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Arne Naess' Conception of Being a Philosopher

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In 1992, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation produced a series of television programs to celebrate Arne Naess' 80th birthday. This series provides insight into his basic philosophy and personality; an intimate look at the man and the motivations which lie behind his sometimes formidable technical writings.<sup>1</sup> Naess frequently makes the distinction between being a professor of philosophy and being a philosopher (a "lover of wisdom") - between being professionally occupied with a specialized, narrowly rational analysis of ideas, and being a person who has thoughtfully developed a total philosophical view and who lives and acts on the basis of that view. Naess claims that he has tried to be both in his life. In this series (and especially in the video *Crossing the Stones*) we see Naess portrayed as a highly mature human being, thinking the thoughts and living the life of an activist philosopher who finds himself in the midst of the global ecological crisis.<sup>2</sup>

On a train ride in 1970 from Oslo to Ustaoset (the little hamlet below the mountain, Hallingskarvet, and his hut Tvergastein) Naess muses about his philosophical development: a development away from logical positivism and the narrow intellectualism of Bertrand Russell in 1934-5, and toward the pragmatic activist philosophies of James and Dewey; and Spinoza, the natural sciences and Nature philosophy. He says that since he could no longer embrace scientific empiricism as a total system, he was forced to a kind of philosophical scepticism which involves a philosophy of diversity of cultures, thought systems, and lifestyles. For Naess, there should be "no definite world view in the future."

Naess greatly admires William James' *Principles of Psychology* (1890) calling it still "the best introduction to the psychology of the self." It is somewhat ironic that James and Dewey's philosophical orientation was anthropocentric, whereas one scholar has pointed to Russell as holding (like Naess) a basically Spinozist orientation, and as someone who warned about the approaching ecological crisis as early as 1948. Russell, however, was unable to integrate his philosophical theory with the peace activism he came to late in life. Perhaps Naess was principally attracted to the pragmatists for their integration of theory with action, and their rejection of concepts of absolute truth.

Naess proposes that philosophy, as it is taught in colleges and universities, should help students retain broad and deep perspectives, as well as helping them to develop and articulate a personal total-view. He suggests that philosophy should be different from science and quasi-scientific behavior; it should aid students in developing a philosophy of life. While we need academic philosophers in the universities, we also need more "old fashioned, maximal perspective philosophers" who *act* from this perspective and relate their total-view perspec-

tives to an activist personal philosophy - to every day questions of how we live and influence people and politicians - and who "act from the deepest in themselves." Philosophy should help students become aware of - and learn to articulate their views and their deepest feelings and intuitions concerning - where they stand "in their innermost being" so that they can "stand up against the technocracy."

Naess discusses his participation in three climbing expeditions to the Himalayas. He resisted the temptation to go to the Himalayas until 1948, because such immense undertakings involved organization, administration, and "coming together to talk about non-essentials." This attitude seems to reflect the point he makes in his little paper "Deep Ecology and Lifestyle" that people should try "to lead a complex (not a complicated) life: trying to realize as many aspects of positive experiences as possible within each time-interval."

The resistance of the Norwegian people to joining the European common market (EEC) - to avoid being swept up in the international global economy as well as to preserve their distinctive cultural traditions - is positively discussed, as is the U.N. Brundtland Commission and the need to distinguish between their concept of "sustainable development" versus genuine ecocentric "ecological sustainability."

The Nazi occupation of Norway allowed Naess to further develop his techniques of Gandhian nonviolent active resistance (*Satyagraha*) this stood him in good stead when he participated in nonviolent demonstrations in arctic Norway over protecting the Mardola waterfall in 1970, and the damming of the Alta River in 1981. He says that "during the ecological crisis one has to be an activist. If you have a religion or philosophy and a conception of yourself [a total view] then you act from that." For Naess, following the philosophy of Spinoza, you "get free" which means you act from your deepest self. And you act "completely relaxed."

One of the keys to Naess' personality is the importance of *playfulness* as, in the video, he engages in what he calls "play boxing" with his professional boxing sparring partner Bjorn Barland. He points out that professional philosophers, and other academics, are expected to be formal and stiff - both inside and out - but, Naess claims, playfulness is basic in life. "The more suffering we see, the more playfulness we need." (One is reminded here of the cheerful playful personality of the Dhali Lhama). Today, Naess says, "there is too much competitive sport and too little playfulness." I think that, like a Zen Master and Coyote Trickster, Naess' playful - and sometimes outrageous - behavior with friends and total strangers serves to shock them out of their complacency and overly serious demeanor. This playfulness often shines through in his writings.

His life at Tvergastein has been his version of living his famous slogan "simple in means, rich in ends" and he hopes that people can find their own ways to live this lifestyle. He says "rich life, simple means. Not a simple life." The high

consumer lifestyles of the First World are just plain "nonsense". These wasteful, ecologically destructive lifestyles must go down, while material conditions in the Third World need to go up. The important thing is life *quality*, which means "how do you feel?" not how luxuriously you live. And citing his other famous slogan, he says "the frontier is long - come on everybody!" you can all do something to help in the crisis.

## Notes

1 Perhaps the best short analysis of Naess' technical ecophilosophy is Harold Glasser, "Deep Ecology Clarified", *The Trumpeter* 12, 3 (1995): 138-42; the best political analysis of ecocentrism is Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992. Especially helpful are Eckersley's discussions on the development and types of environmentalism (chs. 1, 2) together with her analyses of Ecofeminism and Bookchin's Social Ecology.

2 The video "Crossing the Stones" is commercially available from Bullfrog Films, P.O. Box 149, Oley, PA 19547 USA. Phone 800/543-FROG. Fax: 215/370-1978. The film is discussed in *The International Society of Environmental Ethics* newsletter, 5, 2 (1994): 16-17.

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