

The Dream of the Biocentric Community and the Structure of Utopias¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ideal of community as imagined by Arne Naess and the Deep Ecology Movement. In particular the authors address such questions as: Is pluralism of lifestyles reconcilable with the main ideas of the biocentric community? Is liberal justice possible within it? And how realistic is the proposal of education towards a 'biocentric identity'? The analysis shows that, while the deep ecological vision is by no means 'fascist' as some of its critics insist, its inconsistencies, silences and omissions point to an incomplete project which has a dystopian conclusion written into its scenario.

Oh but we dreamed to mend
Whatever mischief seemed
To afflict mankind, but now
That winds of winter blow
Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed

William Butler Yeats, 'Nine Hundred and Nineteen'.

The English poet Wystan Hugh Auden on a famous occasion (the death of William Butler Yeats) declared poetry to be both innocent and impotent: 'Poetry

makes nothing happen [...] it survives in the valley of its saying.'² There are clear indications today that Auden's exculpation of *poiesis* might well be extended to utopian philosophy as well. For many, utopianism makes nothing happen; it exists in the valley of its own turgid rhetoric (or, alternatively, in the swamp dividing cognition from experience). The current mistrust of totalising visions, the growing awareness of the complexity and contradictions of the social organism, all have counselled a retreat from prescriptive vision to analytical humility.

There are many signs that even the end-of-century, neo-romantic search for ecological harmony, roots, community, knowledge, identity and lifestyle, has become a cautious, low voltage romance rather than the passionate affair it was in the sixties. The Deep Ecology Movement, originally launched by the famous Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss,³ remains a puzzle. For some time now, Næss has been at pains to demonstrate that his nature philosophy is not about castles in the air. Since it is a philosophy meant to be realised, he stresses, it is not utopian but 'visionary'.⁴

Næss believes in the need for a green vision to guide our politics away from self-induced ecological destruction. His Deep Ecology is daringly cast in a prescriptive-normative mode of theorising. There is a problem that needs to be solved and a vision of a better order to be promulgated. In opposition to the 'shallow' approach (concerned primarily with the reduction of environmental damage), Deep Ecology proposes a programme of global rescue based on a radical shift of the Western world view from the hierarchical and anthropocentric to the egalitarian and ecocentric.

At the risk of simplifying a complex conception that has already acquired a history and produced its own dissidents,⁵ let us briefly rehearse the main tenets of his eco-political vision. At the core lies the idea of *self-realisation*, which, unlike ego-development, presupposes the unfolding of the true ecological self in harmony with the selfhood of other living beings. This implies an *opposition to notions of stewardship* of the planet (because stewardship views the world as a collection of natural resources primarily for human use). The *primacy of wilderness* is another important feature, along with a celebration of *place and belonging* and *identification with primal peoples*.

Næss's Deep Ecology, as a combination of value theory, ethics and politics, is more than challenging. Regarded by some as extravagant, by others as the cutting edge of the environmental movement, it is now entrenched at the academy and increasingly cited as a standard reference point by which many positions and environmental politics and administrations are assessed.⁶ At the same time it has drawn fire from both environmental philosophers and a variety of interdisciplinary critics, whether of a postmodern, postcolonial or feminist kind. We are not so much interested in rehashing the attacks as in inspecting the internal fissures within Næss's ecological vision which may undermine its professed benevolent and 'realist' aspirations.

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IS LIFESTYLE PLURALISM ACCEPTABLE WITHIN THE ECOCENTRIC COMMUNITY?

The notion of complexity and diversity is central to the Deep Ecological movement in general, and to ecosophy T in particular.⁷ As Næss is careful to point out: 'People are diverse!'⁸ To illustrate his views on cultural pluralism, it is worth setting them in the comparative context of the liberal world view.⁹

Very much like the struggle for a better society, the struggle for a better environment is inevitably accompanied by controversy over conflicting values. A democratic pluralist society should, in principle, work out a consensual basis for the resolution of environmental conflicts. In Deep Ecology such a basis is encapsulated in the Deep Ecology Platform which states that 'the richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth'.¹⁰

According to ecosophy T, there is an inseparable connection between the human subject as defined in the liberal tradition of philosophy, and the environmental havoc unleashed by the competitive lifestyle of industrial society. The realisation of the liberal *private sphere* is linked directly to material consumption and to a striving for goods which prevents the (self)realisation of the *biosphere*, or extended universal Self. According to Næss, the liberal focus on private realisation leads to passivity both with regard to the environment and to the underprivileged:

'Liberalism' [is] a norm for non-intervention when a group or a class bleeds, exploits, domineers or manipulates another group or class – or even threatens to exterminate it. As in a wrestling match with no holds barred, such processes must, according to this liberalism, be left to the *free* interplay of forces – hence the word 'liberal', Latin for 'free'.¹¹

This rather simplistic Marxist critique is soon transcended in an ideological gesture which can be described as 'Neither left nor right, but in front'.¹² Næss eschews a non-interventionary liberalism in favour of communitarian politics.¹³ The normative structure takes the shape of a logical pyramid, starting with a few general principles and ending with numerous practical norms for how to live an ecosophically satisfactory life. Such a life is based on identification with the oppressed:

The positive appraisal [of individuality] becomes meaningful only within a value system in which norms for the expression of individuality and for collectivism (in several senses of the word) are allowed to confront each other and a ranking of values is suggested.¹⁴

The implication is that the individual character is seasoned by activism and enriched by diversity within groups with a collectivist ideology. Provided that individual peculiarities are not in conflict with the aims of the group, one may show individuality within a collective. Næss states explicitly that individuality is essential but on condition that one is part of a community. 'Distinctive, individual traits.... are enforced and intensified in collectivist-ideological groups, e.g. in a kibbutz.'¹⁵ In short, Næss's norm of diversity should be understood as a biotic diversity within the Deep Ecology movement. The liberal notion of the realisation of the private sphere alienates men and women from the biosphere. All attempts to solve environmental problems within the framework of private realisation inevitably remain 'shallow' solutions.¹⁶ This does not mean, however, that supporters of Deep Ecology, when confronted with individuals obsessed with material goods, embark on moralising reprimands. Næss tends to employ strategies of encouragement, even subtle 'bribery', to get the holders of shallow views on his side. A motor launch in the summer is fine if you bike to work the rest of the year. Likewise, if an ecosopher needs to take an aeroplane to a conference on Deep Ecology, the ride, however many gallons of fuel are consumed, is a 'gift from Gaia' since the conference is of paramount importance. Such *ad hoc* concessions are used to keep the theoretical normative system working in practice.

The pressing question is: How radical is the Deep Ecology vision in its attitude to the lifestyle of the 'Shallows'? The answer depends on whether, and to what extent, Deep Ecologists admit and respect the right of opponents to promote shallow views. It is not entirely clear how far they would want to go in order to change individuals or societies that have concepts of justice that are based on an anthropocentric ecological understanding. On this issue there seems to be a schism within the Deep Ecology Movement.

The reformist interpretation implies that 'change' will be brought about by Deep Ecologists living out their respective ecosophies within the framework of a liberal constitution. The constitution ensures that a broad spectrum of multiple self-realisations, understood as different implementations of the good life, exist side by side within the constraints of an overriding model of justice. This model sets out reasonable limits to different normative systems of which Deep Ecology is just one among many. The reformist interpretation also implies that the main task would be to participate in public debate in order to reform society and its system of justice by legal means. This should not be understood as a *modus vivendi* compatible with a liberal constitution, but as a well-integrated philosophical standpoint,¹⁷ meaning that Deep Ecologists would have to be willing to defend their superordinate criteria of justice from attack from without and within the movement. Within such a reformist framework, ecosophy is inevitably stripped of its revolutionary potential and reduced to a therapeutic philosophy:

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its main objective is to raise social consciousness in order to transform private realisation into the proper, ecocentric self-realisation. Though Næss himself insists that his vision lends support to a reformist position he has not so far provided a consistent theory of ecological justice or democracy to support his view.¹⁸

The *radical interpretation*, on the other hand, implies that 'change' will be brought about by rejecting the liberal constitution, as the latter is based on an anthropocentric ethic and understanding of justice.¹⁹ This means that Deep Ecologists would do their best to live out their respective ecosophies but with the explicitly stated intention of changing the entire constitution through nonviolent action and constructing a new society based on a Deep Ecological system of justice. The radical interpretation means, in effect, a rejection of the existing anthropocentric system of justice because it is based on a conspicuously inadequate understanding of ecology. While seeking complete self-realisation within the radical framework, one complies with the liberal constitution on a *temporary modus vivendi* basis, i.e. for strategic reasons or because of the current distribution of power. One recognises here an element of Spinoza's political philosophy: '... as the wise man has the sovereign right to do all that reason dictates, or to live according to the laws of reason, so also the ignorant and foolish man has the right to do all that desire dictates, or to live according to the law of desire'.²⁰ The ecosophers ('the wise') must accept an *ad hoc* compromise, i.e. coexistence with the Shallows ('the ignorant and foolish'). The ultimate goal, however, is a complete radical transformation of liberal society.

This Janus face of Deep Ecology is also reflected within the environmental movement more generally, with its split into reformist and radical wings. The Sierra Club is an example of the former, while the worldview of the Earth First! answers more to the radical description.

What is additionally unsettling is that the Earth First! movement, which has declared itself to be directly inspired by Deep Ecological ideas, contributes to the erosion of pluralism and the nonviolence prized by the parent philosophy. Earth First! takes as its mission the defence of the Earth from industrial society. The appropriate methods to be employed are described in the group's manual of *Ecodefence*, which explains how to destroy defaulters' bulldozers, puncture their car tyres, hack into the databases of their companies, return their executives' pollution to their own gardens or use a sling to break the windows of an executive with environmentally destructive lifestyle.²¹ Having given priority to Gaia, the Earth Firsters! legitimate the physical destruction of anything that damages the earth. Although professing pluralism and nonviolence, the organisation is run like a guerrilla group ready to destroy in order to prevent destruction. According to Næss the Earth First! leader, Dave Foreman, 'has been a disaster for Deep Ecology'.²²

IS JUSTICE POSSIBLE IN AN ECOCENTRIC COMMUNITY?

Whether one construes it in reformist or in radical terms, justice is not the central preoccupation of Deep Ecology. If the reformist interpretation is tenable, then ecosophy lacks clear direction on how adherents of the Deep Ecological movement should proceed vis à vis those who have an inadequate ecological self-realisation. Nor does it offer any suggestion concerning the legal basis on which actions meant to defend the environment and which at the same time inevitably contravene statute law are to remain part of a legitimate movement *within* the liberal constitution. The reformist interpretation implies that understanding and realisation of the points in the Deep Ecological platform must be subject to certain precepts of justice shared with the Shallows. If that is the case, an additional political platform on justice must be included as an independent 'safety net' or yardstick against which ecosophic norms should be measured with respect to justice. Such a platform is at present absent from the Deep Ecological agenda, but perhaps should be elaborated as a necessary precaution against totalitarian interpretations of ecosophy.

Were we to follow the radical interpretation we would get stuck on the question of how the Deep Ecology movement is to implement a future state or society based on an ecocentric system of justice, and how such a system might work. The very fact that ecosophy, when it does make mention of justice, *identifies what is right with what is right within its own normative system*, is problematic. Whatever Næss's qualifications, it points logically to the relevance of the radical interpretation. From the ultimate ecosophic norm about the good life 'N1: Self-realisation!' Næss, with the help of a chain of further norms N2–N10, logically deduces a theory of rights: 'N11: All have equal rights to Self-realisation!'.²³ Justice is thus subsumed in one particular set of beliefs which constitutes a radical breach with the liberal contractual ethic where political rights are practically independent of any notion of what constitutes a good lifestyle.²⁴ Within ecosophy, it does not make sense to distinguish between ecosophic views of a good lifestyle and a theory of justice; justice is subsumed within a theory of the good life.

The lack of a criterion of justice independent of ecosophy and the lack of rules of the game with regard to value conflicts may be further illustrated by a closer examination of ecosophy's constructions of liberal society and of the possible ways in which to implement the postulated social transformation.

One possible ecosophic description of shallow politics has been suggested by Næss: It is the politics of Spinozist 'slaves' which Næss considers to result from strivings arising from Spinoza's first level of understanding. The slaves have an inadequate sense of self-preservation; their passion for competition, honour and suspicion drive them into a race for more material goods, ever more refined technical solutions and short-term profits. Ecological balance, the primary condition for human life, is thus undermined. 'Shallow' society is unable to

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transcend a pattern of behaviour based on egocentric lifestyle, and it continues the kind of environmental plunder described so dramatically by Hardin in his neo-Malthusian 'Tragedy of the Commons.'²⁵ The main victims are developing countries and future generations.

In some ways the ecosophic construction of modern industrial society resembles a Hobbesian natural state.²⁶ This does not mean that liberal society today is utterly bereft of laws and regulations. It implies that those whose self-realisation is inadequate must ultimately rely on force:

... there is for Spinoza, in his *Ethics*, a main distinction between the slaves and the free. *The self-preservation of the slaves is similar to Hobbesian self-preservation in the natural state*, but the self-preservation of the free does not correspond to that of citizens, neither in Hobbesian dictatorships nor in Spinozist democracies. *The former are not communities of free men, but structures based on force.*²⁷

Characteristically, the political problem as identified by ecosophy is not so much traceable to recalcitrant citizens but to 'structures' which imprison the Shallows in the inner (il)logic of power relations. Hence a quasi Hobbesian 'war of all against all' for economic survival:

In the prevalent individualistic and utilitarian political thinking in Western industrial states, the terms 'self-realisation', 'self-expression', 'self-interest' are used for what is above called 'ego-realisation'. One stresses the ultimate and extensive incompatibility of the interests of different individuals. 'One man's slice of bread is another man's death.'²⁸

The passages quoted above illustrate how a series of skilful rhetorical devices allows Næss to accuse the world of dichotomising – while remaining a dichotomiser himself. Constructions of the modern state as a perpetrator of violence against Nature smuggle in such dichotomisation. The current apocalyptic imagery of the population explosion, the ozone hole, the global greenhouse effect and a new Ice Age further enhance the overall association of the Shallows with war, doom and Ragnarokk.²⁹ The contrast with the nonviolent, harmonious, compassionate, Deep Ecological alternative vision could not be starker.

Næss insists that the 'grass roots' do not approve of competitive society and that the majority of the population would prefer to live in an ecologically acceptable fashion within an environmentally friendly society. As often, he takes the Norwegians as representative of humanity *in toto*:

The Norwegian people are friendlier towards the environment than their party politics would suggest. ... Today we can safely say that if Norwegian friendliness toward the environment does not differ essentially from USA, England and West Germany, is it reasonable to think that *our policies are more environmentally destructive than they would be if guided by public opinion*. Our vaunted democracy thus fails to serve its purpose.³⁰

This is a bold observation. Democratic decisions, according to Næss, do not respond to public opinion. It is not clear whether Næss thinks democracy as such fails, or whether the current system is not democratic enough. The radical interpretation would be that democracy as such is a failure and that we thus need another, more powerful, political system. The reformist interpretation would imply that the current system requires closer contact with the 'grass roots' in order to be more environmental. The only problem is that Næss has not attempted to collate his statistical evidence on the opinions of the Norwegians. Instead, he refers to a US survey which supports his postulate. Surveys by NIBR (the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research) actually indicate the opposite, i.e. that politicians and bureaucrats accord higher priority to the environment than their electors.³¹ Though it is an endearing characteristic of Næss to take the 'grass roots' seriously in his philosophy, his generalisations about the Norwegian people and on the failure of democracy rest on shaky empirical foundations.³²

Whatever the Norwegian people's opinions on the environment, the Hobbesian dilemma, which Hardin described as the tragedy of the commons, remains. To Hobbes, the problem was not the people at large, but the few naturally aggressive and foolhardy individuals who are fixated on personal security, power and prestige. How to control the few who break away and who *prefer* short-term goals to a sustainable society? How to restrain those who would choose to go to hell first class?

Næss, to whom self-realisation is living a lifestyle as a member of an ecocentric community, fails to tackle this question. Apart from the fact that the system of justice in his cherished community should be based on principles of nonviolence and direct action, no precise guidance is given as to how to manage a sustainable transformation. Given that the Deep Ecological platform indicates a change in '[...] basic economic, technological, and ideological structures',³³ a feasible interpretation is that it is also a platform for a new (biocentric) society. Following the radical interpretation, it can be reasonably inferred that, unless one endorses utopian anarchism, the biospheric community must be governed by some political power capable of preventing individuals from lapsing back into a competitive material lifestyle. The possibility of establishing an Eco-Sovereign is not raised. Perhaps the hidden assumption is that all parties involved shall eventually relinquish their power and transfer it to an ecologically enlightened Sovereign. This need not be an absolute ruler, as proposed by Hobbes, but some Sovereign People ('the grass roots') who would see to it that potential 'Shallow' breakaways live in an ecologically acceptable fashion – or in a reservation.³⁴

Curiously, Næss appears to regard Bhutan as one possible model for emulation:

[In Bhutan] any students who go abroad for tertiary education must, immediately upon their return, spend six months travelling through the countryside for re-

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education on the actual conditions and values of the people of their own country.³⁵

This is surely puzzling. Assuming that the students in question have what Næss terms a shallow ego-realisation, does this mean that Bhutan is using the power of the State *rightfully* in ordering their 're-education' after studies (and contamination) at foreign universities? Does Næss believe that re-education should be the norm in the society of the future? And will it be the task of the biocentric state to 're-educate' all those suspected of inadequate private realisation? And how far will a Deep Ecological Sovereign People go to monitor and punish ecological dissidents for violating the Deep Ecological value platform?

In Western societies the fair principles of justice do legitimise the use of force. Hobbes justifies the deployment of violence on the basis of a theory of natural rights independent of lifestyle preferences of individuals. The absolute power of the Sovereign is legitimised by a contract between the agents. The difficulty in Hobbes' case is, of course, that the Sovereign is not bound by this contract. Kant, by contrast, proposes a contract theory whereby all agents, including the Sovereign, must recognise fundamental rights and principles of justice, almost irrespective of their lifestyle judgements. The objective of a contractual approach is to safeguard the right of all to live according to their values, deep or shallow, as long as this does not infringe upon the corresponding rights of others.

From a contractual point of view, the legitimisation and justification of power by an internal system of norms for the good life, such as the one propounded by ecosophy, is unjust.³⁶ It is worth noting Næss's use of the notion of right in the Deep Ecology platform: 'Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity [on Earth] except to satisfy vital needs.'³⁷ This formulation does not refer to a formal contractual right or an overlapping idea of right (e.g. Rawls). The concept of right is internal, adduced from various ecosophies.³⁸ From a liberal viewpoint, it is unfair: rights founded on an internal, and not a contractual understanding of justice would be regarded as unjust by the Shallows.

There is another problem. What if another, equally deep, if not deeper ecosophy U or F or O should arise,³⁹ equipped with a concept of justice which is in conflict with Næss's ecosophy T and the concept of right in the platform? Since ecosophy T deploys a particular concept of right, it is a plausible assumption that other, competing deep philosophies will have other concepts of rights, derived from their respective deep value platforms. If there are at least two deep persuasions concerning the good life, of which at least one is friendly to the ecosystem as a whole but not very friendly to human beings, then an open society needs a criterion by which the two ecosophies can be fairly adjudicated. Næss has not been very much interested in elaborating an adequate criterion of justice which might mediate between differing deep convictions as to what (in a deep sense) is a good lifestyle. The ultimate role of justice is to prevent one view of

what, in the deepest sense, constitutes a good life from infringing on the corresponding views of others. As one of several possible Deep Ecological persuasions, ecosophy T risks running into an unregulated conflict with the deep ecosophic self-realisation of others, as well as with radically different deep positions. At least it does so unless one introduces a workable concept of democratic procedure.

THE APPEAL TO NATURE OR HOW TO LEGITIMISE AN ECOCENTRIC COMMUNITY

The logical steps of the Deep Ecological strategy of reasoning are roughly as follows: (1) A socio-political, value-charged anthropology specifying the ontological status of man/society is first established; (2) The anthropological statement is turned into a 'fact' with the help of scientific ecological research; (3) The scientific 'fact' is then used to underpin the normative statements and eco-political ideas deriving from (1). To put it in more concrete terms: Næss's ascription of intrinsic value to nature is a statement of his *Weltanschauung* (1). The statement is further supported by, say, experiments on a community of rats testifying to mutual aid (2).⁴⁰ The acquired evidence is used in the postulate of biocentric egalitarianism (3).

There are two main problems attached to this kind of reasoning. Firstly, it is almost impossible to isolate descriptive and normative moments in this procedure, as the two are intertwined from the very beginning. This is the reverse of Næss's positivist distinction and hierarchical order between *is* and *ought*: 'The word 'philosophy' itself can mean two things: (1) [ecophilosophy] a field study, an approach to knowledge; (2) [ecosophy] one's own personal code of values and a view of the world which guides one's own decisions.'⁴¹ Næss's positivist distinction between descriptive ecophilosophy and normative ecosophy is, at best, spurious, since the very definition of what nature is, is inseparably connected with the postulate of what should be done. Normative ecosophy is the foundation of descriptive ecophilosophy (the foundation of ecology), which in turn supports normative ecosophy. This circular reasoning is clear in the ecosophic system: The hypothesis 'H1: Full self-realisation presupposes the search for [ecological] truth', is subordinate to the ultimate norm 'N1: [Deep Ecological] Self-realisation!'⁴² Ecological truth can thus only be attained under normative ecosophic guidance.

Secondly, Næss inscribes *his own* perceptions into the postulated view of nature: he sees in it what he wants to see – and he goes on to find selected scientific evidence for his perceptions. It is virtually impossible to get out of the orbit of the ecosophically informed narrative: a fact which makes the theory verifiable but not falsifiable. An article by Næss and biologist Ivar Mysterud on 'Wolves as Members of Mixed Communities' is a case in point.⁴³ There are the

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familiar three steps here: Firstly, the notion of the wolf as a possessor of intrinsic value is extended to the wolf as a 'member of a mixed community' – a term inspired by the sociological concept of *Gemeinschaft*. Secondly, the concept of community is read into a biological study of the wolf. Thirdly, Næss and Mysterud's work is offered as empirical evidence for norms concerning humans and wolves as 'members of a mixed, biotic community.' The normative basis for the preservation of wolves is thus established: in accordance with the Norwegian political ideal, wolves are good social democrats in the ecocentric community and should therefore be preserved.

Another example of a similar epistemological circularity is to be found in the movement which claims to be inspired by Deep Ecological premises, namely the American environmentalist organisation Earth First! which we referred to earlier.⁴⁴ The name of the organisation is telling as it clearly establishes priorities. The leader, Dave Foreman, takes Malthus's economic laws on the treatment of the poor as a point of departure. These are construed as conditions for existence in a Darwinist struggle for survival in the biological sense. The empirical evidence is then adduced for normative purposes. The Earth Firsters! such as Christopher Manes not only conclude that draconian birth-control measures are necessary, but speak of AIDS as a self-protective reaction of Gaia against an overpopulated humanity.⁴⁵ They have been accused of callousness, but note how Deep Ecologist Ynestra King answers such criticism:

Foreman once asserted, when asked in an interview about starvation in Ethiopia, that he thought 'the best thing would be just to let nature seek its own balance, to let the people just starve there', certainly a heartless way of putting it, although the point he was trying to make was that the Ethiopian population has overshot the capacity of its devastated environment to produce food [...] Call it callous, if you will, but it is meant to be descriptive, not prescriptive – to suggest that the earth as a living ecosystem might have its own defence mechanisms, including viruses that strike at species that overstress it, to protect it in times of crisis.⁴⁶

King's defence of Foreman is here a distressing illustration of how a green vision may be exonerated irrespective of its inhumanity. King does not reject or disagree with the condition for existence implicit in Foreman's declarations. The criticism is not of a moral, but of a methodological nature: Foreman's statements were ostensibly meant to be *descriptive* not *prescriptive*. As we have suggested, the distinction between *descriptive* and *prescriptive* statements in Deep Ecology, is, at best, deeply problematic. Clearly Foreman's arguments illustrate how Gaia's life-force can be interpreted normatively as *Social Gaianism*.⁴⁷

To what extent does the criticism of Earth First! apply to Deep Ecology? Again, the claim in the Deep Ecological platform that 'The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value'⁴⁸, can be interpreted in two ways:

(1) human and non-human life has intrinsic value;

(2) their flourishing has intrinsic value.

The first reading supports human rights and the animal liberation movement, the second privileges ecological balance. With regard to starving populations, the flourishing of *their* life is clearly in conflict with the ecological balance of, for example, Ethiopia. Næss's platform indicates that in case of such conflict the ecological balance (2) may be given priority: 'The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.'⁴⁹ Whatever Næss may think about Earth First! activists, they are consistent with his philosophy when they argue that, from the perspective of the Deep Ecological platform, AIDS and starvation provide a long term solution for Gaia.

THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF ECOCENTRIC IDENTITY

The starting point, indeed a prerequisite, of the Deep Ecological ethic is a biocentric identity. The demand of full identification with the natural world is a departure from the classical Kantian scheme of things where nature is constructed as the metaphysical 'Other'. Here the duty of humans towards their environment is more of a duty to themselves. By extension, according to Rawls' anthropocentric ethics, people should not maltreat animals because this leads to the corruption of their own morality.⁵⁰ The purpose of a biocentric society is to overcome the ontological curse, the abolishment of the separation of humans from their source of being, from the undifferentiated whole.

Even if we decide to bracket the problem of the rareness of the experience of oneness with nature (except in altered states of consciousness or during middle-class pursuits such as skiing or perching on mountain tops), the belief in the possibility of an ethic based on such – spontaneous?, learned? – identification, strikes one as painfully problematic. Not only does it ignore the existence of loyalties that may be stronger than ecosystemic ones, but it replicates an error made by Marx. He too entertained an idealist hope that individuals of the future would identify completely and spontaneously with their class and, ultimately, with society. The social techniques that were to lead to such identification were the abolition of private property and the socialisation of production. As we have suggested, Næss's Deep Ecology is largely silent on preferred strategies of social change. When pressed on this point, Næss occasionally returns to the benign effects of an eco-friendly upbringing, while Californian environmentalists talk about the 'evolution of consciousness'.⁵¹

The adequate upbringing is to yield a society which is rational and yet compassionate, plural and yet ecological, revolutionary and yet self-limiting. It is a society which will not only have to restrain instincts by building culture (if

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we perceive culture in Freudian terms) but restrain culture by voluntary simplicity. Needless to say that such double restraint is extremely demanding: it is difficult indeed to imagine any mechanism by means of which it could be achieved.

There is a further *hubris* that Deep Ecology shares with familiar utopias. It is the total elision and derision of human passions and desires. Drengson, we recall, defines Deep Ecology as a 'way' which 'aims at appreciation for the intelligence, creativity, beauty, goodness, harmony and vitality of the whole of nature, of the human person and of other person kinds.'⁵² Here one sees the problem in little. Very much in the manner of Rousseau, Deep Ecologists construct nature and humans as essentially good. Implicitly, evil lies in institutions and social structures as if such structures emerged *ex nihilo* and were not human creations. In their critique of science and technology the Deep Ecologists never advert to human curiosity. The fact that our human domination of nature is, in part at least, the fruit of this curiosity has been acknowledged in almost all cosmologies. Indeed St. Bernard in his treatise on the degrees of *hubris*, lists curiosity among the manifestations of grievous sin.⁵³ The shallow end of Deep Ecology is that, in common with other social utopias, it construes evil as a technical blunder, something merely contingent and to be eradicated by an adequate social technology. However problematic, the Kantian connection between freedom and evil continues to haunt us, and the attempts to dismiss it have so far led to the social engineering of 'good citizens' by coercion.

To sum up: In the imagined community of Deep Ecologists the interests of the majority constituted by non-human populations compete with those of *homo sapiens*. Instead of a class/gender power struggle there is a postulated symbiosis of humans, animals and plants – all of them guaranteed the right to self-realisation. The ecocentric community is to be rational and yet compassionate, pluralist and yet ecological, creative and yet self-limiting. The problem with such a community is precisely its heterogeneous make-up. One may certainly imagine a universal brotherhood of wolves – and only wolves, since the needs of wolves are limited and definable and therefore conceivably satisfiable. Human needs are conflicting and have no boundaries, while their complete satisfaction is incompatible with their multiplicity. Since the question of justice remains open and the problem of coexistence of Deep Ecology with other positions in an Eco-State is unresolved, the theory, as it stands, especially in its radical variant, contains enough loopholes to invite, if not logically demand, authoritarian solutions.

It is worth adding that what opens the Deep Ecological Movement to ideological attack is its very diversity, ranging all the way from radical forms of activism to sober theorising.⁵⁴ How to reign in and contain an extremist version of one's own vision is a difficulty faced by every progressive movement from trade unionism to feminism. An additional complication is that the urgency of the ecological crisis demands a common front rather than a fractured movement.

As with all and every exposure of romance, there is almost something sacrilegious in the attempt to deconstruct the gaps and blank spots of an energising vision and an elevating programme. While the theory itself is by no means 'fascist', as some critics generalise, it is an incomplete narrative which invites a faulty 'computation'. However inspiring and benevolent in its intentions, Deep Ecology reveals serious lacunas and inconsistencies which continue to raise the question of intellectual responsibility.

NOTES

¹ We are in debt to Per Ariansen and Jon Wetlesen, Andrew Brennan, Pat Sheeran and Arne Næss himself, all of whom commented and enriched this essay. We obviously disagree with Næss on a number of issues. For his critique and refutation of some of our views see Næss 1998.

² W.H. Auden, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' in *The Oxford Anthology of English Poetry*, Vol II, p. 2104.

³ Næss 1973. The article builds on Næss's lecture series at the University of Oslo in 1972, published as *Økologi og filosofi*, preliminary edition (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1972). See also his *Økologi, samfunn og livsstil* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1976; reprinted 1992), published in English translation as *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (1989).

⁴ Personal communication, August 20, 1998.

⁵ One should, of course, speak of Deep Ecologies rather than of *one* Deep Ecology. For a review of the criticism with responses by Næss, see Witoszek and Brennan 1998. See also Martin W. Lewis's critical review of the existing 'hard' and 'soft' versions of the movement (1992). Among Deep Ecologists, Næss includes (in alphabetical order): Bill Devall, Alan Drengson, Neil Evernden, Faarlund, Warwick Fox, Harold Glasser, Edward Goldsmith, Patsy Hallen, Dolores LaChapelle, Richard Langlais, James Lovelock, Joanna Macy, Andrew McLaughlin, Arne Næss, John Rodman, Theodore Roszak, John Seed, George Sessions, Paul Shepard, Gary Snyder, Sigmund Kvaløy Setereng, Michael Soulé, Michael Zimmerman. See Arne Næss, 'Deep Ecologists Theorists. Who are they? Intramural suggestions' (typescript, 1995).

⁶ References to Deep Ecology are to be found in a number of significant works on the crisis of modernity, from Gore 1992 to Giddens 1994. The radical vision of Deep Ecology has certainly inspired proponents of cultural studies. On 'eco-culture' see Slack and Whitt 1992.

⁷ T – as in the initial of Næss's 'Tvergastein' cabin, located in the Norwegian mountains. The reference to Tvergastein illustrates the concrete rootedness of Næss ecosophic work in his own life. T can also be understood as short for *tolkning* – the Norwegian word for 'interpretation'. See Næss 1953.

⁸ Næss 1989, p. 123.

⁹ On the liberal tradition see Holmes 1991.

¹⁰ Næss 1989, p. 29.

¹¹ Næss 1976, p. 320 (our trans.)

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- ¹² Næss 1989, p. 133. Næss did not formulate the slogan but illustrated the point with triangular models.
- ¹³ The normative system, with norms N_1 – N_n and hypothesis H_1 – H_n , is indicated in Næss 1989, p. 209.
- ¹⁴ Næss 1976, p. 321 (our trans.).
- ¹⁵ Næss 1976, p. 321 (our trans.). See also Næss 1985, p. 261.
- ¹⁶ Næss 1989, pp. 16, 28.
- ¹⁷ Rawls 1987, p. 23f.
- ¹⁸ For further elaboration of this critique see Anker 1994.
- ¹⁹ For a radical interpretation of Næss's work see List 1993.
- ²⁰ Spinoza [1955] p. 201.
- ²¹ Foreman and Heywood 1987, pp. 115f, pp. 89f, pp. 213f, pp. 193f, pp. 202f.
- ²² Personal conversation, 20 August 1998, quoted with permission.
- ²³ Næss 1989, pp. 197, 207.
- ²⁴ Rawls 1993.
- ²⁵ Hardin 1968.
- ²⁶ Echoing Hobbes, the Deep Ecologist Christopher Manes (1990: 243) writes: 'We are all aware of the path taken. The history of ecological decline on this [American] continent is nasty, brutish and short.'
- ²⁷ Næss 1980, p. 321 (our emphasis).
- ²⁸ Næss 1989, p. 85. Næss quotes a Norwegian proverb which captures the essence of Hobbes's war of all against all.
- ²⁹ Bailey 1993.
- ³⁰ Næss 1987, p. 7 (our trans.).
- ³¹ Næss refers to Milbrath 1984. See NIBR-report, Oslo, 1992:1, p. 69f.
- ³² For Næss's views on the 'grass roots' see Næss 1987, p. 7. Extensive studies of statistical material would be required to fully vindicate or refute his claims. The very concept of the 'grass roots', however, is problematic. If it is meant to describe environmental activists as 'far from the centres of power and decision making in routine politics', then there has been a study arguing to the contrary: 'People who are far removed from routine politics and poor in social resources *seldom* take part in actions [of political protest]'. See Olsen and Sæteren 1980, pp. 16, 71 (our emphasis and trans.).
- ³³ Næss 1989, p. 29.
- ³⁴ In a lecture at the Centre for Development and the Environment at the University of Oslo (26/8/89) Næss suggested that, in a sustainable society, enthusiasts of motor car sports should be put in a reservation. That would marginalise them, he argued, while maintaining cultural diversity. It was difficult to establish how serious the master was.
- ³⁵ Næss, 1989, p. 101.
- ³⁶ Dangers inherent in the radical interpretation of ecosophy T have been apparent both to the followers of anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric ethics. In contrast to ecocentric positions, which focus on the moral primacy of ecosystems, some opponents have suggested biocentric ethics, which emphasise the rights and moral status of individuals. Some biocentric philosophers have criticised Næss for not paying sufficient attention to the way in which the intrinsic value of individual living beings bears on the question of justice and rights. See Johnson 1991, pp. 241f; Wetlesen 1992, p. 89f. See also Hargrove 1992.

³⁷ Næss 1989, p. 29.

³⁸ Since a possible conflict is not regulated by any common understanding of justice, this could in effect lead to a schism within the Deep Ecology movement. Here it is as well to reiterate that Næss's concept of right is, predictably, open to different readings. Following the reformist interpretation, the statement 'humans have no right to reduce the Earth's richness' may be read as: 'It is wrong to reduce the richness under a legal democratic system of justice.' But in the light of the radical interpretation, the question of the actual political consequences of Næss's pluralism begins to be worrisome.

³⁹ Fox 1990, chap. 5.

⁴⁰ Rothenberg 1993, chapter III.

⁴¹ Næss 1989, p. 36-37.

⁴² Næss 1976, p. 312, (our trans.).

⁴³ Næss and Mysterud 1987, p. 30.

⁴⁴ Manes 1990, p. 60f, 125f, p. 140f. See letters from Arne Næss to *Earth First!*: 'A European Looks at American Branches of Deep Ecology' (1988), 'Individualism or Collectivism' (1988), 'Letter to Dave Foreman, Earth First!' (1988).

⁴⁵ Christopher Manes (1990: 233) writes: 'Earth Firsters! have suggested in a Malthusian fashion that the appearance of famine in Africa and of plague in the form of AIDS is the inevitable outcome of humanity's inability to conform its numbers to ecological limits.' Manes refers to Miss Ann Thropy (pseud.) 'Population and AIDS', and Daniel Conner, 'Is AIDS the Answer to an Environmentalist's Prayer?'. The pseudonym 'Miss Ann Thropy' refers to Christopher Manes himself. See Lee 1995, chapter 6: 'Misanthropy and Social Justice'.

⁴⁶ Quoted by Sale 1988.

⁴⁷ The perception of humanity as a polluting element in the Gaia organism is also characteristic of James Lovelock: 'Humans on the Earth behave in some ways like a pathogenic microorganism, or like the cells of a tumour or neoplasm. We have grown in numbers and in disturbance to Gaia, to the point where our presence is perceptibly disabling, like a disease.... The statement "There is no pollution but people" carries an awful truth.' See Lovelock 1991, pp. 153-155. The argument which does not value human life as such, only a 'flourishing' condition of the Earth, leads, in fact, to something that can be called *Social-Gaianism*. On the history of the analogous term see Bannister, 1979.

⁴⁸ Næss 1989, p. 29.

⁴⁹ Næss 1989, p. 29.

⁵⁰ See Rawls 1971, p. 17, p. 512. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 237.

⁵¹ See Devall 1979; also Seed 1981.

⁵² See Drengson 1991.

⁵³ See St. Bernard, *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, Migne. Patr.Lat, Vol. 182, 941-977.

⁵⁴ This diversity and the ensuing confusion may be seen on the example of a collection such as List 1993. Here the jostling side by side of Næss, Callicott and Merchant with Manes and Freeman naturally leads to an endless barage of criticisms and explanations.

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