

## **Deep Ecology: Life After Life?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This introductory chapter interrogates the intellectual robustness and mobilizing potential of Arne Naess's deep ecology in the 21st century. Our contention is that deep ecology is not a spent force, as some influential Western philosophers argue in this volume. On the contrary, ecophilosophy has left a legacy which remains a significant part of the ongoing *cultural innovation for a sustainable future*. As several essays in this collection show, Arne Naess' thought feeds into new, science-based visions of the relationship between humans and nature. More importantly, it has got a new lease of life in the South, where biocentric cosmovisions play an ever more important role, not just in philosophical, but political debates which have an impact on Latin America's future.

Keywords: ecophilosophy, cultural innovation, social impact of philosophy, panpsychism, the future of deep ecology

In a magisterial attempt to reclaim and reimagine the pragmatist philosophy for the needs of our time, Robert Unger has asked a poignant question:

How can society and culture be so organized that large numbers of ordinary men and women have a better chance to awake from the narcoleptic daze, outside the circle of intimacy and love, without having to do so as pawns and belligerents?... How can an individual born into a small country live a large life, how can the state help him widen the stage on which he can live such life? (2009: 205)

This volume is the reassessment of a philosophical project that attempted to answer a question similar to that posed by Unger: how can we live a larger life by waking up from inertia and making our planet into a better home? Arne Naess' deep ecology – first enunciated in the early 1970s – was a pioneering codification of the idea of a paradigm shift in Western perceptions of modernity. It stood some of the central modern ideas and concepts on their head: it challenged anthropocentric optimists by insisting on the intrinsic value of all living beings; it invited an individual self to become an enlarged, ecocentric self; it proposed a self-realization in harmony with all living beings. Last but not least, it demanded that the intellectual defenders of nature should stand up and act on nature's behalf. And although some of the Naessian rhetoric was also about changing existing structures of power and society, the revolutionary component in deep ecology has been a matter of multiple interpretations and contestations, including evasions and inconsistencies in Naess' own declarations (e.g. Witoszek and Anker 1998: 239-256).

Much has changed since the time when Arne Naess first spelled out his eight-point testament (Naess 1973).<sup>1</sup> The relaxed, green idealism and flamboyance of the students of 1968 has been replaced by the market-place efficiency of the twenty-first century academy. Utopias of all kind – including deep ecological visions – have been contested and deconstructed. In the late 1980s, another Norwegian-bred response to the accelerating ecological crisis – the Brundtland Report – proposed a comparatively less radical transition towards the ambitious goal of living sustainably (that is, indefinitely) on a finite planet. What is left of Naess' 'enlarged self'?

This volume of *Worldviews* reassesses the value and legacy of deep ecology as a modern nature philosophy. Has Arne Naess' green codex had any lasting impact in the socio-economic realm? Or is it, as some of Naess' critics and former colleagues argue, a spent force, an

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<sup>1</sup> The eight points of Naess' platform were expounded in the article 'The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary' published by *Inquiry*, an interdisciplinary journal founded by Naess (18: 95-100). Since then the eight points have become a meme and can be found at: <http://www.deepecology.org/platform.htm>

anachronistic remnant much like the Catholic Pope: preaching a green orthodoxy without anybody listening (not to mention practicing)? What *is* the relationship between ‘green philosophizing’ – as an act of social criticism – and risk-ridden political movements and acts of civil disobedience in the 21st century? In short, is there a life after life in this philosophy?

Deep ecology is among the earliest philosophical responses to an environmental and civilizational crisis which, if anything, became more, not less, acute in the half-century since Naess first proclaimed the coming of a ‘deep, long-range ecological movement’ from a podium in Bucharest. Between then and now, half of all the planet’s wild animals have disappeared (in numbers), and UNEP estimates that as many as 200 species may be going extinct, on average, every day (WWF Living Planet Report 2016). Geologists are now officially recognizing that humans have become a geological force more powerful than volcanoes, ushering in that unprecedented chapter in Earth’s ancient history widely spoken of as the Anthropocene. The perfect moral storm that Naess foresaw is still raging around us, and business-as-usual seems as inept a response today as it was fifty years ago. It is against this backdrop that this volume has turned both to pioneers and new advocates of a green philosophy to answer the question of what is the relevance of deep ecology for our time of uncertainty, and loss. Given the magnitude and speed of the disruptions we are witnessing, and given the inertia of disruptive forces that still escalate their impact on the biosphere, does not Naess’ proposition of a fair society living modestly, inside the biosphere’s fragile envelopes seem anachronistic or utopian?

As we have indicated, the political and intellectual landscape has changed since deep ecology’s infant days. Concepts such as ‘sustainability,’ ‘environmental ethics,’ and ‘animal rights’ are now common currency in debates on the environmental crisis, though, admittedly, the deep ecology platform is rarely cited in the 21<sup>st</sup> century *Bildung*. To some, Naess’ distinction between ‘shallow’ and ‘deep’ ecologies seems to have lost its critical edge, eclipsed by the mantra of ‘sustainable development’: a concept that is as ubiquitous as it is contested. In the world where the great polluters, US, China and India, drive simultaneously green and carbon locomotives, things surely remain ‘shallow’. However, there is also abundant evidence to the effect that the greening of the world started by such thinkers as Naess and other contemporary pioneers is a fact. Admittedly, the journey towards truly averting planetary ecocide is complex and full of conflicting interests and setbacks, but it also involves quantum leaps and lucky breaks (Midttun and Witoszek 2016).

The Irish poet W. B. Yeats has captured the intricate relationship between change and stasis in his poem ‘Easter 1916’

Hearts with one purpose alone,  
Through summer and winter seem  
Enchanted to a stone,  
To trouble the living stream.

To attend to the symbols: the stream represents the wheeling energies of a live thought, the *Panta Rei* – or *everything flows* – in the tradition of Heraclitus. The stone is not merely a hardened opinion, an abstraction, or a dogma, and it doesn't ultimately matter how long the stone's already been lying there in the river, submerged by the flowing waters. For the stone actively troubles the stream, its stoniness is stubborn; it diverts and redirects and shapes the riverine flow.

*The stone's in the midst of all.*

There are some critics who claim that deep ecology has hardened over time and is now anachronistic: yet another stone to trouble the 'living stream' of the ever more complex contemporary environmental debate, ultimately just another bothersome obstacle with no ability to actually divert the flow of history. There are others – including exasperated pioneers of ecological philosophy such as Freya Mathews and J. Baird Callicott in this volume – who mourn over the detritus of the philosophy which, they claim, 'made nothing happen.'

We disagree with these despondent perceptions. History has taught us that the life and death of ideas – especially the fate of cultural and ideological programs and visions – is a process of rise, retreat and resurgence: a mosaic of climaxes and anti-climaxes. Over one and a half centuries ago Nietzsche boldly declared that God was dead. And indeed, for a while, many acolytes of the theory of secularization, from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann to James Turner, found abundant evidence to document just this argument (Berger 1967; Luckmann 1967; Turner 1985). However, the religious resurgence in the twenty-first century has mocked Nietzsche's dictum, perhaps best summed up by the contrary motto: 'Nietzsche is dead. Sincerely, God.' As Daniel Bell has argued in one of his clairvoyant essays: 'Culture is always a *ricorso*': an endless return of past stories and ideas (Bell 1991: 333). Accordingly, cultural innovation is less about creative destruction and more a process of constant and creative reimagining of images and visions that were 'forgotten' or prematurely thought to be buried or extinct. Think of the Romantic renaissance of Shakespeare after two centuries of oblivion, or the rediscovery of Spinoza or Lao-Tsu by Naess and many other twentieth century ecological thinkers. Or, to use a more malign example, consider the return to Teutonic mythology in Nazi symbolism or the resurrection of the imagery of the Battle of Kosovo (1448) during the twentieth century Balkan Wars.

In short, the real-life potency of seemingly dormant ideological or philosophical visions is sometimes cyclical and often unpredictable. It is no surprise that many architects of groundbreaking environmental visions – including some rueful pioneers of ecophilosophy invited to contribute this volume – are unaware of the intricate ways in which their ideas have penetrated into political or economic realms and spurred vibrant movements and trends, including the 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘green growth.’ Or, encapsulated in their insular cultural contexts, they may have overlooked the novel cosmovisions, such as those in Latin America, which have been either inspired by – or run parallel to – the original deep ecological thinking (see chapters 5 and 6 in this volume).

We contend that deep ecology has been a tacit *primus motor* in a series of social and environmental transformations which go back to the ‘heroic’ 1970s and 1980s. It started a *visionary cycle*, one which has gotten consolidated, motivated public interventions, even forged a hardcore, economic ‘product cycle’. To spell it out – there are reasons to believe that industrial learning for developing green technologies, as well as many conservation initiatives, would not have taken place had it not been for mobilizing green visions stemming from such diverse actors and movements as deep ecology, the Sierra Club, or the green, anti-nuclear movement in Germany. Such visions were initially dismissed as mere chimeras by the apostles of the carbon industry. But they proved crucial to the emergence of the agenda of ecological modernity that has driven incremental green innovation; witness the success of *Energiewende* in Germany, a genuine turnaround that started at the grassroots and then burgeoned, quickly reaching a critical mass that led to courageous public policy-decisions and technological innovation. As soon as the technology of renewables ‘colonized’ the mainstream markets, it has started feeding back to societies and enriching visions of a more humane, and greener planet.

But there are other emerging ramifications of ecophilosophy. Some contributions in this volume (see especially chapters 7 and 8) are audacious enough to ‘evolve the future’ of deep ecology by tapping into what has been called the *panpsychist turn* in philosophy. Panpsychism challenges the Galilean-Cartesian project which stripped matter of its sensory qualities, and insisted that only the firmly disembodied *res cogitans* possesses a genuinely interior dimension. In doing so, the materialist paradigm relegated everything other than the human mind to being ‘pure outside’. This dualistic solution to the fluid relationship between mind and body has been at the heart of the modern project from its inception. Today, it remains an open wound that many have diagnosed but few have been able to mend. Recent years, however, have seen a renewed curiosity and openness for panpsychic responses to what David Chalmers famously

coined the “hard problem”, evidenced for example by Thomas Nagels’ 2012 book *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*.

One of contributors to this volume, Arne Johan Vetlesen, in his 2015 book *The Denial of Nature*, has argued that many of these recent panpsychic articulations may actually not be *radical enough*: ‘Few philosophers have ventured beyond the body to consider nondualistic possibilities of matter *per se*’ (Vetlesen 2015: 194). Another writer in this issue, Freya Mathews, has discussed this problem at some length. Mathews covets a panpsychic position that would truly overcome the old duality and articulate a coherent mind-matter-unity. What would that be, Mathews asks, to posit an ‘inner experience’ inherent in all physicality, a ‘presence-to-itself’ in all matter? Mathews also suggests that such a radically nondualistic, panpsychist turn in philosophy would undermine the very foundations of modern civilization. In her 2003 book, *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism*, she writes that such a turn would completely re-orchestrate

the epistemological and spiritual orientation to the world that underpins it. Hence, although it is the environmental crisis that is calling us to this reorientation, the reorientation itself is much more far-reaching in scope than has thus far been acknowledged by even the most radical streams of the environmental movement. The reanimation entailed by panpsychism embraces materiality *per se*, and hence the mineral and the artefactual, not merely the biological or the natural. Panpsychism in the present context is thus not equivalent to ecologism; it encompasses but also exceeds a ‘deep ecological’ metaphysics (Mathews 2003: 28f; quoted in Vetlesen 2015: 195).

This volume takes a few steps toward that ambitious goal. If, as Mathew argues, any philosophical view that reunites materiality with mentality can be thought of as panpsychist, and if, as Vetlesen argues, any such view would help ‘dismantle the foundational dualism of Western thought’, then Tim Morton’s and Andreas Weber’s essays propose original paths to transcending the old dualism. *Feelings*, Weber suggests, may just be what allows us to experience ‘being matter *from the inside*’, and to find ourselves entangled with the whole. It is through inner experience, Weber further suggests, that “organisms reveal that ‘observations’ are not made by ‘observers’ about ‘objects’, but actually are the inward aspect of the world’s involvement with itself.” In this view, reality is deeply suffused and saturated with subjectivity. And our particularly human style of subjectivity is not evidence of our alienation from reality. It rather enables us to explore with greater subtlety the ways in which the whole is ever striving to be in touch with, and come to terms with, itself – a new twist in Naess’ quest for articulating ways in which the ecological self might come to realize itself.

This issue of *Worldviews* is thus representative of new – critical and creative – perceptions of deep ecology today. Paradoxically, the essays written by Western *animatueurs*

of deep ecology (especially Freya Mathews in this volume) strike the most rhapsodic note. In contrast, the contributions from the younger generation of American and European philosophers, as well as green philosophers coming for the South, testify to the enduring energy of deep ecology both as a body of thought and as a movement. They show that there are ‘spots of Naessianism’ as far as in the Andes, visions which speak of a green philosophy, lifestyle, and politics as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* which boldly experiment with alternatives to current versions of modernity. Further, the very presence of global grassroots environmental movements – including such influential mobilizations as 350.org, Deep Green Resistance, *Buen Vivir*, Transition Towns, Earthwatch, the Earth Charter Initiative, or Standing Rock, to name but a few – is in no small part due to the early impetus of that nonconformist environmental philosopher who spent much of his time up in his mountain cabin Tvergastein, pondering the flow of world events as he was surrounded on all sides by the ancient and seemingly timeless Arctic tundra of the Hardangervidda Plateau.

Up there, dwarf birches may have struggled for fifty years before reaching the height of a man’s ankle, and time can be measured by the imperceptible growth of green and black lichen edging out a modest living on eroding granite. Nature’s rhythm inspired in this mountaineer-philosopher an idiosyncratic perception of time and change. A radical landscape gave birth to a radical thought. Reading and writing by his cabin window at 1,500 meters above sea level after a morning climb to the summit of the Hallingskarvet Mountain, Naess’ imagination was drawn far and wide across a substantial portion of all of southern Norway: tens of thousands of square kilometers of mountains, deep gorges, and lush valleys teeming with evergreen forest. In this landscape of extremes, where the Hardangerjøkul Glacier still lingers from the most recent ice age, and death was never an abstract proposition - never farther away than a careless step, a sudden rockslide, or an avalanche - Naess’ radical philosophical proposals seemed to strangely fit. Where, if not here, could it seem perfectly self-evident that we must fundamentally and boldly rethink the very foundations of our relationship as humans to the planet? Where, if not here, would it appear obvious that thought and action must ever remain tightly coupled, and any deep questioning would ultimately need to translate into a commitment for concrete actions that would avert an ecological Armageddon?

Philosophically, Naess’ vision emerged from his dialogue with Spinoza, Far Eastern philosophies, as well as on the cosmologies of indigenous peoples from regions far unlike the one he himself felt most at home in. But clearly, ecophilosophy also has distinct vernacular roots (Witoszek 1998). For all its cross-pollination with wisdom traditions from distant locales, for all its cosmopolitan curiosity, openness, and syncretism, deep ecology is also uniquely, and

unapologetically Norwegian in its very pragmatism. It is at home in the native nature tradition, where, for a long time, people's life philosophy –both the one at the academy and the one on the ground – was a *friluft* philosophy, a philosophy of the 'open air': one which stemmed from the necessity to listen to nature's laws, adapt and build resilience. And this 'Norwegianness', this at-homeness in the natural world, is both a point of ecophilosophy's strong attraction and a source of its limitations. Its social vision springs from a culture which has relatively limited experience with civilizational collapse, and whose proud and free peasants lived for a long time a relatively harmonious, pastoral life on the margins of a turbulent continent. Ultimately, it rests on an optimistic belief in a cosmic whole where every organism - from the King to your local friendly wolf - is a good, self-restrained Protestant citizen.

And yet, as this volume shows, Naess' philosophy has never been a mere utopian 'neverland' out of touch with historic eventfulness. It was not created as a fancy story from a place of privilege. Neither was it meant to simply carve out a humble, learned existence inside philosophical journals. Naess' thought came to life, and continues to live, as much in philosophical dialogue as in what our contributor Eduardo Gudynas calls 'ethics in the blood' (see chapter 6). As a seasoned mountaineer, Naess knew that to accomplish the seemingly impossible feat of summiting a vertical ascent, one not only needed a daring vision but also had to give attention to the gritty, piecemeal work that would lead from here to there. Failure to attend to either would be fatal. A truism, surely, but one resonant with Scandinavia's topography, where the art and craft of making a living had always demanded a peculiar mix of vision and pragmatism, boldness and humility, as well as a die-hard confidence of success even in the face of ludicrous odds.

To sum up: This issue is not designed to offer an apologia for 'Naessianism', nor is it our intention to predict deep ecology's future. We have gathered voices who engage in critical – even hard-hitting – dialogues with Naess' philosophy, as much as with the concrete impacts his thought may, or – as some authors argue – failed to have had, on the ground. We suggest that this may be the best way to encounter deep ecology: not by calcifying it, not by erecting monuments in its name, and not by allowing it to quietly live on as an outdated dogma. The way to renew it is via the same skepticism, open-mindedness, and curiosity that Naess himself advocated as his fundamental philosophical stance.



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