Arne Næss

There is No Point of No Return

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Arne Næss's book *There is No Point of No Return*, published in 2021 by the British publishing house Penguin Books as part of their "Green Ideas" series, consists of five essays: (1) "The Deep Ecology Movement" (pp. 1–20); (2) "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World" (pp. 21–51); (3) "The Place of Joy in a World of Fact" (pp. 52–71); (4) "Lifestyle Trends Within the Deep Ecology Movement" (pp. 72–75); and (5) "Industrial Society, Postmodernity, and Ecological Sustainability" (pp. 76–102).

The first essay – in a slightly different version – was previously published in *Philosophical Inquiry* 8 (1986, pp. 10–31), and subsequently in A. Drengson & H. Glasser (eds.), *The Selected Works of Arne Næss* (2005, vol. X, pp. 33–55), while the other four essays stem from Næss's ground-breaking book *Ecology of Wisdom* (2016, pp. 81–96, 123–132, 140–141, 279–292).

One can certainly argue that this book addresses some of the most important topics in Næss's environmental philosophy – from a critical evaluation of the human condition to a philosophical rethinking of the ongoing environmental crisis. It is filled with fun, vivid, and joyful examples from everyday life while also presenting "hard academic philosophy" in a reader-friendly way. The writer's style is sharp and precise, making the book a true page-turner. Apart from being Næss's latest book published in English, at least to our knowledge, it holds particular significance as it summarizes some of his most important ideas – making it an ideal read for those unfamiliar with his environmental philosophy. In this review, we will briefly highlight key aspects of his environmental philosophy while also encouraging readers to fully explore the depth of his life's philosophy (i.e., *Ecosophy T*).

The first essay presents the well-known "eight principles of deep ecology", formulated by George Sessions and Arne Næss, followed by extensive commentary on each principle in various contexts. For instance, Næss examines the eight principles in relation to pollution, resources, population, cultural diversity, appropriate technology, land and sea ethics, education and scientific enterprises, while arguing both from a shallow and deep approach – emphasizing that shallow environmentalism needs deep ecology. On that note, the essay also explores the distinction between the so-called "shallow" and "deep ecology movement", concepts that are crucial to Næss's environmental thought. As he noted:

"The decisive difference between a shallow and a deep ecology movement hinges on the willingness to question, and to appreciate the importance of questioning, every economic and political policy in public. The questioning is 'deep' and public. It asks *why* more insistently and consistently, taking nothing for granted." (p. 18)

Apart from asking "deep" and "meaningful questions", when it comes to dealing with environmental issues, the deep ecological approach seeks to address the root causes of environmental issues, whereas the shallow ecological approach tends to only scratch the surface. In this sense, the key difference between the two approaches lies in the following:

"The shallow environmental approach, on the other hand, tends to make the human population more passive and less interested in environmental issues. The deep ecology movement tries to clarify the fundamental presuppositions underlying our economic approach in terms of value priorities, philosophy, and religion. In the shallow movement, argument comes to a halt long before this. The deep ecology movement is therefore 'the ecology movement that questions deeper.'" (p. 20)

However, it is important to remember that effectively addressing – and hopefully solving – the pressing environmental issues of our time requires both approaches.

On that note, the second essay introduces the concept of "self-realization" and Næss's deep-ecological analysis of what it means to "be in the world". Here, "self-realization" refers to the process of expanding one's self beyond the individual ego to recognize a deep connection with all living beings and nature. It involves moving from a "narrow sense of self" to an "ecological self", fostering harmony with the environment and acting in ways that support the well-being of the Earth as an interconnected whole. In the same context, Næss introduces the concept of "identification" as well. Namely, "identification" refers to the process through which individuals recognize their deep connection with nature, seeing themselves as part of a larger ecological whole. It is a key step toward "self-realization", as it involves empathizing with and understanding other beings – both human and non-human – leading to an "expanded sense of self"

that includes the natural world. This identification fosters ecological responsibility and compassionate action. With that in mind, Næss wrote the following lines:

"We need environmental ethics, but when people feel that they unselfishly give up, or even sacrifice, their self-interests to show love for nature, this is probably, in the long run, a treacherous basis for conservation. Through identification, they may come to see that their own interests are served by conservation, through genuine self-love, the love of a widened and deepened self. (p. 29)

This is precisely one of the reasons why Næss was so deeply influenced by Gandhi's selfless acts and non-violent resistance. In fact, Gandhi was one of the main influences, alongside Rachel Carson and Spinoza, in shaping Næss's critical evaluation of "biospherical egalitarianism". As the Norwegian philosopher said:

"Gandhi made manifest the internal relation between self-realization, nonviolence, and what sometimes has been called biospherical egalitarianism." (p. 40)

However, it's important to note that Næss was not your typical environmental philosopher. Although most environmental philosophers developed some form of ethics, Næss opposed a uniform ethical system (apart from Spinoza's ethical system), believing that human action should arise from inclination rather than imposed moral duty. Following Kant's distinction between "beautiful" and "moral action", he prioritized beautiful actions, as they stem from "spontaneous experience" and "identification" with all living and non-living beings. Still, it would be inaccurate to claim that Næss developed his own ethical system, even though his ideas provide a strong foundation for what might be called an "ethics of compassion". Instead, when addressing ecological issues, he placed greater emphasis on ontology. For example, in one passage, he wrote the following:

"Academically speaking, what I suggest is the supremacy of environmental ontology and realism over environmental ethics as a means of invigorating the environmental movement in the years to come. If reality is experienced by the ecological self, our behaviour *naturally* and beautifully follows norms of strict environmental ethics. We certainly need to hear about our ethical shortcomings from time to time, but we more easily change through encouragement and through a deepened perception of reality and our own self. This is, deepened realism. How is this to be brought about? The question lies outside the scope of this essay! It is more a question of community therapy than community science: healing our relations to the widest community, that of all living beings." (p. 45)

Næss's "deepened realism", grounded in his "relational" and "gestalt thinking", argues that we live in a rich reality – a world full of concrete and interconnected contents. Here, "gestalt thinking" refers to Næss's view that organisms and their environment

form interconnected wholes, or gestalts, rather than being separate entities. Influenced by Gestalt psychology, Næss argued that organisms and their environments form dynamic, interconnected totalities and that perception and understanding arise from holistic relationships rather than isolated parts. This perspective supports deep ecology by emphasizing "relational thinking" – the idea that individuals are not separate from nature but embedded within it, fostering identification and self-realization with all living beings. On that note, Næss asserted:

"The rich reality of the world is getting even richer through our specific human endowments; we are the first kind of living beings we know of who have the potential to live in community with all other living beings. It is our hope that all those potentialities will be realized – if not the near future, then at least in the somewhat more remote future." (pp. 50–51)

The third essay addresses the topic of joy, attempting to answer the question: where is joy in the world of fact? Before providing an answer, Næss argued that environmentalists sometimes "succumb to joyless life that belies their concern for a better environment" (p. 53). Concerned for their well-being and mindful of the importance of their work, he believed that:

"Life should manifest the peaks of our value priorities. Working for a better environment is, after all, only of instrumental value. We remain on the level of techniques. What criterion shall we use to follow the lead of our personal priorities? We do have one that is underrated among conscientious, responsible people: joy." (pp. 54–55)

Næss described joy as something that arises from an "active engagement" with the world, rather than from passive contemplation or humility (which he associates with sorrow). His view is influenced by Spinoza, particularly the idea that joy comes from an increase in one's power and understanding. Following Spinoza's philosophy, he outlined three kinds of joy: (1) the joy that comes from recognizing our own power, however small, which gives us self-respect and contentedness; (2) the joy that arises from actively learning about and understanding things greater than ourselves; and (3) the joy that comes from actively engaging with the world and being part of a larger whole, which defines both us and the reality around us. To be more precise, in his words:

"We can come to know adequately more potent things than ourselves. This gives us such joy because of our activeness in the very process of knowing them. The realization of our own potency, and our active relation to the more potent, result in joy. Thus, instead of humility (which is a kind of sorrow), we feel three kinds of joy: first, the joy resulting from the contemplation of our own power, however small,

which gives us *acquiescentia in se ipso*, self-respect and contentedness; second, the joy resulting from increased personal, active knowledge of things greater than we are; and third, the joy resulting from active interaction, which, strictly speaking, defines us (as well as other objects or fragments) in the total field of reality (or in Nature, in Spinoza's terminology)." (p. 65)

Næss suggested that joy is deeply tied to activity, self-realization, and our relational existence within nature. However, it is also important to keep in mind that:

"The rationality of a total view like Spinoza's is perhaps the only form of rationality capable of breaking down the pseudorational thinking of the conservative technocracy that currently obstructs efforts to think in terms of the total biosphere and its continued blossoming in the near and distant future." (pp. 68–69)

In addition to offering readers the opportunity to critically re-think some of the fundamental topics of deep ecology (e.g., joy, self-realization, and identification), Næss does not shy away from expressing his most intimate beliefs and elaborating on his personal life philosophy (i.e., *Ecosophy T*). For instance, in one passage, he wrote the following:

"Personally, I favor the kind of powerful premises represented in Chinese, Indian, Islamic, and Hebrew philosophy, as well as in Western philosophy – namely, those having as a slogan the so-called ultimate unity of all life. They do not hide the fact that big fish eat small ones, but stress the profound interdependence, the functional unity, of such a biospheric magnitude that nonviolence, mutual respect, and feelings of identification are always potentially there, even between the predator and its so-called victim. In many cultures, identification is not limited merely to other living things but also to the mineral world, which helps us conceive of ourselves as genuine surface fragments of our planet, fragments capable of somehow experiencing the existence of all other fragments: a microcosm of the macrocosm." (p. 69)

Shortly after, he added:

"Self-realization is not a maximal realization of the coercive powers of the ego. The *self* in the kinds of philosophy I am alluding to is something expansive, and the environmental crisis may turn out to be of immense value for the further expansion of human consciousness." (p. 70)

It is clear from this that Næss is not just presenting a theory but also his personal worldview (*Weltanschauung*), which serves as an inspiration for developing one's own ecological wisdom (i.e., *ecosophy*). At the very end of his analysis of joy in the world of fact, Næss strongly expresses his personal worldview:

"So-called physical reality, in terms of modern science, is perhaps only a piece of abstract mathematical reality – a reality we emphatically do not live in. Our living environment is made up of all the colorful, odor-filled, ugly, or beautiful details, and it is sheer folly to look for an existing thing without color, odor, or some other homely quality. The significance of this subject is a broad cultural one: the rehabilitation of the status of the immediately experienced world, the colorful and joyful world. *Where* is joy in the world of fact? Right at the center!" (p. 71)

The fourth essay is much more practical in nature, offering a list of 25 different ways in which supporters of the deep ecology movement can joyfully adapt their lifestyles to the movement. Here, we will highlight just a few of them:

1. "Use simple means; avoid unnecessary, complicated instruments and other sorts of means."
2. "Seek depth and richness of experience rather than intensity."
3. "Cultivate life in community (*Gemeinschaft*) rather than in society (*Gesellschaft*)."
4. "Try to satisfy vital needs rather than desires."
5. "Never use life-forms merely as means. Remain conscious of their intrinsic value and dignity, even when using them as resources."
6. "Try to protect local ecosystems, not only individual life-forms, and think of one's own community as part of the ecosystems."
7. "Try to act resolute and without cowardice in conflicts, but remain nonviolent in words and deeds." (cf. pp. 72–75)

The fifth and final essay explores industrial society, postmodernity, and ecological sustainability from a philosophical and deep-ecological perspective. Among other things, Næss also argued that the total unecological consequences of policies ΣU can be expressed in the following equation:

$$\Sigma U = (\Sigma P_u + \Sigma C_u) \times N$$

Where ΣP_u stands for "the per-capita sum total of unecological consequences by production for a given community", ΣC_u for "consumption", and N for the "number of people in the community or country". He also added that:

"For industrial societies, their ΣU_I should not be greater than 10 percent of the total ΣU_T. Without substantial progress toward that goal occurring each year in the industrial societies, this will be difficult to accomplish." (p. 80)

This prompted him to think not only about the theoretical possibilities and limitations of green utopias but also about real, struggling communities that need social support

and political guidance. Regarding industrial societies, postmodernity, and ecological sustainability, Næss strongly argued against consumerism as a modern way of life and in favor of a gradual decrease in population, which was not well received by his critics. For instance, in one of his passages, Næss wrote the following:

"As a firm supporter of the deep ecology movement, I hold that a decrease in consumption and a slow decrease in population will *not* necessarily result in a decrease in the quality of life. There will be a transition period, during which some people living according to the slogan 'Enough is never enough' will have difficulties. But provided the downscaling is effectuated with a strong sense of justice, major uprisings may not occur." (p. 80)

Although "controversial", today we see that many environmental scientists and philosophers largely agree with his deep-ecological analysis. Additionally, numerous artists, anthropologists, biologists, ecologists, and academics from various disciplines are staunch supporters of the deep ecology movement – even though some strongly oppose it due to its "controversial aspects". Be that as it may, one can certainly learn a great deal from reading Næss, regardless of whether we agree with him or not. For instance, Næss is an excellent author to turn to when seeking to view pressing environmental issues from a different perspective. This "change in perspective" is closely tied to his personal worldview, expressed in the following statement:

"There is no physical *world* with specifically physical *content*. There is a reality, the content of which we have direct contact with only through and in our spontaneous experiences. It is a reality of infinite richness." (p. 86)

By reflecting on the concrete content and richness of the world we live in, Næss shifted his focus to developing countries and reforestation. He sought to envision a way to transition from "preindustrial" to "postindustrial" societies with minimal unecological consequences (p. 91). Expressed in his words:

"In short, there is no way back to societies that belong to the past, but there is a way back to ecological sustainability. In fact, there is not just one way but many ways, so that widely different, sustainable cultures are possible." (p. 99)

With all of the above in mind, one could certainly argue that Næss's main deep-ecological message – apart from the importance of joy, identification, and self-realization in the world of concrete content – can be found in the final paragraph of his book:

"There is, however, no point of no return. Compared with the investment of life, work, and money in a great war, the investment needed to overcome the ecological crisis is very small. Moreover, the work of a determined minority could get the work started in earnest." (p. 102)

In conclusion, *There is No Point of No Return* is a small book with big ideas valuable not only for students and academics but also for the general readers. It offers an excellent introduction to Arne Næss's environmental ontology and environmental philosophy in general. In these dire times, this book is a must-read for anyone concerned about the future and well-being of our planet.

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