Report. But we may approach what the authors had in mind by leafing through the book and noting every place they talk of what is needed. All they refer to are quantities of materials and energy and the mechanics of keeping up people's health. They might as well have talked about machines: the latter also need fuel, lubricants, shelter and technicians to repair them when they fail. There is nothing in the report that connects sustainability to anything specifically human.

Judging from masses of human experience reaped from many cultures, economic sustainability is dependent upon the existence of local, living cultures that have an inside relationship to nature. I would also say these are cultures that are based on meaningful work.

Let me put it this way: a basic, specifically human need is to grow and mature into a specific identity. That again means the living availability of a particular cultural tradition—a pattern of activity, thought and feeling that has emerged over many generations as the complex answer to the specific challenges nature offers in this culture's place on the earth. These local challenges are the main reason why we have a variety of deeply different cultures around the world.

A human identity worth the name presupposes an existence that extends in an unbroken manner far beyond an individual lifespan. Identity for the individual means a history and an inherited worldview contain-

ing everything that is necessary to deal with “survival-with-abundance” in her own place. The catch-words here are *self-sufficiency* and *self-reliance*. Without identities reflecting the eco-social histories of the many different landscapes that Gaia presents to human beings, there would be no individuals or societies with sufficient moral strength and inspiration to counter difficulties as they arise. Neither would there be alternative ways of doing things. Alternatives are at the base of fruitful dialogue and discussion inside of mankind.

But these basic survival qualities are exactly those that the Brundtland approach threatens. That approach, in line with systems like GATT and the EC, presupposes a standardized human monoculture. Its mechanistic world model and its view of human individuals as identical elementary particles express a misunderstanding of both Gaia and her human children. The accelerating global eco-social crisis that we are now experiencing is, in sum, a devastating proof of that misunderstanding. One particular philosophical tradition, that of the Platonic-Cartesian brand, is now in for something unprecedented in the history of ideas: it is being decisively proven wrong by Gaia herself.

It is a fantastic irony that Gro Harlem Brundtland is named by the Western media the “world mother of the environment.” If her definition of sustainable development had taken into account what are specifically human needs—the needs of having an existence as Gaia's insiders—the Brundtland Report would have to be entirely rewritten. To top it all, Mrs. Brundtland is now using her green media reputation to convince the crisis-frightened Scandinavians that they should leave their inside identities and move outside to become elementary particles of the European super-pyramid.

Almost miraculously, the Norwegian ecopolitical community has sustained itself despite thirty years of massive “Brundtlandising.” It must be one of those marvels—beyond mechanistic thinking to grasp—that characterize Gaia's inventiveness. But Norway is little, so to all readers of these pages: we need your support!