

PHILOSOPHICAL
DIALOGUES

Chapter 6

Arne Næss, a Philosopher and a Mystic: A Commentary on the Dialogue between Alfred Ayer and Arne Næss

Fons Elders

This famous dialogue between Næss and Ayer took place on television at a late Sunday evening in 1971 in the International School for Philosophy in the Netherlands. The title “The Glass Is on the Table, an Empiricist versus a Total View” shows the core of the difference between both thinkers and their respective philosophies. It was a lively discussion with an empiricist surface-structure, presented and defended brilliantly by Freddy Ayer, and an ontological depth-structure, presented and defended equally brilliantly by Arne Næss. I use the words surface-structure and depth-structure in a metaphorical, non-Chomskian sense.

The dialogue was beautiful for more than one reason. Both philosophers understand every single statement of each other and are able to express themselves as precisely as language permits them. They are also able to argue extensively in favor of their own ideas, while willing to listen to each other’s arguments. There is honesty in both parts, and the common desire to unveil what the two philosophers consider as truth or as the impossibility to reach truth. I hardly know any dialogue in twentieth century philosophy, which combines the sheer intensity of an exchange with such profoundness in the search for meaning and truth.

The discussion made a deep impression on the audience. A seventeen-year-old student *saw*, for the first time in his life, people thinking. Twenty years later he still remembered this television event. For all participants philosophy came to life—without tricks or special visual effects, through the mastery of Næss and

Ayer, who were able to use and demonstrate the inherent qualities of the dialogue form as an imaginative, literary, and hermeneutic model of the search for truth.

In "Dialogue and Meaning"¹ I describe the dialogue as a mental electromagnetic field that in its form shows some resemblance with the polar forces of all organic matter, viz. the simultaneity of centrifugal and centripetal movements. It is like our heartbeat or the rhythm of music, poetry, and dance, an ongoing movement balancing around an invisible center or axis.

I asked both philosophers about their philosophical views and their tasks as philosophers. Ayer answered that these are today very much the same questions that have been asked since the Greeks, mainly about what can be known, how it can be known, what kind of things there are, how they relate to each other, "and I hope, in a sense, to finding the truth." Næss responded by saying that he saw it a little differently because philosophy included the most profound, the deepest, the most fundamental problems. These problems have not changed much over the last two thousand years. But Næss agreed with Ayer that the epistemological and ontological questions belong to philosophy, and are among the most profound questions we can ask.

Ayer immediately retorted with: How does Næss measure the profundity of a problem? Næss threw the question back at him by asking rhetorically: "How do we measure? Well, that's one of the most profound questions of all."

The two gentlemen did not lose one minute trying to take the lead, each using their own language game with a different kind of semantics and logic to gain some ground.

The words "profound" and "deep" played an important role for Næss in this dialogue, as they do in Næss' s philosophy in general. He uses these terms both with regard to epistemological as well as to ontological questions. The epistemological and ontological questions are for Arne Næss so deeply interrelated that they form a Möbius string.

Let me quote some statements of Næss, which capture the intimate connections between his philosophy and his particular form of mysticism. Næss continues the philosophic-mystical tradition of Spinoza and combines his world of nature-experiences with an effort to change the Western, dualistic paradigm into a green worldview, not so different perhaps from the earth-bound worldview in Europe before the Indo-European invasion in the middle of the fourth millennium before our Christian era.²

1. "In moments of high concentration and integration, not at the times when I am merely functioning, I have this feeling—and it is not just a feeling—that we don't have any decisive arguments for any conclusions whatsoever."
2. "The mysteries that we 'know' include those of 'I know' and the link between the knower and the known."
3. "I can be shaken and I wish others to be able to be shaken!"
4. "I think I believe in the ultimate unity of all living beings."

5. "But the ecological movement may change the European tradition. The formulation 'all living beings are ultimately one,' is neither a norm nor a description. . . . It is the kind of utterance you make in support of something I would call an intuition, by which I do not mean that it is necessarily true. . . . My self is not my ego, but something capable of immense development."
6. "Yes, biologically we are just centers of interactions in one great field."
7. "More central is the fact that, as a philosopher, I think I have a kind of total view, which would include logic, epistemology, and ontology, but also evaluations, and that I do not escape from the relevance of them at any moment."
8. "It's not the great Self, it is the small self that needs limitation: it is when I'm functioning in tough practical situations, but not when I'm deciding what it is worthwhile doing in life, when the very widest perspectives are involved and when one is concentrating and meditating."
9. "I do not think we need a concept of fact, and we do not even need a concept of knowledge, in what I would call fundamental philosophical discussion."
10. "It is only true *if it is so*."
11. "Let me formulate it thus: I hope I would prefer to be killed by someone else rather than to kill, and I *ought* to prefer it."
12. "With my Spinozist leanings towards integrity—being an integrated person as the most important thing—I'm now trying to close down on all these vagaries. I am inviting you [Alfred Ayer] to do the same."

I have left out the questions or answers of Ayer's, not because they are not interesting. On the contrary, I am convinced that the usual tactics of Freddy Ayer to use his language and mind as a razor blade to cut through the metaphysical utterances of his opponents, forced Arne to be equally sharp, if not sharper, in presenting and protecting his deeper aspirations and intuitive notions. I want to use these statements in order to clarify the intimate relationship between Arne's philosophical and mystical endeavors.

A common denominator in most of the quotations is Næss's realization of boundlessness with regard to knowledge and identity (see 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10), while his total view consists of the interrelationship between all the domains or disciplines of philosophy, including normative questions such as the "right" to kill (see 7, 11). The experience of boundlessness which leads to the formulation "all living beings are ultimately one" forces or, at least, seduces Arne to argue *ad profundum* for a commitment of the whole person (see 3, 12).

The mystical experience of boundlessness and unity is at the heart of the philosophy of Arne Næss. From this existential experience, the development of his philosophical oeuvre becomes self-evident, leading from sympathy for empiricism and pragmatism to skepticism, and from there to a philosophy of the diversity of lifestyles and the diversity of life conceptions, and to the realization that there shouldn't or couldn't be a scientific worldview but that we do need a total view. During decades, Arne Næss had to argue systematically and coher-

ently to create enough space for his inner experiences, which have become the source of his green philosophy.

"I got the impression that Næss approaches everyone, from the beginning, on the assumption that they are going to be both right and wrong." I wrote this sentence many years ago, trying to understand Næss's inclination never fully to identify with whatever position or statement. Both as a person and as a philosopher, Arne wanted to be so all-encompassing that he was forcing himself to escape any fixed position, both on the philosophical as well as on the emotional level. However, this impression or observation was formed at the beginning of the seventies. It doesn't hold anymore today. Arne Næss's philosophical need and duty to analyze, to decondition, to generalize, and to develop a coherent total view have merged into one desire. This is to clarify and to manifest as convincingly as possible his deeper intuitions about the real values of life and nature.

Arne's intuitions derive their strength and their "truth" from his mystical experiences. He uses all his philosophical talents to create as much space as possible for the songlines of our ancestors and for the songlines of the grandchildren of our grandchildren. If I write "these intuitions derive their strength and their 'truth' from his mystical experiences," I am putting the word "truth" in quotes, solely to indicate that using the word is improper with regard to an intuitive statement as "the ultimate unity of all living beings." In doing so, I follow Næss's own advice not to use the word "truth" too easily. If we consider Næss's analysis of the notion of fact and truth, it may become clear that he has to defend this seemingly impossible position (see 9, 10). He has to do so because of the fact that his most authentic experiences do not allow him to accept a less all-encompassing design (see 7, 8). Why is this so? Not only because mystic experiences are by their very nature authentic, but also due to the inner nature of such experiences, i.e., the dissolution of the "I" and "You" or "It" into a unity (see 2). Sentences like "I consider myself a philosopher when I'm trying to convince people of nonviolence, consistent nonviolence whatever happens," or "Philosophy is just this: that you develop something that I've started and gradually you introduce preciseness from different directions. Then you breathe three times, reinforce your intuition, and go a little further towards precision" become understandable, if we realize a deeper aspect of Arne's message.

This precision of Næss means also abolishing a distinction between description and norm, fact and non-fact: "I do not think we need a concept of fact, and we do not even need a concept of knowledge, in what I would call fundamental philosophical discussion," to end with the statement: "I hope I would prefer to be killed by someone else rather than to kill, and I *ought* to prefer it."

The combination of these four statements shows how Arne Næss stretches his commitment as a philosopher to the utmost limit, in defending the necessity of a total view with all its normative and emotional implications. The source of his philosophical commitment is the mystic experience of the unity of all living beings.

The aim of his philosophical commitment is action, viz. the transformation of our lifestyle through the application of the Eight Points.

"I can be shaken and I wish others to be able to be shaken!" (see 3). This is not a statement of an armchair philosopher but rather of a prophet or philosopher who feels responsible for "a kind of total view, which would include logic, epistemology, and ontology, but also evaluations, and *that I do not escape from the relevance of them at any moment*" (see 7, my emphasis). This is not a non-personal, academic statement but the commitment of a warrior or mystic philosopher for whom nothing any more belongs to the domain of indifferent or unimportant issues. Rudolf Carnap told me in 1970, three months before he died, that he couldn't understand that such an intelligent man as Arne Næss could write in one and the same book about him and Heidegger. The book *Four Modern Philosophers* (1968) dealt with Carnap, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Sartre. It was nice to see in "The Glass Is on the Table," how also Freddy Ayer reacted in a similar way when Næss mentioned the name of Heidegger: "Let's keep him out of this. . . . We ought to maintain certain standards." Næss wouldn't be Næss to let pass such a chance. So he continued by saying "Well, a man whose name begins with H and ends with R thinks. . . ."

Næss's capacity for joking makes the seriousness of his philosophy acceptable. He maintains a balance between the extremes by balancing on a tightrope with a priest on his left side, and a jester on his right, as the authors of the Preface suggest.

Notes

¹ Fons Elders, "Dialogue and Meaning," in *Dialogue and Universalism* (Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1990), 28.

² See Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Collins, 1989).