

In Sceptical Wonder

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Inquiries into the Philosophy of Arne Naess
on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday

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Norwegian Perspective
No. 27011230992
or the TAO of Arne Naess

FONS ELDERS

Poi, poi, good morning, good morning
ôh, the same to you
oudjamo? You are doing well? Oh djamo!
oemanam djamo? Your family too?
ôh djamo, ja!
oeba djamo?
oena djamo?
poi, poi
father healthy, mother healthy
djamo, yes
oedélébé djamo?
big brother healthy?
djamo djamo
poi poi
oesoengono djamo?
little brothers healthy?
djamo
poi poi
guiniwopoe djamo?
whole family healthy?
djamo!
poi, poi
poi, we are greeting you
emme gana ébé jinne viaj
we have come to see your country
poi, poi, welcome, welcome
dagau, it is good
kinewo ama ali?
are you content?

kinema àh, we are content
poi, poi.
oeba ginneh gue guongolo
it is your country, you can do what you like
poi, poi.
emoesie batoeroe natoeroe
we have the same fathers, the same mothers
poi, poi.
welcome, welcome.¹

“Our country is your country; our home is your home” – so we were welcomed by the Amir of Koundou Ando, a Dogon village in Mali.

A small group of family and friends, we stayed in this African village in December 1976 and January 1977.

Each morning after sunrise greetings were sounding through the entire village like soft, vivid poetry.

It took me ten days before the silence of that tiny semi-desert village on the slope of the mountains took possession of me. In the same ten days, I felt like a leaky basket, slowly but surely dripping out its own sour wine. Philosophers call it *Zen*, the Void or other names. Psychologists will call it adaptation, alienation, renewal. It doesn't matter.

This morning I felt like the millet the women are stamping each morning and afternoon: my emotions are going so many ways after a night of dreaming about my cultural hinterland – cars, trams, traffic-lines, Samkalden (mayor of Amsterdam), Marijke, jumping over a fence, a voyage to Novosibirsk, a meeting, pictured by the BVD (Dutch secret service) etc., that it feels as if the four winds are pulling at me.

Suddenly, my emotions are lifted up into the air.

The wind is blowing the chaff away. The grain remains. I feel much better.²

These experiences are playing a key-role in my understanding of Arne Naess's philosophy. His intuitive insight that “All living beings are ultimately one” belongs to the basic philosophy of the Dogon too.

If I read such a little stream of words in the Philosophical Department of the University of Amsterdam, in an architectural environment that looks like the National Bank of the Netherlands, while surrounded by books of philosophers of 'all' times and places, I start to laugh. Laughing

is the philosophical antidote to reason, as Octavio Paz expresses this problem succinctly.

Arne Naess laughs a lot too, sometimes with a poker face, sometimes without, then suddenly looks very serious. He is an actor, because he is the bearer of many perspectives, which all have certain aspects of truth for him. In that sense he is a Western Gandhi.

In Koundou Goumon a handful of old people and some children are living in a cave, to maintain contact with their ancestors: “c’est leur raison d’existence” – it’s their reason for existing.

People stay somewhere to cultivate the land;
people stay somewhere to guard the prisoners;
people travel all the time doing big business;
people stay somewhere to maintain contact with their ancestors.
It looks all the same, while a voice is telling us that it isn’t.
Many people commit suicide.

Only a few of us accept being shot during a non-violent blockade of military nuclear bases.

We understand the one committing suicide, better than the other: we respect Gandhi and Martin Luther King, but we don’t understand them.

We understand language better than silence.

We understand self-controlling knowledge better than mystical experience.

We understand nature for what it is giving us, but not for what it is asking from us: to dissolve our forms by dying.

We understand equality, but we don’t practice the adage: “democracy is truth for everyone”.³

We understand many dimensions of reality and we use our knowledge for many divergent goals, but we don’t have a cosmology, if “the cosmos is a language of languages”.⁴

The Problem with our Philosophy is Simply that it Originates in a Chair: Systematic Philosophy belongs to a Sedentary Culture!

The form of our methodical thinking takes the form of a chair: although many different chairs, they are chairs *from* and *for* our thinking. We are sitting in it, comfortably, although a little bit bored, and tired.

Nomadic culture is our tabu, more than incest, innocence, drugs. We are annihilating the very existence of the few nomads left. To travel

around the world today, without a passport, takes longer than it did in the sixteenth century.

The world hasn't changed, but our handling of it has. The old philosophies, e.g. from Śāṅkara, are still powerful, timeless in many of their truth-meanings. The same is true for art: old tools, poems, music, architecture are timeless too, in many of their beauty-meanings.

In some areas of philosophy and art there is no linear progress, not even a dialectic one in the Hegelian or Marxist sense

Our counting of time has gone from a rhythmical, cyclical understanding of nature-time to an abstract linear chronological time: we are believers in growth of all possible and impossible kinds. Therefore work is a main value in all highly industrialized countries, and in the ones that are trying to become industrialized, e.g. China.

The notion of progress is the ideological counterpart and ultimately the justification of the law of unequal development. The law of unequal development is the nucleus of the capitalist system. Profit can only be made on a substantial scale if there are differences in prices and salaries between classes and between regions.

This law of unequal development needs an ongoing growth, because a slowdown will endanger the profit and the notion of progress. If powerful groups or individuals are losing their tight control over their domains of influence, they will try to re-entrench themselves by enforcing their own private concept of time and place: territories, marketplaces, borders are run like one-way traffic.

In the old, non-sedentary stories about the cosmos, time and place cannot be possessed, only cultivated with respect for Nature. The Dogon live by the norm that they can't only take, but also have to give. If the Dogon go through the Sigi-festival, once in sixty years, a human life-span, they renew the life of the entire community.

Their cosmology reminds me often of Spinoza. And Arne Naess is close to Spinoza, but he is also a student of Pyrrhonian scepticism, Gandhi's non-violence strategy, Ecology, and the author of *The Pluralist and Possibilist Aspect of the Scientific Enterprise*: he is an original TAO of perspectives.

Arne Naess has become one of the few cosmologists in contemporary Western philosophy.

Naess has been trying to be more scientific than anyone else, searching for the meaning of words like 'truth', 'democracy', 'objectivity'. Yet he has become a metaphysical, pragmatic, green philosopher, whose main

interest is cultural philosophy, in which the word 'culture' implies all the activities of man, including economics. Naess has become a good defender of possible fundamental meanings of metaphysical statements, 'utterances' as he himself prefers to call them – a more careful word. He even makes it quite clear that nobody can escape metaphysical or ontological ideas, not even in the purer forms of knowledge, i.e. in methodology.

In 1968 he published two books: *Four Modern Philosophers* and *Scepticism*. These studies presuppose each other: one cannot write in an empathic way on Carnap and Heidegger, or about Sartre and Wittgenstein without being a mature sceptic.

Carnap told me, three months before his death (1970), that he couldn't understand why Arne Naess, for whom he felt much respect, wrote about him and Martin Heidegger in one and the same book: *Four Modern Philosophers*. Heidegger was not a philosopher he could be compared with, at least not in the same volume; perhaps in the same library, but then standing as far apart as C and H.

Everyone who witnessed the debate for Dutch Television between Alfred Ayer and Arne Naess ten years ago, will remember the indignation of Ayer when Naess started to talk about Heidegger. Emotions ran high:

Naess: I am sorry, I would feel badly if you were to take me as just a Heideggerian or some kind of. . .

Ayer: No, no, on the contrary. I mean, I wouldn't. . .

Naess: I'm not sure I'm not. I'm quite near Heidegger in a certain sense.

Ayer: Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense!

Naess: Yes, we are *geworfen*. I feel very much that I have been thrown into the world, and that I am still being thrown.

Ayer: Now *why* do yourself this injustice? Why spoil it? Now leave him out, keep him out. How do you know we are thrown into existence. You may have had a very difficult birth for all you remember.

Naess: How do I know? How do I know the relevance of knowledge?

Ayer: Thrown into existence, nonsense.

Naess: Perhaps you use the term 'know' too often.

Ayer: This should be eliminated.

Naess: Let's get away from being thrown into existence. . . Yes, I shall try to trust you when you say that I am not thrown."⁵

In this debate we see Naess defending his total view in a rational way, *versus* the beautifully worded empiristic philosophy of Ayer. Naess and Ayer were able to understand each other fully during a two hour debate

and to disagree fundamentally on many issues. When Naess said during the discussion with the public that he could also have defended opposite points of view, Ayer got a little bit shocked. He didn't want to believe that. And he was right, I think.

Naess gives such a reaction, which he didn't want to be printed in the final text of this debate in *Reflexive Water*, overplaying scepticism for the sake of its own argument.

Ayer, with his quick psychological insight, knew that Naess couldn't have defended opposite points of view the way he did.

Naess: Well, I learnt from housewives and schoolgirls another way of putting it. They say that something is true *if it is* so. Marvellous. It is a little bit wider than "it is so", and much wider than "it is a fact". It's true, *if it is* so, it's false *if it isn't* so. Marvellous. But very little is said, of course, concerning testability.

Ayer: But "it's being so" is what I call a fact.

Naess: "If it is so"; we have a conditional there, and there we agree.

Ayer: Yes.

Naess: It is only true "if it is so".

Ayer: Certainly.

Naess: But what *is*? What *is* there? And here we must be terribly comprehensive, if we are to include all living ontological traditions. And to narrow it down to facts, is to narrow it down to the British Isles first of all.⁶

"If" is the form of a reflective, conditional consciousness, in which we acknowledge the fundamental relativity of our knowledge versus the ocean of other possibilities and points of view: Norwegian perspective No. 27011230992.

"Is" is the depth of the other side of our consciousness:

there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness against which our several minds plunge as into a mothersea or reservoir. . . (reservoir). . . we with our lives are like islands in the sea, or trees in the forest.⁷

Octavio Paz, in a beautiful essay on "André Breton or the Quest of the Beginning" expresses it a similar way:

The old notion of analogy is coming to the fore once again: nature is a language, and language in turn is a double of nature. . . The Other, our double, is a denial of the illusory solidity and security of our

consciousness, that pillar of smoke on which we build our arrogant philosophical and religious constructs.⁸

Philosophy as the art of fundamental and coherent thinking is rooted in life. On a flight to Oslo, coming from Amsterdam, the day before Christmas, I was watching my fellow-travellers. After a stop in Copenhagen, many Norwegians entered the plane. Flying through rough weather, thick white clouds and hurtling wind-gusts, I looked up again from my book at the other passengers. Their faces were glowing with a tired but intense expectation. Suddenly, I realized that all our thinking is driven by desire. I got a picture of Arne Naess, climbing a mountain with Spinoza in his rucksack, calling his daughter Spinoza. The *Amor Intellectualis* was right there, all around me.

Thinking and life revolve around the same polarities.

Life has two fundamental tendencies: the one is contraction (centralization), the other expansion. The former one acts in a centripetal way, the latter one in a centrifugal way. The one means unification, the other differentiation of growth. If growth prevails over unity it results in disorganization, disintegration, chaos, decay. In organic life hypertrophy leads to the final destruction of the organism ('cancer'). In mental life growth without unity (centralization) leads to insanity, mental dissolution. If centralization prevails over growth it results in atrophy and finally in the complete stagnation of life, whether physical or mental.⁹

Naess will talk about diversity and complexity within an all-embracing network of interrelations: "*the ecological movement may change the European tradition*".¹⁰

When the egotism-ego vanishes, something else grows, that ingredient of the person that tends to identify itself with God, with humanity, all that lives. Therefore Gandhi may also say that once the reduction of one's egotism-self is *complete*, one comes face to face with God, finds Truth, *realizes the universal self, the Self*. The way of humility is essentially the way of reducing egotism.¹¹

What follows now, is Naessian strategy:

Norm 1: Seek complete self-realization.

Hypothesis 1: Complete self-realization requires seeking truth.

Norm 2: Seek truth (from N1 and H1).

Hypothesis 2: All living beings are ultimately one.

Hypothesis 3: Violence against yourself precludes realizing your self.

Hypothesis 4: Violence against any living being is violence against your self.

Hypothesis 5: Violence by anybody against anybody precludes complete self-realization of anybody.

Norm 3: Act so as to reduce and eliminate violence (from N1 and H5).¹²

Every student of Naess knows that this list is not complete, and that Naess loves systematizations of this kind: E, F etc. His study of Spinoza: *Freedom, Emotion and Self-Subsistence: The Structure Of A Central Part Of Spinoza's Ethics*, includes also a survey of terminological relations. Such a survey is unavoidable "if Spinoza's thinking is to be used in our lives in this latter part of our century".¹³

I admire this attitude of Naess. He reconstructs vague sounding formulas such as "Search for truth and realize *ahimsa* (non-violence)" into a workable practice of action.

If he writes that "to be active or to act and to understand cannot be systematically distinguished in the *Ethics*", one may apply this remark to Naess's *oeuvre*: "the oneness is something to be realized rather than a fact".¹⁴

The form of Naess's philosophy, his style of thinking and arguing, reflects in many aspects the traits of a sedentary culture, but the meaning of Naess's philosophy is becoming more and more nomadic: "the ideology of ownership has no place in a philosophically grounded ecology". Or: "The Norwegian people or the Norwegian state does not own Norway".¹⁵ An egalitarian attitude is a part of the ontology of the members of the so-called primitive societies, writes Naess and the implication for our own culture is clear.

Naess has convinced me that the adage "Search for Truth and realize *ahimsa*" is the Way, which seems to be the only chance for Life on Earth. Against nuclear violence, which can destroy the life of several generations, no symmetrical effective resistance is possible, because the maintenance of life on earth cannot be reached by the use of nuclear violence.

Truth and *ahimsa* relate to each other as aim and tao, or the goals-means relationship.

An Indian from South Africa, being for the first time in his life in Bombay, the home-town of his parents, said to me: "If there were ten

Gandhi's, the world would look different. . . If there were five Gandhi's, the world would look different. . ." I answered him that we need millions of Gandhi's, because the few will be shot, without any doubt.

In opposition to Hypothesis 13 of Naess: "Your opponent is less likely to use violent means, the better he understands your conduct and your case"¹⁶, I believe that in cases of radical non-violent actions, the leaders will be killed, just because non-violence is able to change the historical course of our society. It is the way to integrate many beliefs, including the Christian one into political action.

This will be considered by some people with a lot of power over their fellow human beings too big a risk to take. Therefore a few Gandhi's will not help. We need many with an egalitarian attitude, being mutually independent and solidary.

There is a distinction, which I think is very important, between power over something and power to do something. Something may be in your power to do, where you are the cause, where you are active, self-determining. That is the power that the great philosophers have said is a great good and the maximizing of power in this sense is good. Then we have power in the sense of over-powering something. I am sorry to say that what we call the power struggle and the power situation today, is a question of who has power over, rather than who has power to. I am going to stress the old good power, in the sense of power to do something.¹⁷

If I relate this distinction between the two notions of power to Naess's cosmology, then something becomes very clear:

Naessian total view fights the totalitarian tendencies of knowledge and power, which are only directed at control over.

In his cosmology there is no 'scientific' vision of the world, no established scientific 'knowledge', such as is dominant in the Western tradition of the last three centuries.

In "The Unity of Life. Ecosophy T", Naess quotes Descartes' *Discourse on Method*: "that it is possible to arrive at knowledge which is most useful in life. . .", ". . . the speculative philosophy taught in the Schools. . ." can be replaced by "a practical philosophy". ". . . knowing the power and the effects of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens. . . (we might thereby) make ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature".¹⁸

Arne Naess is working for a cosmic unity and pluriformity, walking on a road, which he first had to construct as the Romans did, being a child of a sedentary culture. Slowly he moves on to non-existent roads, nomadic

ones, still full of Norms and Hypotheses to make his *TAO* as understandable and as attractive as possible, knowing that it is a tough road, but very beautiful. I don't know any professional philosopher in Western culture, who has gone that far in breaking the spell of the one-sided notion of value-free rationality and knowledge, not by degrading the rational heartcore of our culture, but by widening its meaning. Arne Naess's cosmology is becoming a synthesis of Western and Eastern understanding, a *tao* with new directions to go.

I hope that the written *form* of his philosophy will go in the direction of dialogues, in which he can weave the threads of the different philosophies of men and women into the unity of time, place and action.

Art, philosophy and science will have to merge into a cosmology, if "the cosmos is a language of languages".

Arne Naess is seventy. He is going to die only if he wants to, according to Colin Wilson:

But if life is consciousness, then the problem of prolonging life should be the problem of increasing consciousness – the aim of science as well as art. Ecstasy is increase of consciousness – and rats fed on a diet of ecstasy live longer. . .

(from a longevity study). Philosophers and mathematicians came out best, with nearly 50 per cent living to be over seventy-five. The average for musicians, artists and writers was lower – but then, a much higher percentage of artists tend to be emotionally unstable or unhappy. The figures showed that the stable ones tended to live as long as the philosophers.¹⁹

Poi, poi, Arne! My house is your house; my country is your country. You are welcome!

Amsterdam, 1981, the 5th of May, liberation day in the Netherlands since 1945.

Custodia

El nombre
 Sus sombras
 El hombre La hembra
 El mazo El gong
 La i La o
 La torre El aljibe
 El índice La hora
 El hueso La rosa
 El rocío La huesa
 El venero La llama
 El tizón La noche
 El río La ciudad
 La quilla El ancla
 El hembro La hombra
 El hombre
 Su cuerpo de nombres
 Tu nombre en mi nombre En tu nombre mi nombre
 Uno frente al otro uno contra el otro uno en torno al otro
 El uno en el otro
 Sin nombres

Shrine

The name
 Its umbras
 The man The woman
 The hammer The gong
 The i The o
 The tower The well
 The pointer The hour
 The bone The rose
 The shower The grave
 The spring The flame
 The brand The night
 The river The city
 The keel The anchor
 The manwomb The wombman
 The man
 His body of names
 Your name in my name In your name my name
 One facing the other one against the other one around the other
 The one in the other
 Nameless

A poem by Octavio Paz

NOTES

The title "Norwegian Perspective No. 27011230992" is autobiographical: VII. The Unity of Life. Ecosophy T., p. 105.

Tao means "way" or "road", with the connotation in Taoist cosmology that "the component organisms in the universal organism followed their Tao each according to its own nature, and their motions could be dealt with in the essentially 'non-representational' form of algebra". Joseph Needham, in *Science and Civilization in China*, Vol. III, p. 485.

1. B Schierbeek, *A Report on the Dogon*.
 2. A note in my diary, 30 December 1976.
 3. W. F. Hermans, *King Kong*. 1968.
 4. O. Paz, 1973, p. 62.
 5. F. Elders, 1974. The debate between A. J. Ayer and A. Naess is printed there under the title: "The Glass is on the Table", in *Reflexive Water*, 1974.
 6. F. Elders, 1974, p. 46.
 7. W. James, 1911, p. 204.
 8. O. Paz, 1973, pp. 50-52.
 9. Lama A. Govinda, 1969, p. 53.
 10. F. Elders, 1974, p. 31.
 11. A. Naess, 1974 a, pp. 38-39.
 12. A. Naess, 1974 a, p. 54.
 13. A. Naess, 1975 b, p. 1.
 14. A. Naess, 1975 b, p. 55.
 15. A. Naess, 1976, pp. 23-25, 92 ff. 264 ff. "The Unity of Life; Ecosophy T".
 16. A. Naess, 1974 a, p. 72.
 17. Lecture by A. Naess on "Power and Imagination", at A Symposium of the Academy of Architecture on the Urban Environment. Amsterdam, June 1979.
 18. A. Naess, 1976, p. 264 ff.
 19. C. Wilson, 1971, pp. 38-39.
- With thanks to Judith Levine for help with the editing.