

Depth, Ecology, and the Deep Ecology Movement: Arne Næss's Proposal for the Future

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The aim of this paper is to focus on the idea of depth developed by Arne Næss, which is related both to his research methodology and some of its anthropological/cosmological implications. Far from being purely a psychological dimension (as argued by Warwick Fox), in Næss's perspective, the subject of depth is a methodological and ontological issue that underpins and lays the framework for the deep ecology movement. We cannot interpret the question of "depth" without considering the "relational ontology" that he himself has developed in which the "ecological self" is viewed as a "relational union within the total field." Based on this point of view, I propose that we are able to reinterpret the history of the deep ecology movement and its future, while rereading its politics, from the issue of depth.

INTRODUCTION: REVISITING ARNE NÆSS FOR CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE

Why is it necessary to reexplore the issue of depth in the context of current environmental crisis? How can this concept help to develop current policies capable of respecting the environment, without succumbing to the well-known catastrophic or apocalyptic excesses? I would like to answer these questions in this article while aiming to find out if Arne Næss's proposal can be considered substantial in the context of today's environmental discourse. My objective is to show how our political view can be reconsidered in light of a fitting philosophical argument based on a very clear theoretical proposal, such as Næss's, that is known by the majority of studies on environmental ethics. To this effect, the Norwegian thinker's proposal is particularly radical (in a good way), given that it asserts it is not possible to change actions (and, therefore, change policies) without a preceding change in worldview.

Within this theory of action, which, in contrast to the thinking of many philosophers from the postmodern era, links the action (meaning the "ought-to-be") with what "is," it is possible to rediscover the predominance of environmental ontology over environmental ethics, as indicated by Næss himself, meaning, the predominance of what is over what ought to be. In this regard, as I will point out in the conclusion of this article, Næss's agenda is not so much a "political" or "ethical" agenda, but rather an "ontological agenda," and at the same time, "anthropological." However, to understand this assertion, it is imperative to have a clear grasp on the issue of depth outlined by

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the Norwegian philosopher's research method, and it is the pinnacle of an innovative worldview that aims to change the order of things.

THE DEPTH OF DEEP ECOLOGY: IN SEARCH OF A DEFINITION

If we wanted to describe the philosophical research of Arne Næss, we should most definitely use the adjective *deep*, a term that has brought both good fortune and misfortune to the Norwegian philosopher. On the one hand, Næss's philosophy spread due to the change of 1973 brought by the publication of "The Shallow and the Deep,"¹ and to the "paternity" of the deep ecology movement. However, on the other hand, the meaning of this adjective has been interpreted too hastily on numerous occasions, and as such, Næss himself regretted having used the word "deep" to describe his approach to environmental issues. Indeed, in the philosopher's initial works, the adjective referred to the approach of the person tackling the ecological issues and not so much to the essence of the person itself. Thus, Næss says, in a footnote to the article "The Deep Ecology Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects":

Adherents of the deep ecology movement fairly commonly use the term *deep ecologist*, whereas *shallow ecologist*, I am glad to say, is rather uncommon. Both terms may be considered arrogant and slightly misleading. I prefer to use the awkward but more egalitarian expression "supporter of the deep (or shallow) ecology movement," avoiding personification.²

However, this issue of depth is really at the very core of Næss's philosophy: it denotes a serious way of arguing in search of the root causes of a fact or an assertion—an argument that looks for the rationale. Thus, the issue of seriousness is significantly correlated with the matter of depth: "To me every clearly stated question, if taken seriously, leads to other questions, and sooner or later we arrive in the realm of philosophy. From there I see no *theoretical* escape."³ He adds:

What characterizes the deep movement (in relation to the shallow) is not so much the *answers* that are given to "deep questions," but rather *that* "deep questions" are raised and taken seriously. Argumentation patterns within the shallow movement rarely touch the deeper questions: we do not find the complete social and philosophical *Problematizierung*. However, if supporters of the shallow movement are invited to answer the deeper questions, it is my experience that they often accept the points of view of the deep ecology movement.⁴

¹ Arne Næss, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary," *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95–100.

² Arne Næss, "The Deep Ecology Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects," *Philosophical Inquiry* 8, no. 1–2 (1986): 30.

³ Arne Næss, "Author's Preface," in Harold Glasser and Alan Drengson, eds., *The Selected Works of Arne Naess* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), p. lxiii.

⁴ Arne Næss, "Deepness of Questions and the Deep Ecology Movement," in George Sessions, ed., *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1995), p. 210.

Ultimately, it appears that the coherence of the Norwegian's philosophy is evaluated according to the parameter of depth: this is the determining indicator that measures the quality and effectiveness of each of Næss's arguments, and it seems as if he himself had requested to be evaluated via this parameter. We could say that his research was completely defined by depth and that he tried to convey this attitude to the proponents of the deep ecology movement: "The adjective *deep* stresses that we ask why and how, where others do not."⁵ Thus, David Rothenberg remarks on Næss's philosophical research:

Depth only applies to the distance one looks in search of the roots of the problem, refusing to ignore troubling evidence that may reveal untold vastness of the danger. One should never limit the bounds of the problem just to make an easier solution acceptable. This will not touch the core.⁶

Therefore, the issue of depth is essentially related to the subject of the question: there is a "questioning" and, therefore, an "arguing," that can be termed as deep, or, in other words, which captures the essence of the problem exactly. Næss's persistent manner of questioning reality has been compared many times to that of Socrates and the Western philosophical tradition of the origins.⁷ However, Næss sheds light on the differences between his philosophy and the well-known Socratic maieutics:

Following Socrates, I want to provoke questioning until others know where they stand on basic matters of life and death. . . . Socrates, though, pretended in debate that he knew nothing. My posture seems to be the opposite. I may seem to know everything and to derive it magically from a small set of hypotheses about the world. Both interpretations are misleading! Socrates did not consistently claim to know nothing, nor do I in my Ecosophy T pretend to have all that comprehensive a knowledge.⁸

Thus, Næss's attitude tends to undermine all our thinking that uses "superficial" reasons—that is, reasons prompted by the surface of things: "To go deep means to go right down to assumptions that we support wholeheartedly."⁹

However, interpreted as such, the subject of depth seems to subsist at an existential level that is quite undefined, and which may be enough to distinguish the approach of other philosophers, but certainly not Næss's. To completely understand the issue

⁵ Stephen Bodian, "Simple in Means, Rich in Ends. An Interview with Arne Naess," in Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, p. 27.

⁶ David Rothenberg, "Introduction, Ecosophy T: From Intuition to System," in Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 12.

⁷ See Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1985), p. 65.

⁸ Næss, *The Deep Ecology Movement*, p. 27.

⁹ Arne Næss with Per I. Haukeland, *Life's Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), p. 7.

of depth, we must reconsider it in its “logical” aspect while taking a look at the “Apron Diagram”¹⁰: an argument, for which the ultimate aim is depth, should try to reach the level of the ultimate premises, world visions, and “ecosophies” (level one) through the act of questioning, starting at the level of the “particular rules and decisions” (level four). This is an upward movement, which delves into our very deepest beliefs to reach the ultimate reasons underpinning these beliefs.

The issue of depth is ultimately an essentially logical (or epistemological) issue and not as much ontological: first and foremost, our way of seeing reality is defined as deep, but not so much the reality itself. It is important to keep in mind that not all of Næss’s so-called “disciples” consider this hypothesis to be evident: Warwick Fox, for example, only considers the issue to be logical *prima facie*, and more inherently ontological: to this effect, the adjective *deep* must imply reality itself for Fox.¹¹ Therefore, the different levels of reality are being tapped into is a consequence of our way of questioning reality and not so much a result that reality is actually characterized as “multi-level.” In this regard, the “depth” suggested by the ecological movement is more fittingly described as “depth of intent,”¹² that is, the ability to implement a dynamic process that reaches the ultimate premises of our assertions. Thus, the system designed by Næss is one of premises/conclusions where these premises obviously have a fundamental value, even if they are the last in the chronological order within the cognitive process.

The Norwegian philosopher clarifies what point our deep questioning must reach to arrive at the premises underpinning practical conclusions and policies: “When we derive some rules from those that lie deeper within ourselves, we must stop somewhere. We stop at that point which seems deepest to *us*.”¹³ This research methodology gains value and coherence in view of the ultimate aim of Næss’s research: to define the experience with the depth it deserves. Therefore, in my opinion, all his philosophical speculation must be interpreted as a comprehensive reinterpretation of nature and the world of experience¹⁴ (meaning our relationship with nature), driven by the intention of a deep and constant search for the truth.¹⁵

If Næss’s prominent concern is to fully understand the nature of which we are

¹⁰ See Arne Næss, “The Apron Diagram,” in Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue, eds., *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995), pp. 10–12.

¹¹ See Warwick Fox, “Intellectual Origins of the ‘Depth’ Theme in the Philosophy of Arne Naess,” *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* 9, no. 2 (1992), <http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/index.php/trumpet/article/view/427/699>.

¹² See Jan Radler, “Neurath’s Congestions, Depth of Intention, and Precization: Arne Naess and His Viennese Heritage,” *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 3, no. 1 (2013): 85.

¹³ Næss and Haukeland, *Life’s Philosophy*, p. 113.

¹⁴ Regarding this topic of experience, which is fundamental for environmental ethics and ethics in general, please see: Maria T. Russo and Luca Valera, *Invito al Ben-essere: Lineamenti di Etica* (Roma: Aracne, 2015), pp. 135–59.

¹⁵ See Luca Valera, “L’ecosofia di Arne Naess. Intervista ad Alan Drengson,” in Luca Valera, *Arne Naess: Introduzione all’Ecologia* (Pisa: ETS, 2015), p. 209.

a part, the response given by modern science appears to be too premature, and, ultimately, unsatisfactory; therefore, his dissatisfaction concerning an “objectivist idea of the scientific truth,” which he himself attributes to Galileo, can be easily understood. Indeed, despite its aim to describe reality objectively, modern science fails not only in this very idea of objectivity, but rather in the integrity and depth of the very description of the world.¹⁶ Ultimately, what science describes seems to fall quite far from the concrete nature of which we are a considerable part.

Modern science, and particularly physics, only identifies abstract and universal structures, meaning latent schematisms in nature, in the words of Francis Bacon. The dissatisfaction fueled by Næss towards the scientific approach also finds its motivation in the inability of science to fulfill the requirement of deep questioning about the essence of the natural world: science only captures pure structures of nature, and because of this, deep ecology must resort to another method to understand nature and our relationship with it. Thus, Næss writes:

Physics provides some common points of bearing, for example time and space coordinates, degrees of longitude and latitude. But characteristically enough, these are nowhere to be found: there are few who believe that when a ship crosses the equator, a man must stand in the bow and cut it with a knife. A physical equator is nowhere to be found! Together, these bearing points create a pure structure or form. The structure is ‘pure’ in the sense that it lacks bodily or other content. . . . Such theoretical science can be learned, understood, and acknowledged to be valid in any culture whatsoever, not because it describes the common reality, but because it describes a structure independent of most cultural conceptions. The structure belongs to reality, but it is not reality. It can be revised again and again, making possible ever different interpretations of and routes to reality.¹⁷

Therefore, the need for a deep approach (which he himself calls “phenomenological”) to environmental issues arises in Næss as a possible response to the modern trend of the scientific method, or in other words, the tendency to reduce nature to a group of symbols and mathematical equations that are completely dominated by the obsession with a search for the Kantian “thing-in-itself” (*Ding an sich*).¹⁸

The need for a suitable phenomenology of our natural experience,¹⁹ meaning,

¹⁶ As Næss observes, “‘Objective descriptions of nature’ offered us by physics ought to be regarded not as descriptions of nature, but as descriptions of certain conditions of interdependence and thereby can be universal, common for all cultures.” Næss, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, p. 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Næss remarks that “Within the informed public, the dominating answer would in all likelihood be that it is precisely the mathematical natural sciences which supply the approximately correct description of the environment as this is in itself. . . . Are we getting any closer with the long scientific strides built upon the work of Galileo and Newton? . . . Philosophers and scientists have attempted to supply understandable descriptions of things in themselves, descriptions absolutely independent of their comprehension through the senses or in any other way. I believe we can safely say that all the attempts have failed and that it is the formulation of the problem which is at fault.” *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁹ See the following regarding this topic: Eugene C. Hargrove, “Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value,” *The Monist* 75, no. 2 (1992): 183–207.

our experience as natural beings, therefore arises as an intent.²⁰ Næss's aim, in essence, is to safeguard the complexity of the concrete phenomena, and at the same time get to the bottom of our experience of "being-in-nature" while avoiding any possible misleading generalization or hasty abstraction.

THE ONTOLOGY OF DEPTH AND NATURE

The difficulties found evidently due to objectivism (and to subjectivism) in the deep reinterpretation of our relationship with the world reveal to Næss the need for a new type of ontology that can also substantiate our spontaneous and concrete experience and get around the problem of the relationship between the subjectivity and objectivity of our judgments. Particularly in regards to this latter point, he confirms the need to contrast the objectivist paradigm of science with an all-encompassing vision capable of "saving the phenomena"²¹ in their totality.

Næss identifies this alternative vision with the Gestalt ontology, meaning with a system that has the first ecological principle as its theoretical cornerstone: "Everything hangs together."²² A vision such as this requires abandoning the argument that the entities would be separate and independent and, at the same time, the "man-in-environment" image in favor of the "relational, total-field" image,²³ our spontaneous experience unveils a deep unity on different levels (between the subject and the object, between humans and nature, between the self and the world). This unity²⁴ is not so much the result of a mental association of several sequential and separate experiences carried out by the subject, but rather an intrinsic relationship between these very entities that are related in an integrative and broad totality; this comprises the "concrete content" of the experience that can then be analyzed through the extraction of the "abstract structure."

The operation completed by Næss is significant: a reversal of the very concept of "reality" is implemented via the "Gestalt ontology": the adjective *real* does not really signify the objective structure of reality (*entia rationis*) due to its abstract nature; rather, it describes the very content of our spontaneous experience (a

²⁰ Næss *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, p. 35.

²¹ As Næss suggests, "An attempt is made to defend our spontaneous, rich, seemingly contradictory experience of nature as more than subjective impressions. They make up the concrete contents of our world. This point of view, as every other ontology, is deeply problematic — but of great potential value for energetic environmentalism in its opposition to the contemporary near monopoly of the so-called scientific world-view" (Ibid.) The expression "saving the phenomena" is particularly important in the history of philosophy, and it has been widely spread in the Italian context thanks to the Bontadini's philosophical proposal. See Gustavo Bontadini, "Sozein ta Phainomena (A Emanuele Severino)," *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-scolastica* 56 (1964): 439–68.

²² Arne Næss, "The Politics of the Deep Ecology Movement," in Glasser and Drengson, *The Selected Works*, p. 218.

²³ See Næss, "The Shallow and the Deep," p. 95.

²⁴ See Christian Diehm, "Arne Næss, Val Plumwood, and Deep Ecological Subjectivity: A Contribution to the 'Deep Ecology-Ecofeminism Debate,'" *Ethics and the Environment* 7, no. 1 (2002): 28.

totality of different gestalts), including the subjective qualities. Næss observes that: "In spontaneous experiences we have direct access to what is real."²⁵ Thus, the theoretical revolution carried out by the Norwegian philosopher via "Gestalt ontology" is shaped as a recovery of the predominance of the concrete world over the abstract one, the "real" over the "apparent," with the aim to achieve "a sort of ontological realism in the sense that we have direct access to the contents of reality in our spontaneous experiences. These are not mere appearances or phenomena."²⁶

In terms of the aim of this article, I will not delve deeper into the topic of the Gestalt ontology developed by Næss²⁷ nor demonstrate how the philosopher arrives at the notion of "ecological self" through this method. Instead, I will focus on a certain method that leads to the discovery of new dimensions of reality that perhaps remained hidden through the use of another method, such as the use of the so-called "scientific method," for example. I am ultimately arguing here that a change in worldview also implies a change in method, and that this method must accommodate the reality itself; to reach depth, we need a deep method that is able to consider more than just the surface of things.

To this effect, the matter of superficiality must be interpreted as an inability (or a lack of willingness) to get to the bottom of things, as affirmed by Næss himself:

The most relevant contrast provoked by the notion of deep ecology is not a facile contrast between "shallow" and "deep" approaches, but rather a contrast between the flat and the deep—between flat ecology and deep ecology—between a detached way of seeing that looks at nature from outside, and an embedded way of seeing (and feeling) that gazes into the depths of a nature that encompasses and permeates us. Deep ecology, in other words, implies that we are situated in the depths of the earthly ecology.²⁸

However, based on what we have seen, it is not possible to reach this depth of perspective without an appropriate method or a broad enough worldview that enables the interpretation of phenomena as something simply isolated, as something that is not related to other living beings. For example, getting back to the aforementioned reduction carried out by modern science, it can be said that it is guilty of having reduced nature to a lifeless reserve of resources so that man, once his "abstract structures" were known, could use it at his will. By reducing it to a mere object, dissecting and studying it as if it were a simple *object*, human beings have turned it into a *project* because they were unable to capture its intrinsic unity and creative potential.

The current ecological crisis emerges precisely out of this human incapacity, which

²⁵ Arne Næss, "Heidegger, Postmodern Theory, and Deep Ecology," *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* 14, no. 4 (1997), <http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/index.php/trumpet/article/view/175/217>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ See the following regarding this aspect: Arne Næss, "Ecosophy and Gestalt Ontology," *The Trumpeter. Journal of Ecosophy* 6, no. 4 (1989): 134–37; Arne Næss, "Reflections on Gestalt Ontology," *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* 21, no. 1 (2005): 119–28; Christian Diehm, "Arne Naess and the Task of Gestalt Ontology," *Environmental Ethics* 28, no. 1 (2006): 21–35.

²⁸ David Abram, "On Depth Ecology," *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* 30, no. 2 (2014): 103.

can be interpreted as the most significant consequence of the philosophical approach of Descartes, Bacon, and Galileo. It can therefore be understood why Næss recurs to Spinoza²⁹ to shape his worldview: a viable ecosophy needs a strong philosophical reference to the issue of nature that is able to provide a broad vision fitting of the natural world and the place of man in the cosmos (meaning his relationship with other living beings). Næss thus describes this “ecological” change in perspective concerning nature:

The nature conceived by field ecologists is not the passive, dead, value neutral nature of mechanistic science, but akin to the *Deus sive Natura* of Spinoza. All-inclusive, creative (as *natura naturans*), infinitely diverse, and alive in the broad sense of panpsychism, but also manifesting a structure, the so-called laws of nature. There are always causes to be found, but extremely complex and difficult to unearth.³⁰

This notion of nature also affects the idea of *human nature*: even though it is true that humanity is not simply “something placed in an environment,” and that “everything is connected with everything else,” human realization will depend to a certain extent on the realization of the totality of nature. Therefore, not only when choosing to reshape our relationship with the world will the world also be positively reshaped.³¹ Rather, on the contrary, our way of being can be positively changed by a reform of nature. In this regard, the struggle for self-realization – we should say it in the words of Spinoza, “the fight to preserve and develop (our) specific nature or essence”³² – in Næss’s point of view, can never coincide with the desire to dominate nature (or to subjugate other living beings in general). Building on Spinoza again, as Næss himself highlights, “there is nothing in human nature or essence . . . which can only manifest or express itself through

²⁹ For example, see for this topic, Arne Naess, *Is Freedom Consistent with Spinoza’s Determinism?* in Johannes G. van der Bend, ed., *Spinoza on Knowing, Being, and Freedom: Proceedings of the Spinoza Symposium* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1973), pp. 6–23; Arne Naess, *Freedom, Emotion, and Self-Subsistence: The Structure of a Central Part of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1975); Arne Naess, “Spinoza and Ecology,” *Philosophia* 7, no. 1 (1977): 45–54; Arne Naess, “Environmental Ethics and Spinoza’s Ethics: Comments on Genevieve Lloyd’s Article,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (1980): 313–25; Arne Naess, “Spinoza’s Finite God,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 35, no. 135 (1981): 120–26; Arne Naess, “An Application of Empirical Argumentation Analysis to Spinoza’s Ethics,” in Else M. Barth and Jo L. Martens, eds., *Argumentation: Approaches to Theory Formation* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1982), pp. 245–55; Arne Naess, “Einstein, Spinoza, and God,” in Alwyn van der Merwe, ed., *Old and New Questions in Physics, Cosmology, Philosophy, and Theoretical Biology: Essays in Honor of Wolfgang Yourgrau* (New York: Plenum Press, 1983), pp. 683–87; Arne Naess, “Spinoza and Attitudes Towards Nature,” in AA.VV., eds., *Spinoza: His Thought and Work* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1983), pp. 160–75; Arne Naess, *Spinoza and the Deep Ecology Movement* (Delft: Eburon, 1993).

³⁰ Næss *Spinoza and Ecology*, p. 46.

³¹ See Harold Glasser, “Learning Our Way to a Sustainable and Desirable World: Ideas Inspired by Arne Naess and Deep Ecology,” in Peter B. Corcoran and Arjen E. J. Wals, eds., *Higher Education and the Challenge of Sustainability: Problematics, Promise and Practice* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), p. 146.

³² See Næss, *Spinoza and Ecology*, p. 49.

injury to others. That is, the striving for expression of one's nature does not inevitably imply an attitude of hostile domination over other beings, human or nonhuman."³³

To mature or to "realize its potential," the self needs the other, and, therefore, Næss concludes, "our self-realization is hindered if the self-realization of others, with whom we identify, is hindered."³⁴ Once again, this idea hinges on the ontology elaborated by Næss, meaning his "Gestalt ontology," which reminds us that every living being is part of an environment, or to put it in words that are more fitting to the philosopher's thinking, every living being is part of a related totality of gestalts:

"An injury to where I belong is an injury to me!" This slogan reminds us that the human self is a part of many gestalts. The skin is not our limit. Therefore, the term environment is not popular among some supporters of deep ecology, because an environment may imply the separation of an organism from its surroundings and, as such, does not foster feelings of participation, identification, or expanded notions of the self.³⁵

He specifies the previous idea in another article with reference to Spinoza's philosophy: "At higher levels of self-realization, the self in some ways encompasses others in a state of increasing intensity and extension of "symbiosis." The freedom of the individual ultimately requires that of the collectivity."³⁶ Although it is true that our realization depends on others, given that the "self" is always a "self-in-an-environment," or to use a concept that might require further development, the self always resides in a house (*oikos*),³⁷ we also must say that it depends on some characteristics that are found in human nature itself. To this effect, Næss's famous argument can be understood as "'Realizing inherent potentialities' is one of the good, less-than-ten-word clarifications of 'self-realization.'"³⁸

Næss himself highlights this dependence of ecology on a certain anthropology, like I had put forward at the beginning of this article:

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.³⁹

In this vein, the Norwegian continuously points out in his texts the need for policies

³³ Ibid., p. 50.

³⁴ Arne Næss, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," in Glasser and Drengson, *The Selected Works*, p. 516.

³⁵ Næss, *The Politics of the Deep Ecology Movement*, p. 202.

³⁶ Arne Næss, *Spinoza and Attitude Towards Nature*, in Glasser and Drengson, eds., *The Selected Works*, p. 389.

³⁷ About this topic, see Luca Valera, "Oikos e relazioni: l'abitare come cura dell'alterità," in Donatella Pagliacci, ed., *Differenze e relazioni, Volume II: Cura dei legami* (Roma: Aracne, 2014), pp. 213–22; and Luca Valera, *Ecologia Umana: Le sfide Etiche del Rapporto Uomo/ambiente* (Roma: Aracne, 2013).

³⁸ Næss, *Self-Realization*, p. 519.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 529.

based on appropriate anthropological “practice,” meaning a certain notion of capacities and human virtues. A new policy needs maturation of the self to be effective.

CONCLUSION: DEPTH IN ETHICS AND POLICIES CHANGE PERSPECTIVES AND, THEREBY, CHANGE ACTIONS

Næss’s anthropological idea, far from being catastrophic or anti-human as many authors have argued, is essentially optimistic and leans towards a positive reinterpretation of the role of the human being in the cosmos. As he himself demonstrates in the article *The arrogance of Anti-Humanism*,⁴⁰ his criticism is not aimed at humanity itself but rather at the immaturity of humanity: “In criticizing the ‘homocentrism’ or ‘anthropocentrism’ of the shallow ecological movement, we are pointing to an image of man as an immature being with crude, narrow and shortsighted interests. It is an image well suited to the kind of policies dominant today.”⁴¹

This immaturity relies on a superficial and selfish view of human beings that does not reflect human nature itself, and which ultimately does not take our natural dimension into account, as highlighted by Harold Glasser, a disciple of Næss:

Humans have co-evolved with the planet’s other life forms. . . . We are a part of nature, but it is a nature that we continue to dominate and diminish through our collective efforts to refashion it in our image. These efforts to distance ourselves from nature, to de-wild and de-sacralize it through continual marginalization and homogenization, may, however, only end up diminishing and de-humanizing us.⁴²

If this is the current situation that reflects current human immaturity, what could be the most appropriate response at the political level? Clearly, in Næss’s philosophical view, it cannot be a catastrophic response or a solution defined by the infamous “heuristics of fear” developed by Hans Jonas.⁴³ In this regard, Næss would not support the idea that “the perception of the malum is infinitely easier to us than the perception of the *bonum*,” neither the idea that “we know much sooner what we do not want than what we want.”⁴⁴ Thus, there is no reason for Næss to maintain that “the prophecy of doom is to be given greater heed than the prophecy of bliss,”⁴⁵ as Jonas does. Opposition from Næss to all catastrophic ideas can be seen very clearly in this text:

“Humanity will ultimately destroy itself if we thoughtlessly eliminate the organisms that constitute essential links in the complex and delicate web of life of which we are part.” Such statements are meant as warnings, and the authors most likely hope that

⁴⁰ See Arne Næss, “The Arrogance of Anti-Humanism,” *Ecophilosophy* 6 (1984): 8–9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴² Glasser, *Learning Our Way*, p. 131.

⁴³ See Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 26–27.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

action will be taken to change politics deeply so that the warnings will not be realized as truths. Also politically significant are the predictions that the longer we wait before we start making radical changes, the more terrifying will be the necessary political and other means to reestablish planetary richness and diversity of life, including a decent human quality of life. The doomsday terminology is the invention of opponents of the deep ecology movement. The same holds true for expressions like “zero growth.”⁴⁶

Where is, therefore, a good place to start again concerning environmental issues? Based on what we have observed, Næss would not agree either with beginning with duty-based ethics. This does not encounter a fitting counterpoint in human nature itself, thereby appealing to an indicator that is external to the human being, meaning duty. That is why Næss rekindles a Kantian distinction (present in the text *Versuch einiger Betrachtungen über den Optimismus*) between moral actions and beautiful actions that is not actually very well-known: “I borrow his [Kant’s] distinction between moral and beautiful actions. I foresee a bright future for this terminology. It offers a fairly new perspective on our actions within the realm of radical environmentalism, or more specifically within the deep ecology movement.”⁴⁷

Næss’s proposal is to develop our capacity to act in a beautiful way, meaning in harmony with our nature (which he himself recognizes is dependent on some human inclinations):

Now, my point is that, in environmental affairs, perhaps we should try primarily to influence people toward performing beautiful acts. We should work on their inclinations rather than their morality. Unhappily, the extensive moralizing within environmentalism has given the public the false impression that we primarily ask them to sacrifice, to show more responsibility, more concern, better morality. . . . Part of the joy stems from the consciousness of our intimate relation to something bigger than our ego, something that has endured for millions of years and deserves continued life for many more millions of years. The requisite care flows naturally if the ‘self’ is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt or conceived as protection of ourselves.⁴⁸

The point that perhaps Næss does not elaborate on very much deals with the definition itself of the idea of “in harmony with human nature.” However, what appears to be interesting is the predominance of the knowledge of nature (understood as essence) over the development of a “moral or ethical” agenda, and, thus, of a political agenda. It ultimately seems that the philosopher (nearly unexpectedly because of the most well-known interpretations of his work) is opening the door to an *Environmental Virtues Ethics*, and, thus, a predominance of ontology (and of anthropology) over ethics, meaning the development of an appropriate ontological agenda, and, subsequently, an appropriate anthropological agenda.

⁴⁶ Næss *The Politics of the Deep Ecology Movement*, p. 207.

⁴⁷ Arne Næss “Beautiful Action: Its Function in the Ecological Crisis,” in Glasser and Drengrson *The Selected Works*, p. 122.

⁴⁸ Næss *Self-Realization*, p. 527.