

Home, Ecological Self and Self-Realization: Understanding Asymmetrical Relationships Through Arne Næss's Ecosophy

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Abstract In this paper, we discuss Næss's concept of ecological self in light of the process of identification and the idea of self-realization, in order to understand the asymmetrical relationship among human beings and nature. In this regard, our hypothesis is that Næss does not use the concept of the ecological self to justify ontology of processes, or definitively overcome the idea of individual entities in view of a transpersonal ecology, as Fox argues. Quite the opposite: Næss's ecological self is nothing but an echo of the theme of the home and of belonging to a place (i.e., dwelling), and, therefore, it deals with a positive relationship of the individual with its environment. This allows us to reshape environmental ethics starting from environmental ontology, and recalling the primacy of the latter on the former: the very theoretic background of an ethical view might only be a suitable interpretation of human nature and properties, starting from a relational viewpoint that may help understanding us our asymmetrical relationships with the world.

Keywords Arne Næss · Ecological self · Asymmetrical relationships · Self-realization · Transpersonal ecology · Environmental ethics and ontology

Introduction

The philosophical speculation of Arne Næss, the Norwegian father of the deep ecology movement, brought about significant change not only to the contemporary environmental philosophy and ethics, but also to the realm of philosophical

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anthropology. In fact, the environmental breakthrough supported by Næss allowed the nature of human beings to be considered again in light of their position in the world, thus shifting the focus of our reflection from the question ‘who is he/she?’ to ‘where is he/she?’.

His philosophical background helps us to think about the asymmetry of the human relationship to ‘nature,’ focusing on the idea that human beings maintain a peculiar position in the world, without being “apart from nature” (Blok 2015: 928). This asymmetry is mainly given by the fact that the human self can only come to know itself through others and this constitute its place, as we will try to explain later on.

This turning point has been widely supported by contemporary phenomenological anthropology (Valera 2013: 174–179). In this sense, Max Scheler’s philosophical speculation about the human place in the cosmos (Scheler 2009) is an important example. In this regard, Scheler states: “In a certain sense all of the central problems of philosophy can be said to lead us back to the questions of what man is and what the metaphysical position and status is which he occupies within the totality of being, world and God” (Scheler 1978: 184). Continuing on the same line of thought, we could say that even more than Scheler, the German philosopher Helmuth Plessner (1928) contributed to the development of the topic of the human/environment relation within the field of philosophical anthropology, resuming von Uexküll’s (1909) speculations about the relation between *Welt* and *Umwelt*.

We can argue that Næss radicalizes Scheler and Plessner’s intuitions, drawing on a strong critique of previous anthropologies: “In this conception of the maturity of the self, Nature is largely left out. Our immediate environment, our home (where we belong as children), and the identification with nonhuman living beings are largely ignored” (Næss 2005a: 516). To grasp the anthropological structure in its totality, though, we must go back to nature and its contemplation: in Næss’s thought, one can interpret human being’s existence with a broader perspective only through this filter. From his perspective, the interpretation of the human being as a living being who is totally isolated, unfamiliar to the surrounding environment and not contaminated by the outside world is completely reductionist and considered inappropriate for formulating an adequate anthropology and a coherent cosmology.

In Næss’s thought, the human being is a *natural* being that originated in the world of nature, like every other living being, and has a well-defined nature. In this regard, his philosophical speculation is a revival of the idea of the human nature in the environmental field. In a fairly surprising way for the context of contemporary philosophy of ecology, Næss revisits the Aristotelian idea that “each life form has its own nature, which determines what kind of life gives maximum satisfaction” (Næss 1984: 9). We will address later the theme of self-realization (or ‘maximum satisfaction’); for now, we should just remember the existence of a ‘given nature’ of all living things, highlighting that this nature has a certain relation with their potentialities. We have to understand,—and this is the aim of the paper—why in Næss’s works there is “supremacy of environmental ontology and realism over environmental ethics” (Næss 2005a: 527). This thesis also should imply that every form of life tends to (and strives to) be what it is, and it is only the knowledge of its own reality that can indicate how to develop and flourish.

The supremacy of ontology on ethics (Zimmermann 1993: 198) would also indicate the primacy of knowledge on behavior: it is necessary to fully understand the potential of a life-form and to define its fundamental mode of action in order to respect its essence. It is clear that this task is for human beings only, since they are the only living beings able to understand and recognize the essence of every living being, as well as to allow for its flourishing. This consideration confirms the idea that an appropriate environmental ethic has to be ‘anthropogenic’ (Rolston 1994: 14), i.e., it has to be necessarily conceived and implemented by human persons. We must be careful, though: being anthropogenic does not make it ‘anthropocentric’ yet (Valera 2014a: 189–190).

All these considerations bring us reconsidering more deeply environmental and agricultural ethics in light of environmental and agricultural ontology, i.e., of an adequate anthropological and cosmological view that may give birth to an ethical thinking. The fundamental question, then, should not be about policies or behaviors, but rather about ‘nature’ (i.e., essence) in itself: “A reflection on what humanity and nature *are* in themselves is necessary. We agree with radical environmentalists, too, that are in need of an ontological shift” (Blok 2014: 314–315).

For this reason, we think, together with Næss—as we should see through this paper—that the theoretical background of an ethical view might only be a suitable ontology and an adequate interpretation of human nature and properties, starting from a relational viewpoint (Valera and Bertolaso 2016) that may help understand our asymmetrical relationships with the world.

Human Beings as a Part of Nature: Home and Dwelling

Let us now deepen the issue of the human being as a being consisting of a fundamental relationship with its environment. This implies that we can no longer say that the environment starts where the boundary of our skin ends, because we ‘live *an environment*’ much more than ‘we live *in it*.’ In this regard, Næss states: “The human self is then basically an ecological self, that is, a kind of part of ecosystems” (Næss 2005b: 222).

The first consequence of this idea is a change in the concept of environment that no longer coincides with the simple outline of the human substance. The environment is instead something that constantly forms relationships that are essential to the human being itself. In this regard, it is important to recall the idea of *Heimat*, which conserves clear Heideggerian connotations: as Roger Scruton (2012: 228) clearly explains, “Human beings [...] live in the ‘natural world’ to which their primary attitude is not one of explaining, but of belonging. This natural world is a ‘surrounding world’ (*Umwelt*) and a ‘world of life’ (*Lebenswelt*).”

This idea of the environment as an integral part of the constitution of the human meaning is translated by Næss into the concept of ‘Home:’ “Home as a positive, value-weighted place can be defined here in part as the relationship with nature” (Næss 1989: 62). ‘Household’—*oikos*—and ‘dwelling’ are truly important for philosophical anthropology and contemporary environmental ethics, and might not

have been adequately¹ considered in academic circles, especially in the North American context. Perhaps Heidegger's philosophical speculation was able to give a proper foundation to the idea of such a co-essential relationship between human beings and space (Heidegger 1975: 154), i.e., the concept of 'dwelling.' We can say, in a sense, that Næss's philosophy resumes Heidegger's speculation about the concept of 'home' and 'dwelling,' which could be defined as the human possibility to share spaces with other living beings. In this regard, it is worth noticing that, both in Næss and Heidegger, "home [is] not a building," (Næss 2005f: 339) since dwelling does not consist of a simple 'being on Earth.' The consequence of this idea is that "our current '*unheimlich*'" is caused by 'our inability to dwell' (Lavery and Whitehead 2012: 113), that is, we suffer "from a place-corrosive process" (Næss 2005f, 339). The current crisis, therefore, would not be primarily a lack of homes or resources—albeit, in a certain way, it has something to do with these two aspects.

Through dwelling human beings open spaces and create new worlds. They rediscover the actual meaning of things and establish essential links with spaces through memory, artistic production, construction of places, etc.; to put it briefly, through the act of changing the world. We can now see how the relationship between human beings and the world can never be neutral. Through dwelling, human beings always generate a sense—i.e., a meaning, a way of understanding reality that may change the world in an irreversible way. This precisely means 'building:' for this reason, building and dwelling theoretically go together. Therefore, the 'superficial' existing tension among conservationists and developers makes no sense (Scruton 2012: 233), since "*oikos* is not merely a vague metaphor for ecology, but that built households provide a key to understanding the household of nature" (Anker 2003: 131). In this regard, there is no dwelling without building, and vice versa: "The word (homeland) is regarded here in an essential sense, [...] in terms of the history of Being" (Heidegger 1993: 241).

As I mentioned above, thus, dwelling can never be considered as a simple 'being on Earth:' there is no human posture that can be indifferent to the environment, and, at the same time, there is no environment that can be indifferent to the human being. Næss translates the concept expressed above as such: "'To have a home,' 'to belong,' 'to live' and many other similar expressions suggest fundamental milieu factors involved in the shaping of an individual's sense of self and self-respect. The identity of the individual, 'that I am something,' is developed through interaction with a broad manifold, both organic and inorganic. There is no completely isolatable I, no isolatable social unit. To distance oneself from nature and the 'natural' is to distance oneself from a part of that which the I is built up. Its 'identity,' 'what the individual I is,' and, thereby, sense of self and self-respect, are broken down. Some milieu factors, e.g. mother, father, family, one's first companions, play a central role in the development of an I, but so do home and the surroundings of home" (Næss 1989: 164).

This issue is particularly important for contemporary environmental philosophy—as well as for philosophical anthropology—since it points out that in the home

¹ We are not saying, here, that it has not been considered yet, but that it has not yet been *adequately* considered, given the importance of the issue.

(i.e., in the world made by human beings, who dwell in it) there cannot be any separation or dualism: the human subject creates a home since it already dwells, being a part of nature. We can therefore avoid the dichotomy between human being and nature (Rothenberg 1996: 255), starting from the definition of a human being as ‘the being who dwells in the home,’ overcoming, at the same time, the contemporary polarity between anthropocentrism and biocentrism. As Scruton (2012: 237) correctly points out, “the human psyche is [...] intrinsically *concerned with home*.” In this regard, the Heideggerian Being-in-the-world is a fundamental tool to interpret Næss’s thinking (and contemporary environmental ethics positions): “In displacing the subject-object dichotomy that circumscribes environmental theory and practice, Heidegger’s thought opens up a horizon of possibilities of other ways/beginnings/trajectories for environmentalism.² What would it mean to approach all environmental issues from a fundamental understanding of Being-in-the-world on Earth?” (DeLuca 2005: 74).

The premise of this statement is the concept of identification: the human being can create a home because it identifies itself with the place in which it has chosen to dwell. Humans cannot dwell on the entire Earth, but only specific places on Earth as home. The ‘ecologically’ universal (the Earth) should be reached only through the ‘circumstantially’ particular (the Home/the Place). In this process of universalizing the particular, it follows that this place becomes the Place (Næss 2005f: 339). Næss feels a particular affection for the idea of ‘Place,’ and it is for this reason that Næss’s philosophy of life has a deep connection to his own land (Anker 2003: 138; Anker and Witoszek 1998), Norway: within this environment, unique in the world, his philosophical speculation has flourished, and it probably could not have flourished in the same way anywhere else. As Anker (2003: 140) highlights, recalling the ‘philosophy of place’ developed by Næss (but not only), “the manner of thinking about the household of nature reflects the house in which the philosopher of nature lived.” This is also the reason in his writings why Næss often points out the tragedy of being eradicated from a place, as what occurred in Norway immediately after the eighties: “If people are relocated [...] they also realize (but too late) that their home-place was a part of themselves and that they identified with features of that place” (Næss 2005a: 521). Once we recognize this essential relationship between the human being and the world in the concept of ‘Home,’ the tragedy of being eradicated from a place coincides with the tragedy of losing a part of one’s own identity. If the human subject is always *in the world* and *with the world*, its relation with the environment is always something decisive, avoiding dualisms, since “home is not just any place” (Scruton 2012: 239). Therefore, to break this relation also means to break the relation that the subject forms with its own self (Scruton 2012: 229–230).

Even in this regard, the concept of ‘Home’ developed by Næss maintains certain connections with the Heideggerian idea of dwelling, since “to be at home

² It is worth noticing that many important authors in Deep Ecology interpreted Heidegger mainly from a political point of view, and, for this reason, his works seem incompatible with the anti-anthropocentric and anti-fascist worldview of Deep Ecology. It is quite famous the idea of a “Nazification of Nature” developed by Zimmermann (Lavery and Whitehead 2012: 112–113; Scruton 2012: 235).

everywhere is to experience the freedom that allows our disclosure of Being” (Botha 2003: 164) and the eradication always means ‘a deprivation of freedom.’

The Ecological Self: The Self of a Self-Realized Being

The topic of the ‘Home’ deals with the human existential condition and its ability to empathize with its place, recognizing how the relation the human being has interwoven with the external world is always constitutive of its identity. This issue, far from being only the result of an existential reflection, is the translation of a specific ontology, which draws inspiration from the continuous reassessment of the subject’s deep experience (Valera 2014b: 650–654). Due to these specific roots, we can say that Næss’s environmental philosophy is a *deep* philosophy (Valera 2016: 17–25). A superficial reading of our position in the cosmos—i.e., an interpretation that does not try to discover the ultimate reasons for our being in the world—could not possibly grasp the real human essence.

The newness offered to contemporary thought by Næss—in line with much of phenomenological philosophy—shifts the focus of research from ‘I’ to ‘Thou,’ i.e., tries to interpret the structure of ‘I’ in view of its relationship with ‘Thou.’ The identification process, namely the deep relation of ‘I’ with the environment, makes the movement of displacing from ‘I’ to ‘Thou’ possible: “One experiences oneself as a genuine part of all life. Each living being is understood as a goal in itself, in principle on equal footing with one’s own ego. It also entails a transition from I–it attitudes to I–thou attitudes—to use Buber’s terminology” (Næss 1989: 174).

In I/Thou relationships, Næss points out the real anthropological structure, namely the ability of the human subject to leave its boundaries in order to understand otherness. In light of this point, it is possible to better understand Næss’s criticism against previous anthropologies: they are guilty of having reduced human essence to mere ‘ego,’ leaving an image of the human being as an immature and fully self-centered being. In this regard, the immaturity condemned by Næss would not only be at the level of moral misunderstanding, but at the level of the inability to grasp the anthropological sense.

These considerations presuppose that there is a significant philosophical difference between “the concepts of ego, self, and Self (the deep, comprehensive and ecological self)” (Næss 1989: 175), and that these three concepts are the steps that lead to the full maturation of the self. The movement that characterizes the displacing of the ego from itself coincides with the transition from the ego to the self in order to achieve the extended self (or Self). Næss outlines the process in the following way: “Traditionally, the maturity of the self has been considered to develop through three stages: from ego to social self (including the ego), and from social self to a metaphysical self (including the social self). [...] I tentatively introduce [...] the concept of ecological self. We may be said to be in, and of, Nature from the very beginning of our selves. Society and human relationships are important, but our self is much richer in its constitutive relationships. These relationships are not just those we have with other people and the human community” (Næss 2005a: 516).

The above passage is an excellent summary of the path taken so far: through the process of identification with otherness, the self perceives the world as a home and achieves the ‘ecological self,’ i.e., its real anthropological structure. The ‘I’ is essentially a relationship and openness to otherness: “Because of an inescapable process of identification with others, with increasing maturity the self is widened and deepened. We ‘see ourselves in others’” (Næss 2005a: 516).

From this assumption, it is also possible to understand the next step taken by Næss: in order to achieve the real anthropological structure—that is, to achieve maturity, with a language closer to the one of the Norwegian philosopher—relations should be safeguarded and deepened. This argument helps us fully understand Næss’s philosophical view as a whole: self-realization does not necessarily involve the subjugation of others. On the contrary, the human being needs the other—human and non-human—in order to reach its realization, since “our self-realization is hindered if the self-realization of others with whom we identify is hindered” (Næss 2005a: 516). The steps that lead Næss to this conclusion are described as follow:

1. We usually underestimate our nature, since “we tend to confuse our self with the narrow ego” (Næss 2005a: 515).
2. This underestimation comes from an immature (in the sense of incomplete) conception of ourselves: human nature naturally tends to identify with the other selves “in *all* major relationships” (Næss 2005a: 516).
3. Within these relationships, the human relation with nature is often overlooked, and with it, the possible identification of the human being with all living beings; the notion of ‘ecological self’ simply aims to emphasize the human opening beyond the boundaries of the human world (Næss 2005a: 516).
4. Every living being tends to its realization, i.e., to the fulfillment of its potentiality, which is different for each nature.
5. Human realization depends on the implementation of its potential identification with otherness. Through this process, the self is ‘widened and deepened’ (Næss 2005a: 516), so that the realization of the other does not become an obstacle to my achievement, but a stimulus.

The reflection developed by Næss, and briefly sketched here, brings us to the following consideration: every living being tends to its realization, which depends on the nature (i.e., potentialities) of the form of life itself. As we have already pointed out, each life-form has its own nature, which determines what kind of life gives maximum satisfaction to it. The recovery of the Aristotelian terminology ‘*kata-physin*’ becomes central to Næss in order to ground a discourse that has nature as the point of reference for human behavior, and that, at the same time, paves the way to the consideration of every living being’s proper nature worthy of respect. Once again, we should appreciate the implicit proximity of Næss’s thinking to that of Heidegger: both would agree that “true dwelling is not an imposition of the self on an unknown landscape, but rather a preserving and a safeguarding of each thing in its nature” (Botha 2003: 165). The supremacy of the ontology over ethics hence is reiterated, as well as the idea that ‘nature’ (understood in both cosmological and ontological terms) is not silent or value-free. A value-free nature,

as Jonas (1984: 236) points out, is a pure dogma, since nature always implies subjectivity. This aspect has been often overlooked in contemporary environmental philosophy, and it is worthy of major attention.

We can also understand the reason why Næss uses the principle of self-realization as the unique criterion that regulates living beings' life (Næss 2005c: 485): all activities can be interpreted as a form of approaching the ultimate goal of life, or as a transition from potentiality to actuality in order to preserve (*perseverare*, to use Spinoza's terms) one's specific nature (Næss 2005d: 414).

However, in our opinion, one particular point remains unsolved in Næss's speculation: why should we consider the selfish and self-centered perception as an immature human phase, and not the contrary, as the most natural and developed one? Why, in principle, we should not consider the others, and thus also the relation with the others, as the starting point of hell, to borrow a famous image by Sartre? If the other is indeed a limit to my freedom, which seeks to be absolute, it is not clear why the human being should identify with otherness, thus betraying its ego and meeting its destruction. In Sartre's thought, every meeting is indeed constantly under the sign of a 'mutual theft': "By limiting me, each constitutes the limit of the Other, and deprives him, as he deprives me, of an objective aspect of the world" (Sartre 2004: 103); and therefore "the essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not the *Mitsein*; it is conflict" (Sartre 1978: 429) and this "conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others" (Sartre 1978: 364). The conflict as fate is the consequence of the idea that relations are actually impossible.

Unfortunately, Næss has not considered this latest aspect to its further implications, and the idea of an essentially positive relationship seems to be defined, therefore, more as an initial hypothesis than as a result of a philosophical argumentation. It is evident, however, that this is a crucial issue in order to understand Næss's environmental ethics, since the following proposals—for example, the idea that the realization of the other promotes self-realization—derive entirely from that assumption. In this regard, the philosophy of perception developed by Næss is too optimistic and lacks in sufficient argumentative elaboration. This leads to an essentially optimistic anthropology—human nature is essentially positive, even though human behaviors may accidentally be destructive. These claims should have been further explained or justified in his works. This is a particularly important point, since much of Næss's ontological and ethical considerations depends on his theory of perception and anthropology—for instance, the process of self-realization is logically dependent on the process of identification.

An important point, however, has to be highlighted: Næss's philosophy does not deny "the extraordinary human condition" (Holy-Luczaj 2015: 58), and this would allow us to provide a certain interpretation (Avery 2004: 47) of Næss's ecosophy in light of Heidegger's philosophy (too anthropocentric—Dombrowski 1994);³

³ Another interesting point regards the political character of Heidegger's philosophical speculation—and not Næss's one—particularly concerning with the ambivalent notion of 'home' and the terms '*Heim*, *heimlich* and *Heimat*;' in this regard, we agree with this statement by Lavery and Whitehead (2012: 112): "It is important to point out [...] that the exclusionary logic connected with Heidegger's notion of home is inherent in his philosophy itself and not simply due to his political orientations."

speaking of human condition (and human nature), Næss wrote: “No other life-form in the universe whose nature is such that, under favorable circumstances, it would more or less inevitably develop a broad and deep concern for life conditions in general” (Næss 1984: 8). In this regard, Næss is criticizing certain human behaviors, rather than human nature, and this leads us to reconsider the importance of the idea of an individual (and, at the same time, ecological) self. The last step is to demonstrate how these two concepts (ecological and individual self) are not necessarily conflicting.

Against a Transpersonal Ecological Self to Understand Asymmetric Relationships

The link between the concept of human maturity and identification with otherness is therefore expressed by Næss through the concept of ‘ecological self’⁴: “I shall offer only a single sentence that resembles a definition of the ‘ecological self.’ The ecological self is a person’s ‘process of identification’” (Næss 2005a: 517).

The ‘ecological self’ essentially recalls the human being’s constitutive opening to something other than itself, or, more precisely, the need for a non-closure to the relationship with the other. This concept is, once again, the possible answer to a prevailing atomism, which turned the human being into an island, with ‘no windows in the world.’ Thus, we should not interpret this argument in a shallow manner. With the concept of ‘ecological self’ Næss does not want to call into question the individuality of every living being (and in particular of the human being), but only to reiterate its opening. The notion of ‘ecological self’ is not certainly easy or immediate to interpret; therefore, to avoid hasty interpretations which may constitute the prelude to ontology of processes⁵ or to systemic or holistic anthropological points of view (Capra 1996), it should be examined in more detail. This is an important point to highlight, since the topic has not been interpreted by some of Næss’s followers according to his original intention: being relational does not necessarily imply being processual (Valera and Bertolaso 2016).

In particular, Warwick Fox has concisely expressed the central insight of deep ecology, from which it is possible to notice the dependence of his interpretation on the aforementioned ontology of processes and to a systemic/holistic approach: “It is the idea that we can make no firm ontological divide in the field of existence: that there is no bifurcation in reality between the human and the non-human realms [...]. To the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness” (Fox 1984: 196). Therefore, according to Fox (2006), the question of individuality—or of the identity of indiscernibles—would be impossible to sustain in Næss’s

⁴ We used in a nearly synonymic manner the two concepts of identification and maturation: in fact, as Reitan (1996: 414) pointed out, “Næss takes this process of identification to parallel the process of maturation.”

⁵ We are referring, in particular, to Rosi Braidotti’s (via Deleuze) intuition, which constitutes the theoretical background to posthumanism: the paradigm shift proposed here consists of the abandonment of ontology of individuals to reach an ontology which has as its theoretical center the idea of process (Braidotti 2006; Braidotti 2013).

ontology (and anthropology), since the idea of the ecological self needs a holistic theoretical foundation. Fox does not interpret of Næss carefully enough when he writes: “Næss’s philosophical sense of deep ecology refers to the this-worldly realization of as expansive a sense of self as possible in a world in which selves and things-in-the-world are conceived as processes. Since this approach is one that involves the realization of a sense of self that extends beyond (or that is trans–) one’s egoic, biographical, or personal sense of self, the clearest, most accurate, and most informative term for this sense of deep ecology is, in my view, transpersonal ecology” (Fox 1995: 197). However, Næss clarified several times this point, giving more emphasis to a fundamental recognition of individuality. If deep ecology might be compatible with a certain type of holism, it is clearly “incompatible with the kind of holism which obliterates individuality, particularly that of individuals and single specimens of any species” (Næss 1999: 272). Also Diehm’s interpretation supports this argument: “Næss [...] declares that his thought places a ‘strong emphasis on individuals,’ and goes so far as to say that he is ‘in favor of letting point one of the eight points (of the deep ecology platform) refer only to individuals.’ [...] Here we see that in the gestaltist view the individuals are indeed discernible, [...] but that at the same time we must recognize the relational or gestalt character of these individuals, such that our concern for individuals must take note of the networks of relations that allow them to flourish” (Diehm 2002: 31). Even Kheel (2008: 178–191), although distant from Næss’s thought on a few points, confirms the hypothesis of the centrality of the concept of individual in Næss’s deep ecology: “Næss recognizes the ontological distinctness of individual selves” (Kheel, 2008: 191). Finally, even Næss took the distance from Fox’s radical positions, which necessarily lead to overcoming the ego (i.e., to a transpersonal ecology): “An ecologically-oriented friend, the author Warwick Fox, has put it approximately in this way: ‘I feel like a leaf on the tree of life.’ But to me, this seems a far-too-close relationship between leaf and tree. I feel more of an individual than would be allowed to a leaf. I feel more like a little tree in a huge forest” (Næss and Haukeland 2002: 101). Similarly, Fox’s expression ‘drops in the ocean’ can be misleading if it is understood as the drops thereby lose their individuality: “At any level of realization of potentials, the individual egos remain separate. They do not dissolve like individual drops in the ocean. Our care continues ultimately to concern the individuals, not any collectivity. But the individual is not, and will not be isolatable, whatever exists has a gestalt character” (Næss 1989: 195). It is clear that there is a difficult balance to maintain: on the one hand, we have the ocean of organic and mystical visions; on the other, the abyss of atomistic individualism. At the basis of the notion of ecological self, Næss does not place the wish to go beyond the concept of an ontologically-closed individual being—as Warren (1999: 265–269) points out, too, greatly emphasizing the lack of understanding in Fox, Session and Devall’s rereading of the theme of individuality—but rather he places the need to accurately describe the relevance of the category of relationship and the mutual influence of the self with the environment (Diehm 2002: 30).⁶

⁶ Diehm (2002: 31) continues: “I believe we can find arguments in gestalt ontology in favor of the distinguishability of individuals.”

That point can be more easily understood in light of the process of identification (Booth 1996) aforementioned, which is the human ability to deepen itself, leading to identification with the other. It is thus possible to interpret the process of identification as a reaffirmation of the importance of individuality in Næss: “He stresses that even in identification one must recognize that self and others are ‘different individuals’” (Diehm 2002: 32). This hypothesis is confirmed in Næss’s writings, where he recalls that “the identification process leads deeper into Nature as a whole, but also deeper into unique features of particular beings. It does not lead away from the singular and finite” (Næss 1977: 51).

If it is true that, through this process, Næss aims to definitively overcome the dichotomy I/Thou, which denies the possibility of recognizing the other as part of one’s self—therefore eliminating any separation and any ‘natural enmity’—on the other, it is also appropriate to consider the identification process as a way of strengthening and making the self ‘mature.’ It is in light of the previous interpretation that the idea of ‘expansive self’ (Næss 2005e: 119) does not sound as the possibility of the annihilation of ego boundaries, in favor of a fluidization and mystic loss of the individual being. Hence, identification is a process of ‘widening’ of the self, rooted in relationality, requiring the recognition of one’s own individuality.

In our opinion, ‘self-realization’ is a reaffirmation of the primacy of the individual over the whole at the ontological level—the ultimate principle in Ecosophy T is just the non-derived norm ‘Self-realization!’, and, if it were not so, our hypothesis would be at least inconsistent.

This assertion, however, needs two further qualifications.

First, the ultimate norm ‘Self-realization!’ is central only in Ecosophy T, and not in the platform of the deep ecology movement. Instead, some of Næss’s successors have considered it as a principle of deep ecology, thus incorrectly interpreting his view. In this regard, Næss (1986: 19) points out: “An idea of Self-realization [...] has not been proposed by me as an adequate expression of the central message of the whole movement. ‘Self-realization’ is central in the sense of the only non-derived norm in my Ecosophy T.” And even Sessions (1995: 190) states: “Considerable confusion has arisen when this psychological process or thesis of Self-Realization is taken to be an identifying characteristic of the Deep Ecology movement. The ‘wide identification’ process is not only a part of Næss’s Ecosophy T, it is also the basis of Warwick Fox’s ‘transpersonal ecology’ (that is, it is a Level I ecosophy and not a part of the Deep Ecology platform at Level II). Thus, the Self-Realization norm or thesis is not an identifying characteristic of the Deep Ecology movement!”. Although it is true that this principle is not distinctive of deep ecology, but only of Ecosophy T, on the other hand it is also possible to point out an incorrect interpretation of Næss’s writings, as emphasized by Warren: the process of Self-realization is not so much a ‘psychological’ matter (and, in this sense, it has nothing in common with Fox’s interpretation), but rather, it is an ethical issue, or, *prima facie*, an ontological one. Every human being, just like any other living being—tends to realize its nature, and this is not only a psychological movement, but an ethical enterprise, starting from certain ontological proprieties.

Second, we need to point out that the principle of self-realization concerns at the same time ethics and ontology. Through the ultimate norm ‘Self-realization!’, Næss states that every human being has a project to be completed, an ‘ultimate goal’ (Næss 2005a: 528) that coincides with the development of its potential, i.e., of its nature: “The most important feature of self-realization, as compared with pleasure and happiness, is its dependence on a certain view of human capacities (or better, human potentialities). Again, this implies a particular view of human nature. In practice, it does not imply a general doctrine of human nature. That is the work of philosophical fields of research. An individual whose attitudes reveal that he or she takes self-realization to be the ultimate or fundamental goal in life has to have a view of his or her nature and potentialities, and the more one’s nature and potentialities are realized, the more self-realization there is” (Næss 2005a: 529). The question of the ultimate goal (or Self-realization) is first of all a matter of ontological nature, and only consequently an ethical one (Næss 2005a: 528–529). This means that, even though ontology has a primacy on ethics, ethics continues to play an independent role, although bound (and related) to a precise ontology. It is not a mere deduction of ethics from ontology, but rather, a “derivation” (a logical derivation) of certain norms and actions from a set of principles (which may differ for every person, certainly, but the derivational structure still remains). The derivational character of his system (Næss 1995)—even though Næss states that we should not take (Næss 2005f: 48) this aspect of his total view too seriously—allows us to improve our understanding of the relationship between ethics and ontology in a more adhering manner, thus confirming what has been said so far.

The issue of Self-realization concerns a certain idea of human nature (or of human potential), even before a certain way of assessing the relations between human beings and their environment (Booth 2013). Reitan goes even further in the interpretation of this principle: if it is true that this ultimate norm concerns a realization of human potential, and human nature is characterized by rationality, then through Self-realization the human being achieves an extension of its rationality. He writes: “The ecological Self is the realization of the potential inherent in human nature; if we regard rationality (broadly conceived) as a significant component of human nature, [...] there is a reason to think that Self-realization is a part of actualizing our rational nature” (Reitan 1996: 415).

Conclusions: Ontology, Ethics and Environment

In conclusion, starting from a reading of Næss’s works, we can say that essentially his main objective is not to go beyond the boundaries of the self in order to annihilate or dissolve the human being in the whole, thus achieving a transpersonal ecology (or a transpersonal ecological self), as Fox argues. Even if Næss’s ontology has been largely influenced by Whitehead (Palmer 1998: 164–211), we should not simply affirm that “since individuals are ‘knots’ or ‘centers of interactions,’ their solidity disappears” (Palmer 1998: 174), as we have already pointed out. On the contrary, Næss’s aim is to constantly reaffirm the primacy of ontology over ethics, namely the supremacy of the so-called Gestalt ontology on environmental ethics, in

order to achieve a ‘deepened realism’ (Næss 2005a: 527). In this sense, the interpretation of Næss’s works in light of the Heideggerian thought, as we tried to suggest with reference to the issue of dwelling, offers an important argument, as Howe (1993: 94) correctly argued: “Heidegger’s ontology may contribute to deep ecology [...] by cultivating a new perspective on the theme of interrelatedness between man and the natural environment.”

Nevertheless, we cannot consider Arne Næss’s philosophy as a simple application of Heidegger’s thought to the environmental field. More specifically, Næss’s philosophy develops part of Heidegger’s ontology into a new environmental philosophy. His environmental ethics, including its axiology and prescriptive indications, are dependent upon his broader environmental philosophy. For these reasons, his philosophical speculation can neither be defined as an environmental ethics (in an analytic sense) nor an environmental philosophy (in a continental sense) *tout court*, even if it is closer to the latter.

The relationship between environmental philosophy and ethics in Næss sheds some light on another crucial tenet of his philosophy, namely, the grounding of environmental ethics. Næss’s view is frankly derivational (Næss 1995): ontology, i.e. the point of view that tells us what nature is, is necessary in order to ground environmental ethics. This derivational character of his system (Næss 2005f: 48) constitutes, thus, an advancement toward a deeper environmental philosophy: an environmental ethics has to be logically consistent with some ontological premises in order to be prescriptive.

In this sense, it is worth focusing on Næss’s philosophical speculation about ‘human nature’ and ‘human potentialities,’ as the best example of the relation between ontology and ethics: the mature self—the ecological self—crosses its borders to enrich and empower its own being, since it is able to identify with the other self, and, above all, with a higher degree of self-realization. The self brings, thus, the others (living and non-living) in its home, making this relation part of its home, without any dualism, and without losing its ‘solidity.’ Starting from this perspective, it seems possible to develop an environmental ethics based on environmental ontology,⁷ which might recognize, at the same time, the individuality of the self and the asymmetry in its relation with the other individuals.

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⁷ For this reason, “Deep Ecology can be thought [...] as a metaphysics of ethics rather than an environmental ethics” (de Jonge 2016).

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