

## Introduction

---

### Ecosophy T: from intuition to system

*The system begins with the immediate . . . The beginning of the system is the absolute beginning . . . How does the system begin with the immediate? Does it begin with it immediately? The answer to this question must be an unqualified no.*

Søren Kierkegaard  
Concluding  
Unscientific Postscript

We feel our world in crisis. We walk around and sense an emptiness in our way of living and the course which we follow. Immediate, spontaneous experience tells us this: intuition. And not only intuition, but information, speaking of the dangers, comes to us daily in staggering quantities.

How can we respond? Has civilisation simply broken away hopelessly from a perfection of nature? All points to a bleak and negative resignation.

But this is only one kind of intuition – there is also the intuition of joy.

Arne Naess gives a lecture somewhere in Oslo. After an hour he suddenly stops, glances quickly around the stage, and suddenly leaves the podium and approaches a potted plant to his left. He quickly pulls off a leaf, scurries back to the microphone, and gazes sincerely at the audience as he holds the leaf in the light so all can see. ‘You can spend a lifetime contemplating this’, he comments. ‘It is enough. Thank you.’

In 1969, Naess resigned his professorship in philosophy after over thirty years of work in semantics, philosophy of science, and the systematic exposition of the philosophies of Spinoza and Gandhi. The threat of ecocatastrophe had become too apparent – there was much public outcry and protest. Naess believed philosophy could help chart a way out of the chaos. Because for him it had always been not just a ‘love of wisdom’, but a love of wisdom related to action. And action without this underlying wisdom is useless.

Information leads to pessimism. Yet it is still possible to find joy and wonder in immediate experience. The problem is how to make it easier for people to ‘begin immediately’. ‘I began writing *Ecology, Community,*

**2** *Introduction: Ecosophy T – from intuition to system*

*and Lifestyle* because I was pessimistic', he reflects. 'And I wanted to stress the continued possibility for joy in a world faced by disaster.'

Naess offers in this book the basis of a new ontology which posits humanity as inseparable from nature. If this ontology is fully understood, it will no longer be possible for us to injure nature wantonly, as this would mean injuring an integral part of ourselves. From this ontological beginning, ethics and practical action are to fall into place.

So Naess's system begins with an immediate reconsideration of 'what there is', how we perceive things around us. There can be no more spontaneous beginning than this. But the problem, which Kierkegaard points out above (in reference to philosophical systems in general), appears at once – just how does it begin? It cannot begin at once because it must be studied, considered, and perhaps internalised. Only then can we use it in a spontaneous manner.

In this introduction I try to review the background of Naess' system, some of its particulars, and an overview of its position among other philosophies of environmentalism, in order to soften its beginning.

**1** **Beginning with intuitions**

Naess' result is not a work of philosophical or logical argumentation – 'It is primarily intuitions', he says. These are intuitions developed over a long life spent in nature. Arne recalls their beginnings:

From when I was about four years old until puberty, I could stand or sit for hours, days, weeks in shallow water on the coast, inspecting and marvelling at the overwhelming diversity and richness of life in the sea. The tiny beautiful forms which 'nobody' cared for, or were even unable to see, were part of a seemingly infinite world, but nevertheless *my* world. Feeling apart in many human relations, I identified with 'nature'.<sup>1</sup>

Much later in life Naess will write that the young child's world is that which is close and easily apprehendable around him.<sup>2</sup> It is an easy time to feel that one's identity is tied to immediate nature. But it was in his teens that Naess's awareness expanded to include a bond with people who lived their lives near to nature:

When fifteen years old I managed through sheer persistency of appeals to travel alone in early June to the highest mountain region of Norway – Jotunheimen. At the foot of the mountain I was stopped by deep rotten snow and I could find nowhere to sleep. Eventually I came across a very old man who was engaged in digging away the snow surrounding and in part covering a closed cottage belonging to an association for mountaineering and tourism. We stayed together for a week in a nearby hut. So far as I can remember, we ate only one dish: oatmeal porridge with dry bread. The porridge had been stored in the snow from the

*Beginning with intuitions*

3

previous autumn – that is what I thought the old man said. Later I came to doubt it. A misunderstanding on my part. The porridge was served cold, and if any tiny piece was left over on my plate he would eat it. In the evenings he would talk incidentally about mountains, about reindeer, hunting, and other occupations in the highest regions. But mostly he would play the violin. It was part of the local culture to mark the rhythm with the feet, and he would not give up trying to make me capable of joining him in this. But how difficult! The old man's rhythms seemed more complex than anything I had ever heard!

Enough details! The effect of this week established my conviction of an inner relation between mountains and mountain people, a certain greatness, cleanness, a concentration upon what is essential, a self-sufficiency; and consequently a disregard of luxury, of complicated means of all kinds. From the outside the mountain way of life would seem Spartan, rough, and rigid, but the playing of the violin and the obvious fondness for all things above the timberline, living or 'dead', certainly witnessed a rich, sensual attachment to life, a deep pleasure in what can be experienced with wide open eyes and mind.

These reflections instilled within me the idea of modesty – modesty in man's relationships with mountains in particular and the natural world in general. As I see it, modesty is of little value if it is not a natural consequence of much deeper feelings, a consequence of a way of understanding ourselves as part of nature in a wide sense of the term. This way is such that the smaller we come to feel ourselves compared to the mountain, the nearer we come to participating in its greatness. I do not know why this is so.<sup>3</sup>

We need to compare ourselves with the mountain – this is not meant to be a grand metaphor for a possible humanity, like Nietzsche's *Übermensch* ('six thousand feet above men and time!'), but an actual, living mountain: a model of a nature in which we can fully exist only with fabulous awe. The possibility of modesty is the most human of characteristics. But why is the link between people and nature so central?

Naess would, in time, try to discover 'why this is so' by elaborating a philosophy that leads from the immediate self into the vast world of nature. It is this which is presented in this book. The intention is to encourage readers to find ways to develop and articulate basic, common intuitions of the absolute value of nature which resonate with their own backgrounds and approaches.

The recognition of the problem and its subsequent study using philosophical methods is called *ecophilosophy*. More precisely, it is the utilisation of basic concepts from the science of ecology – such as complexity, diversity, and symbiosis – to clarify the place of our species within nature through the process of working out a total view.

#### 4 *Introduction: Ecosophy T—from intuition to system*

Ecophilosophy leads in two directions. It can be used to develop a deep ecological philosophy, as philosophers continue to elaborate these basic notions and their connections. And it can lend support to a growing international deep ecology movement, which includes scientists, activists, scholars, artists, and all those who are actively working towards a change in anti-ecological political and social structures.

In an attempt to categorise what it is that binds supporters of this movement together, a platform of deep ecology has been developed, which appears in chapter 1. It consists of eight common points to guide those who believe that ecological problems cannot be solved only by technical 'quick-fix' solutions. In practice this can mean simply trying to see a particular problem from the point of view of other interests than our own (i.e. other species, or ecosystems themselves) or it can be an opening to a full scale critique of our civilisation, seeking out false conceptions of reality at the core.

But in any case this platform is meant as a kind of resting point for agreement; a place where those who desire the type of change argued for in this book can look upon to realise where they stand, what it is they share in common in their beliefs.

And such deep matters should not be oversimplified. A recurring theme in this book will be to introduce two basic ecological principles into a philosophical review of our society: unity and diversity. And as the poet A. R. Ammons warns: 'oneness is not useful when easily derived, manyness is not truthful when thinly selective.'<sup>4</sup>

Some kind of agreement is essential if people are to act together towards change in a group, but their differences in perspectives and means for reaching agreement should not be lost in the oneness. The environmental movement will be strongest if it can be shown that its concise set of principles can be derived from a variety of world-views and backgrounds. The more philosophical, religious, and scientific evidence can be found to support the normative values of environmentalism, the more important and universal the movement will be.

The philosophical side of ecophilosophy investigates the particular methods of viewing the world that lead different individuals to something like the platform of deep ecology. Naess calls this reasoning process *ecosophy*, if it becomes articulated in a philosophical manner.

A good portion of this book is devoted to the presentation of Naess's own system of reasoning that leads to the platform, an Ecosophy T. 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, . . .) that each of us could

develop for ourselves. Though we are meant to nod in agreement more or less with its conclusions, it is not essential to accept its particular chains of reasoning. It is most important that we are able to reach the system's conclusions using ways of feeling and reason familiar to us, rather than accepting all of Naess's particular steps and defences of his reasoning. For it is important to realise that Naess is less interested in building a system to explain all than he is in teaching us to develop our own systems in our own ways; incomplete, perhaps, but so necessary for us to reach real and grounded similar conclusions – not the least of which is realising that change must begin at once.

## 2 Interpretation and precisation in Naess's philosophy

An ecosophy is a personal system, a personal philosophy, and for another's to reach us something in it must resound with us immediately. It need not be entirely original.

This is not every philosopher's view on how to use their systems. Some have believed they have solved all the important problems of existence, and others think they have proved that these problems are unsolvable. But Naess would rather have every person take some time to interpret what he presents in their own ways, recognising that many different, distinct, yet mutually acceptable interpretations are possible and compatible.

This notion has its roots in his work in semantics in the 1950s. Naess's view (in *Interpretation and Preciseness*) is that those who communicate do not do so on the basis of sharing a common language, but by mutually interpreting what the other has said based on prior understanding of what the words and expressions mean.<sup>5</sup> A particular word's associations for an individual can be so vast or so specialised that another's use of this same word could be miles away from what the speaker intends. And this is not mere quibbling, but a real block towards the possibility of others' ideas really getting through to us.

But communication is possible. By admitting the use of vague and general terms, which Naess calls the  $T_0$  level, and accepting many parallel interpretations, or precisations, at higher levels. As he explains it:

Let me give an example of what I mean by precisation, since the concept so often causes misunderstandings. At the vaguest level,  $T_0$ , we have the sentence 'I was born in the twentieth century.' The next more precise level,  $T_1$ , would have to clarify this information, and clear up possible misunderstanding. For instance,  $T_1$  might be 'I was born in the twentieth century after the death of Christ.' On the other hand, to say 'I was born

6 *Introduction: Ecosophy T – from intuition to system*

in 1912' is not a precisation. It is an elaboration: more information is given on the situation, not the utterance itself . . . For example, Pascal jumped up from his sleep and shouted 'feu!'. Then 'Dieu!' Then 'Dieu d'Abraham et Isaac!' . . . narrowing successively. Precising? At the beginning we share in the inspiration. Pascal, though, becomes a bad example in the sense that he got *caught in a specialism*, moving from the fire to a very particular notion of a God, excluding all others.<sup>6</sup>

The type of clarification Pascal offers for his utterance limits the possible effect of his original intuitive inspiration. We want to know just what the 'fire' is, not by narrowing its range but by understanding what was meant. We should approach Naess's normative system Ecosophy T in the same way.<sup>7</sup>

When Arne begins his system with the norm 'Self-realisation!' many associations will be raised. In the text one learns that we are not meant to narrow this realisation to our own limited egos, but to seek an understanding of the widest 'Self', one with a capital S that expands from each of us to include all.

Before too much confusion is engendered, we must reflect upon a second, rather ecological notion of communication: that it does not happen alone. We come up with ideas, we release them to the world, but only if they can be grasped by others can they come to exist collectively and have weight. This is the essence of Naess's 'relational thinking' – nothing exists apart. Neither a person, nor a species, nor an environmental problem. A word only takes life through its meanings and compatible interpretations. This is the practical effect of realising an ecosophical ontology.

We can only etch out the meaning of a concept through its moving place in the field of other concepts and the ways they are perceived. In this process we identify wholes that are perceived to have an organic identifiable unity in themselves, as a network of relations that can move as one. The term chosen for this kind of understandable shape is *gestalt*, borrowed from work in the psychology of perception in the early part of this century.<sup>8</sup> The world provides us with a flood of information, but that which presents itself as living entities is characterised by a certain natural life, which comes to us as a conviction that identity is inherent only in the relationships which make up the entity. As Naess remarked while skiing at night in minus twenty celsius under crystal clear blue darkness and a wide moon: 'the extreme cold is so much a part of the gestalt that if it were any warmer we would really feel uncomfortable.'

The gestalt of ecosophy T as a whole is something that the reader will not be able to perceive step by step, or stride after stride. The exposition

of the book is not strictly logical in a syllogistic sense (from A and B follows C), as it is impossible to formulate an ecosophy completely in this way. Arne hints at the meanings. As one forges the connections both his view and ours take shape. Remember two of his underlying beliefs. (1) As persons we cannot escape pretending to act and decide on the basis of a total view. But verbal articulation of this view in its entirety is impossible.<sup>9</sup> (2) The system begins with the immediate. Its own rules should never mask the immediate. Or: If we wish to identify a starting point for a system, spontaneous experience offers itself. But any system used carries with it social contexts that cannot capture or replace the uniqueness of the original experience.

### 3 Clarification of terms in translation

With these notions in mind, some of the key terms used within ecosophy T can now be introduced. The translation of these terms from Norwegian to English is somewhat problematic. Many of the substantives used (realisation, identification, precisation) convey a more active sense in their Norwegian usage. They are never states to be reached, but processes. The words for 'environment' and 'intrinsic value' are both more familiar terms in the Norwegian. For the translation to succeed, these should be treated not as awkward concepts, but as words to be used in daily speech.

#### (a) *Milieu/environment*

These two terms are used interchangeably for the single Norwegian word *miljø*. Why both? Because, as in French, the Norwegian term has wider and more familiar connotations than the somewhat cumbersome 'environment'. But we have no simple English word to use here. If an easier word existed, the notion of environmental conservation might be more widely accepted in our culture.

What are 'environmental problems'? What is 'degradation of the environment'? Simple: destruction of what surrounds us, the immediate which we are within. Not merely the physical *nature*, but all that we live in, all the *gestalts* we can identify ourselves within. According to Naess, this harmonises our very identity as it is necessary to reveal our greater selves.

Within these concepts are the related *gestalts* of *nature* and *life*. The word *nature* has very many associations in English and Scandinavian languages<sup>10</sup> and we should not forgo any of these associations in a term whose very richness of meanings demonstrates its significance. The particularly scientific interpretations of wild, untouched nature<sup>11</sup> which

8 *Introduction: Ecosophy T – from intuition to system*

find their way into ethical categories are complexity, diversity, and symbiosis. These concepts underlie the reasoning toward values throughout the entire work, and are given relational definitions in chapter 7.

I don't want to say too much about how Naess derives a notion of rightness from these terms, but let it suffice to say that he does not uphold a norm of 'life', as this smacks of the danger of 'cult of life' that is a root to certain fascistic philosophies. Perhaps it is too little connected to the individual, or to the fact that one should be prepared, through an ecosophy, to make one's own decisions about the world, and this is then built upon norms with a more dynamic and directional quality than what we get by simply upholding 'life!'

How do we make the link from ethical principles to decisions? With the notion of gestalt understanding comes the possibility of gestalt switch. At first one sees the world one way, but with an increasing awareness of formerly hidden relations, another understanding suddenly comes to light and we make an instantaneous shift. All of a sudden things become clear – a kind of a-ha! experience, the moment of insight. Another way of describing the purpose of *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle* is as an effort to bring about this moment of ecological gestalt switch – conversion, if you will. Many methods are useful.

Many people who had read the book in its five successive Norwegian editions through the 1970s were consulted to find out what parts were important to them, how they found it useful. There was a tremendous diversity of responses, as there are many motivations for the particular gestalt switch needed to reach an understanding of the abyss between our species and the Earth. One of Naess's aims is to reveal as many possible motivations as possible.

(b) *Self-realisation*

One thing common to all these motivations (ways of reaching the switching point) is that they all connect the individual to the principles of interconnectedness in nature. Naess's key concept in this is 'Self-realisation', used throughout the book in various guises. Keeping with his belief in the power of  $T_0$  formulations, Arne stubbornly refuses to pin down this term to a rigid definition:

People are frustrated that I can write an entire book upon an intuition that is 'nowhere defined or explained'. It is tantalising for our culture, this seeming lack of explanation . . . But if you hear a phrase like 'all life is fundamentally one!' you must be open to *tasting* this, before asking immediately 'what does this mean?' Being more precise does not necessarily create something that is more inspiring.<sup>12</sup>



But, in fact, Naess's use of Self-realisation is a bold attempt to connect the general statement that 'all life is fundamentally one' with our individual needs and desires. Without cleaving away at its potential, I here only mention several points to alleviate misunderstanding.

(1) Self-realisation is not self-centred. Remember the capital S, but at the same time do not think the individual self or ego is dissolved in the larger Self. The diversity of different individuals and approaches remains, as we share and shape our connections to the larger. Still, Dostoyevsky realised what was necessary for Self-realisation when he outlined a prime danger of modern times:

. . . the isolation that prevails everywhere . . . has not fully developed, not reached its limit yet. For every one strives to keep his individuality as apart as possible, wishes to secure the greatest possible fullness of life for himself; but meantime all his efforts result not in attaining fullness of life but self-destruction, for instead of self-realisation he ends by arriving at complete solitude.<sup>13</sup>

We cannot simply split into units, pursuing our own goals. This is why Naess requires the concept of a greater Self.

(2) If one really expands oneself to include other people and species and nature itself, altruism becomes unnecessary. The larger world becomes part of our own interests. It is seen as a world of *potentials* to increase our own Self-realisation, as we are part of the increase of others'.

(3) The word in Norwegian is *Selv-realisering*: Self-realising. It is an active condition, not a place one can reach. No one ever reaches Self-realisation, for complete Self-realisation would require the realisation of all. Just as no one in certain Buddhist traditions ever reaches nirvana, as the rest of the world must be pulled along to get there. It is only a process, a way to live one's life.

We use the concept as a guideline. It gives us a direction to proceed in; a way to see our actions as part of a larger gestalt. Naess comments on why he has chosen to begin his system in this way:

Now Self-realisation, like nonviolence, is a vague, and T<sub>0</sub> term . . . .  
There is at the outset something essential: for life, by life. But there must be an arrow. A direction, starting from the self, moving towards the Self. It is a direction I can say yes to ethically. We may call it a vector – in tremendous but determinate dimensions.<sup>14</sup>

These metaphors ought to be kept in mind: arrow, direction, vector. They can help clarify the bounds in which Self-realisation can be expanded, if not defined directly. And what precisely are the dimensions? This can perhaps be clarified if we discuss how one moves along the path from one intuition to another.

10 *Introduction: Ecosophy T – from intuition to system*(c) *Derivation*

The process of motion in thought is for Arne synonymous with derivation. And here he precisises in the direction of logical derivation, i.e. from ‘Self-realisation!’ and ‘Self-realisation for all beings!’ we can trace a system of syllogisms to derive ecological norms for ‘Diversity!’ and ‘Complexity!’ This does not refer to historical derivation, i.e. ‘Where have these concepts come from in time?’ or derivations of purpose, i.e. ‘Why are these concepts useful for me?’ (even though both these questions could be addressed within Ecosophy T). It is purely logical derivation which is meant.

Naess wishes to show how we can justify all actions and beliefs by connecting them back to those most fundamental for us, beginning with Self-realisation. It is rigid and pure logic he uses, yet the core statements are still basically intuitive and elusive.

*How is the world existent in a gestalt perspective? Why do we make use of the relational field?* Baruch Spinoza, one of Naess’s sources of inspiration, had a response to these questions that might well be echoed today:

I do not know how the parts are interconnected, and how each part accords with the whole; for to know this it would be necessary to know the whole of nature and all of its parts . . . . By the connection of the parts, then, I mean nothing else than that the laws, or nature, of one part adapt themselves to the laws, or nature, of another part in such a way as to produce the least possible opposition.<sup>15</sup>

This provides a clue on how to embrace more gestalt relations. Look for things that flow together without opposition. From these can meaningful wholes be discovered. (This involves a breaking down of some of the unnatural oppositions we have come to accept as parts of our culture.)

So we concentrate on finding within each discovered relation a mirror of the larger structure. In this way our total views are hinted at with every single thing we complete. We should not believe that more information will make this clearer. What is needed is a re-orientation in thinking to appreciate what can be learned from specific and simple things through recognising their defining relations with other things. And this accompanies the process of learning to feel as one with them.

(d) *Identification*

The process of motion through experience manifests itself through identification, *identifisering* in Norwegian. This is also an active term: it could be thought of as ‘identiting’. We discover that parts of nature are parts of ourselves. We cannot exist separate from them. If we