

The World View of Arne Naess

On intuition, total view and methodos

Introduction

During many decades of an active and contemplative life, Arne Naess, born in Oslo in 1912, developed gradually a world view, in which nature is the all-embracing source of life and the meaning of life. Spinoza's Deus sive Natura comprises in a nutshell the background of Naess *eco-philosophy*, a notion that he prefers above the term *ecology*, because it implies a reference to wisdom. Naess's world view is a total view in the sense that he feels and accepts the responsibility to connect all his views, be it ethical, epistemological or political. And the connection between these views has to show a certain coherence. (PD 14) According to Naess, philosophy has to deal with *the most profound, the deepest, and the most fundamental problems. They will change very little, and they have not changed much over the last two thousand years.* (PD 11) Naess places him self with such a vision on philosophy among the more radical thinkers of the 20th century, including philosophers as Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Carnap or Sartre.

The aspiration of Naess to integrate his epistemological, ontological and political views, raises the question, how to approach such a total view. Where is the entrance and where is the exit of such a system? Naess would criticise my question by denying its assumption. He would probably answer: *there is no entrance and there is no exit in my philosophical system. There is perhaps not even a system, but only a careful articulation of intuitive notions, with an elaboration in various directions, and on various levels.*

World view and methodos

The difficulty of analysing a world view results not only from the complexity of its meaning or content, but equally from its epistemological riddles. The distinction between questions with regard to the nature of reality and with regard to the nature of fundamental knowledge is itself the result of breaking away from an immediate experience of the environment. The breaking away results out of wonder and out of shock. The perceptions which result out of wonder and shock have world wide evolved into various total views, primarily of a spiritual nature. The awe, the experience of the holy and the sublime have lead to various religions and basic philosophies. The main distinction in the field of total views is the one between religions, based upon a Revelation from Beyond, and religions or philosophies, based upon inner revelation or reflection.

The distinction is of utmost importance, because it places and views the origin of human reality and his ethical behaviour in a transcendent origin, or in an immanent or immanent—transcendent reality, in which human perception plays itself the key role for understanding its position. The difference between a transcendent origin or an immanent origin leads not only to a different interpretation about the origin of spirituality, but also to a different interpretation about the relation between being and knowledge. When one perceives the origin of being as arising from outside the (human) realm of being, then also true knowledge of that origin is outside the human reach. Such a perception, characteristic for the monotheistic traditions, creates a gap between two kinds of realities. The gap becomes even deeper through the immaterial nature of that origin. The immaterial origin leads to an ontological difference with the cosmos, living nature and human existence, based upon a notion of the Absolute, outside space and time, respectively Yahwe, God or Allah. Man is situated between the Absolute and Nature. The relationship between Man, the Divine and the natural order revolves around a vertical axis.

This brief analysis indicates that the search for the ontology, for the logic, and for the intimate relationship between the logic and the ontology of a world view, is never value – free or without assumptions. To enter a world view for the first time, be it an animistic or post-Newtonian world view, is like entering a grandiose labyrinth. The logic of any labyrinth is difficult to unravel without proper guidance. I call this guidance the *methodos* of a world view. A specific *methodos* introduces the student gradually into a specific perception with the result that he starts to see the world according to the values and core ideas of that world view. This happens usually with the exclusion of other world views, by lack of information or distortion of the other views. The already existing perception will guide the eyes of the student toward the understanding and appreciation of an established world view, for example Hinduism, Judaism, a post-Newtonian physical world view or a combination of several world views, for example being a Buddhist and quantum physicist.

Any world view comprises three levels

1. how to acquire knowledge about (ultimate) reality; 2. getting acquainted with the basic characteristics of reality, and 3. getting acquainted with the existing valuations, that find their expression in ethical and aesthetic values.

It might be evident that the three levels influence each other profoundly, but not in the same way or in the same sequence. The *methodos* of Buddha or Socrates differs from the *methodos* of the monotheistic religions. In the monotheistic world views, Sacred Books are the main source of revelation. The Books attribute by implication a decisive role to language in the acquisition of sacred knowledge, while the visual world and the world of images have a lower status or are even unholy. The *methodos* of Buddha and Socrates follows a different road, based upon personal reflection and direct experience. (Humanism and

Buddhism....) We might conclude that also the methodos of a world view is not value – free. It comprises both effect and cause, because it mirrors and feeds a specific perception of reality. And any specific perception implies a value-frame.

The methodos of Arne Naess

Arne Naess has always argued that any methodology presupposes at least one postulate with regard to its conception of knowledge and reality. We might judge the presence of such a postulate as a negative point of departure, implying that human intelligence is unable to jump over its own shadow. But we can also judge it positively, arguing that human intelligence is part of the question and therefore part of the possible answers. The insight that the distinction between facts and values is more artificial than real, is only a problem for a theory of knowledge that strives for knowledge without any trace of subjective and personal experience, in fact an impersonal, godlike, powerful knowledge that functions only instrumentally. Such a knowledge is not value-free in its approach of nature, but value-free with regard to the concrete experiences of people. In the words of Karin Verelst.... *the ontological condition experienced by human beings when participating consciously in reality, and recognisable articulated in different mythological and philosophical traditions, is not accounted for by our present-day, logically structured world views.*

The insight that facts and values are interwoven, in any perception and in any world view, scientific or religious, plays an important role in the philosophy of Naess. This insight is an open invitation to search for the hidden assumptions in our collective and personal perception of nature; to analyse the assumptions and, subsequently, to introduce carefully some constructive idea(s) about ‘nature’, arguing for their meaning without being able to ‘prove’ them or even wanting to prove them. Where facts and values, theory and praxis, are intently interwoven, ‘proof’ follows upon action, not vice versa. Experience plays a key role in this approach. Naess’ methodos is a training in conscious not-knowing that facilitates new perspectives and stimulates the creative imagination. His aim is that we learn to trust our intuition, without becoming naïve.

On intuition

Arne Naess writes and speaks to deepen the insight of his readers or audience in such a way that both attitude and practical behaviour have to change, when we realise, step by step, the implications of our own world view, or of the world view that Naess presents. Naess follows the road of Socrates: *do know your self*, with no lesser aim than that of Karl Marx: *to change the world*. He makes a careful use of the various modes of logic, argumentation, and dialogue, arguing for seemingly impossible statements, such as *the ultimate unity of all living beings*. In my contribution to *Philosophical Dialogues*, I wrote a commentary on the dialogue between Alfred Ayer and Arne Naess. The

dialogue took place on Dutch television in 1971 with me in the seat of the moderator. Neither Naess nor Ayer knew on beforehand what kind of questions I would raise. This method contributed greatly to the spontaneity of the dialogue that reflected the guiding ideas of his green philosophy which Naess would unfold in the decades to come.

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.

Naess refers to intuition when he expresses his deepest insights, without claiming them to be true, although it might be clear that he believes them to be true. The working of the intuition is closely related with moments of high concentration and integration, that open vast perspectives: *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.* The distinction between the great Self and the small self is important, because the Self and the self refer to different levels of consciousness. Where the perception is most clear, not affected by personal interests, fear or desire, there is a temporary fusion of the 'knower' and that what is perceived: *The mysteries that we 'know' include those of 'I know' and the link between the knower and the known.*

We may wonder how to interpret the notion of the great Self versus the small self. It seems to me that is sufficient to realise what happens to a person in an intense aesthetic experience. Seeing a friend dying, who surrenders himself in full consciousness to the great void, opens such an immense space that we may talk about the great Self as a symbol for the totality of all there exists. Such an experience is literally speechless. We do not have to grasp intellectually what we sense intuitively. An ontological statement such as *the ultimate unity of all living beings*, is a correlate to the epistemological statement of a total view. Both suppose and mirror each other. How we do perceive 'knowledge' or how we do perceive 'being' are interrelated. Knowledge and being arise out of the same root of the human existence. Human existence implies various degrees of consciousness, including intuitive notions.

Fons Elders
Kapberg, Warder

Philosophical Dialogues. Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy.

Editors: Nina Witoszek and Andrew Brennan Rowman & Littlefield Publishers
1999.