

# ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS TO HOLISTIC ONTOLOGY: A Naessian Approach

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**Abstract:** Deep ecological movement, started in 1972 by distinguished Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, is founded on three basic principles: a scientific insight into the interrelatedness of all systems of life on Earth together with the rejection of anthropocentrism, the need of self realization, identifying with the whole, and Holistic Ontology. If we realize the universe as a self, where we find the interconnectedness of ourselves with the universe then that would involve a radical change of environmental ethics to an environmental metaphysics. That in turn would make our ways of living more consistent with the well being of life on earth. The Deep Ecology, proposed by Arne Naess helps the readers to have a holistic approach to our mother earth and to the environment.

**Key Terms:** Arne Naess, Ecosophy, Ecophilosophy, Ecoself, Deep Ecology, Gestalt, Holistic Ontology, Identification, Self-Realization.

## 1. Introduction

When I was four or five years old, I had the opportunity to explore some shorelines, and I was intrigued by the fantastic variety of life forms, especially the tiny fishes and crabs and shrimps which would gather around me in a very friendly way. I lived with these other beings throughout the summer. When I was nine or ten, I learned to enjoy the high mountains where my mother had a cottage. Because I had no father, the mountain somehow became my father, as a friendly, immensely powerful being, perfect and extremely tranquil. Later, pressures from school, from society, from the man-made world, made me happy to be where nothing pressured

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me into behaving or evaluating in any particular way. For example, clouds talk to us, but they do not pressure us into believing anything. Even a work of art somehow intends something, informs us about something. But nature is overwhelmingly rich and good and does not impose anything upon us. We are completely free, our imagination is free. Of course, if we are careless, an avalanche might bury us or we might drown, but in nature there are always warnings. I never had the feeling that nature is something to be dominated or to be conquered: it is something with which we coexist.

Modern astronomy, which we follow, indicates that the universe is growing, and I feel that I am growing with the universe: I identify with the universe – the greater the universe, the greater I am. Some people feel threatened when they realize that the cosmos is so immense and we are so small. But we can be just as big as the cosmos, in a sense. We ourselves, as human beings, are capable of identifying with the whole of existence.<sup>1</sup>

Arne Dekke Eide Naess (1912-2009) was a Norwegian New Age philosopher, an important intellectual and inspirational figure within the environmental movement of the late twentieth century, who coined the term 'Deep Ecology.' He grew up in a wealthy family in Oslo and among the mountains of Norway. He went to school in Paris and studied with the Vienna circle of philosophers in Austria. In 1939 Naess was the youngest person to be appointed full professor at the University of Oslo. Arne Naess was both a professor of philosophy, who taught at the University and a philosopher who lived his philosophy. He has written thirty books and hundreds of papers in specialized philosophical topics like philosophy of science, empirical semantics, and ecology.

In this paper I am concerned with the philosophy of deep ecology and not the deep ecology movement initiated by Naess. In the early days, Philosophy as a whole considered the nature

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<sup>1</sup>George Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1995, 26.

as something useful for human beings. Naess, however, impresses upon us that nature has an intrinsic value; it is something with which we co-exist. Of course attributing intrinsic value to nature is not a new trend; we have, among many others, Francis of Assisi and Spinoza in the Medieval and Modern period respectively, who attributed intrinsic value to the nature. Naess was a pioneer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who brought this concept with more nuances and urgency.

## 2. Sources of Inspiration

Arne Naess was inspired by the philosophy of Spinoza, Gandhi, and Alfred North Whitehead and the religious traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism, particularly *Bhagavat Gita*. Many environmental movements of his time paved the way to improve his approach to the environment. For example, Rachel Carson's famous book *Silent Spring* inspired him to form 'Ecosophy T,' his personal Ecosophy. Romanticism also was an inspiration for him. Inspired by the fundamental thoughts of great people and traditions he adapted them to add more strength to his original and basic vision of deep ecology.

Ecology, as a subject of philosophical and scientific investigation, had evolved from the natural history of the Greeks, particularly by Theophrastus, a friend and associate of Aristotle. He first described the interrelationships among organisms and between organisms and their non-living environment. German zoologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866 applied the term *Oekologie* to the relation of the animal both to its organic as well as its inorganic environment. The word ecology comes from the Greek word *Oikos*, meaning 'household', 'home' or 'place to live'. Naess defined ecology as "the inter-disciplinary scientific study of the living conditions of organisms in interaction with each other and with the surrounding, organic as well as inorganic."<sup>2</sup> Ecology begins with the premise that, this world – and the planet Earth in particular – is our home, and that we human beings ought to care for it with responsibility.

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<sup>2</sup>Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Life Style*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Publication, 1989, 36.

Arne Naess coined the term 'Deep Ecology' originally to emphasize a contrast between deep ecology and 'Shallow Ecology' or what was later termed 'Reform Environmentalism.'<sup>3</sup> Shallow Ecology views human beings as the source of all values and ascribes only instrumental value to the non-human world. On the other hand, Deep Ecology rejects the anthropocentric image in favour of the 'total-view'<sup>4</sup> image. A number of key issues, terms and slogans from the environmental debate will clarify the contrast between the shallow and deep ecology movement.

**Pollution:** The shallow reaction to acid rain for example tends to avoid action by demanding more research, and the attempt to find species of trees which will tolerate high acidity, etc. The deep approach concentrates on what is going on in the total ecosystem and calls for a high priority fight against the economics and the technology responsible for producing the acid rain.

**Resources:** The shallow approach emphasizes resource as an instrument for humans, especially for the present generation in affluent societies. In this view the resources of the earth belong to those who have the technology to exploit them. They believe that, the resources will not be depleted because as they get rarer, a high market price will conserve them and substitute will be found through technological progress. But the deep ecology approach advocates that resources and habitat are for all life forms and they are for their own sake.

**Population:** The shallow approach considers population as a problem only for developing countries. But deep approach recognizes population explosion as exerting excessive pressures on the planetary life.

**Land and Sea Ethics:** The shallow approach considers wild life management as conserving nature for future generations of

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<sup>3</sup>Eric Katz, *Beneath the Surface*, London: MIT Press, 2000, 16.

<sup>4</sup>It means a collection of factors like background, passions, prejudices, etc. of the person. The total view of a philosopher may affect the philosophy of the person. In the same manner the total view of the ecosopher will have a lot of influence in his Ecosophy.

human beings. Deep approach argues that the earth does not belong only to the human; it has got a value in itself.

The essence of deep ecology as compared with the shallow ecology is to ask deeper questions. The adjective ‘deep’ stresses that we ask why and how, where others do not. For instance, ecology as a science does not ask what kind of a society would be best for maintaining a particular ecosystem. As long as ecologists keep narrowly to their science, they do not ask such questions. What we need today is a tremendous expansion of ecological thinking in what Naess called ‘Ecosophy,’ a shift from science to wisdom.

Ecophilosophy is distinguished from Ecosophy. Ecophilosophy, according to Naess, deals with environmental problems common to ecology. It is a descriptive study, appropriate to a university course. But when we ask fundamental questions regarding the environmental problems we seek the root causes of it. There emerges the Ecosophy. According to Naess all must develop a personal Ecosophy. Naess had developed a personal Ecosophy known as Ecosophy T, where T referred to ‘Tvergastien,’ a mountain hut in Norway, where Naess had a hut and used to write many books and spent a lot of time there.<sup>5</sup> His Ecosophy T was the inspirational source of his deep ecology and the interpreters of Naess often equate Ecosophy T and deep ecology.<sup>6</sup> Now we proceed to know how Arne Naess explained how this deep questioning is possible and the use of such deep questioning.

### 3. Apron Diagram

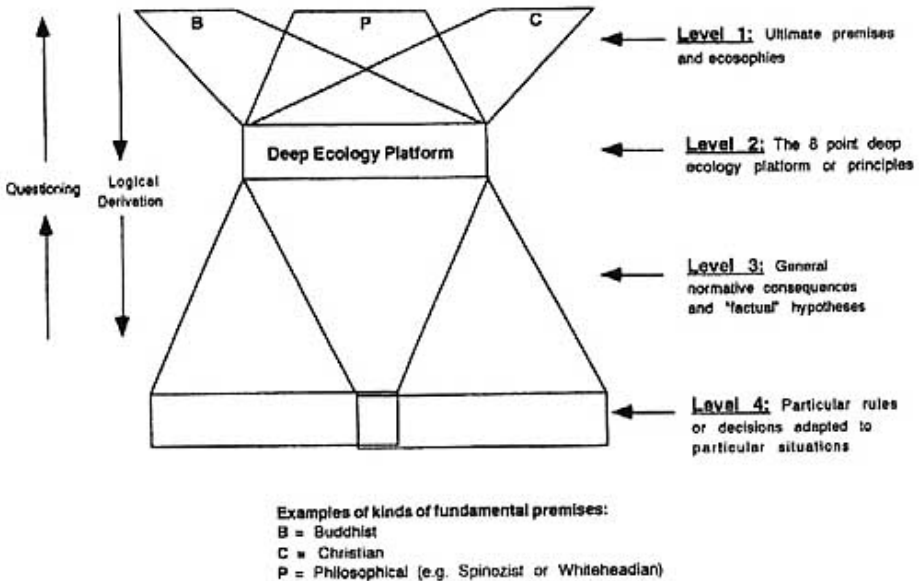
For deep questioning Arne Naess developed the four level system depicted in a pyramid’s form (he called it Apron diagram). In this there is an integrated movement from the practical realm at level four (at the base of the pyramid) to the

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<sup>5</sup>Arne Naess, “The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects,” *Philosophical Enquiry*, Vol. 8, 1986, 19.

<sup>6</sup>Katz, *Beneath the Surface*, 17.

religious / philosophical realm at level 1 (at the peak of the pyramid).<sup>7</sup>



Level one is concerned with uncovering a person's ultimate premises or norms, from which all actions and attitudes spring. This is the level we reach if we keep asking 'why?' to everything a person says (rather like what small children do) beginning at the realm of everyday life. Eventually if the process has gone deep, we could make a statement which encapsulates our deepest intuitions about life based on deep experiences of wide 'identification'.<sup>8</sup>

Fundamental norms generally belong to the philosophical or religious realm; and being fundamental, they are not provable or derivable from other norms. These fundamental norms can be very diverse, for example, a Buddhist and a Christian would disagree about the existence of God, but both would want to protect the nature. Arne Naess explores the need for a set of

<sup>7</sup>Naess, "The Deep Ecological Movement," <[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Apron\\_diagram.png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Apron_diagram.png)> (9 October, 2014).

<sup>8</sup>Michael E. Zimmerman, "Deep Ecological Movement," in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, Herb Klein, ed., New York: Pearson-Prentice Hall, 1993, 206.

basic views which can be broadly accepted by deep ecology supporters with widely divergent belief systems and ideologies. For this reason he devised the deep ecology platform,<sup>9</sup> which is also known as the eight points of the deep ecology movement. This is the second level in the Apron Diagram. They are:

1. All life has value in itself, independent of its usefulness to humans.
2. Richness and diversity contribute to life's well-being and have value in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy the vital needs in a responsible way.
4. The impact of humans in the world is excessive and rapidly getting worse.
5. Human life styles and population are key elements of this impact.
6. The diversity of life, including cultures, can flourish only with reduced human impact.
7. Basic ideological, political, economic, and technological structures must therefore be changed.
8. Those who accept the forgoing points have an obligation to participate in implementing the necessary changes and to do so peacefully and democratically.

If you can largely agree with the platform statements, you fall within the umbrella of 'the deep ecology movement' and you can place yourself within the ranks of its supporters. The platform is not meant to be a rigid set of doctrinaire statements, but rather a set of discussion points, open to modification by people who broadly accept them.

Here level one statements of wider identification are represented by the first three points which incorporate the ultimate norm, 'intrinsic value.' So for all the deep ecologists, the first three points belong to the first level in apron diagram. The points four to seven are seen as the bridge between the ultimate

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<sup>9</sup>The basic platform has remained virtually unchanged since 1984, although statements 4 and 5 are often reversed. This is the version which appears in Naess' *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, D. Rothenberg, trans., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 89.

norm and personal lifestyles, with point eight, relating specifically to concrete actions in the world.

At level three one has moved from consideration of general principles at level two to an exploration of one's own situation. Here we make general normative principles for our life. The general normative principles of each country may vary; so the level three will be different from culture to culture and the moral principles regarding the protection of the nature also differ. Level four will comprise concrete decisions in concrete situations which appear as conclusions from the deliberations involving premises at level one to three. This level is 'the practical realm'.

In the first level we have fundamental norms. It differs from person to person; i.e., the fundamental norms of different persons are decided by the principles of religion in which they belong to, the philosophy they follow, the tradition and culture they practice, etc. So diversity is seen in the first level. The second level creates a unity in this diversity. It is the deep ecology platform that unites the different ecosophies of different persons. Again in the third level we see a change. The moral law that is made in consultation with the deep ecology platforms also can vary from culture to culture, from person to person, provided that they will be based on those eight golden points.

From these general principles we apply rules to the concrete life situations. What we must do in a particular situation (for example, a need to kill an animal for the sake of food) will be based on the general normative principles which belong to the level three. Again the law that we apply to one situation is not a fixed one. It can change according to the situations and circumstances. So we may ask: Is not deep ecology proposes subjectivism then? Naess was cautious about this criticism and rejects subjectivism in morality. To prove this he proposes the three core ideas of deep ecology which we shall discuss briefly in the following section.



## 5. Identification, Self Realization, and Holistic Ontology

According to Eric Katz, there are three basic features of the philosophical position that distinguish Deep Ecology from all other philosophies and ideologies.<sup>10</sup> They are:

- i. Identification with the non-human natural world,
- ii. The pre-eminent value of self-realization, and
- iii. A relational holistic ontology as the basis of normative values and decisions.

Deep ecology, for Naess, is a personal statement of a total view. Each individual must develop his or her own total view regarding the value of the environment and the human relationship to the natural world. Each individual's total view may be different from the values of other individuals working on their own total views. What ties these varying total views together into a coherent position is first, the platform of deep ecology; and second, the method of developing a total view of the human relationship to the natural world as a response to the ecological crisis.

### 5.1. Identification

This concept means that each individual human agent develops some form of empathy, understanding or commonality with other entities and systems in the environment. “It is a spontaneous, non-rational, but not irrational, process through which the interest of (or interests) another beings are reacted to as our own interests.”<sup>11</sup> Commonality is fundamental to the idea of identification, though it does not mean ‘identity.’ We understand that we have common interests with all other life-forms and systems in the natural world; but we do not believe that we literally are those other entities in the natural world.

I am Jith Francis; I may identify with the cow standing outside of the window. In that I recognize our common interest in the maintenance of this habitat, but I am not the cow. Perhaps the most crucial way in which we identify with other living beings is through our recognition that all living beings have some type of

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<sup>10</sup>Katz, *Beneath the Surface*, 23.

<sup>11</sup>Arne Naess, *Deep Ecology*, San Diego: Avant Books, 1985, 216.

intrinsic or inherent values, and that their individual flourishing is good for them, not necessarily for human beings and human institutions. Here we see the shift from the anthropocentrism to the ecocentrism. Identification is thus the recognition that the other life forms have value in themselves, just as we do. And their lives are meaningful to them. But identification can also be linked to the core process of the expansion of the self, a process that eventually leads to the self-realization, the fundamental norm of Naess' version of Deep Ecology.

## 5.2. Self-Realization

Self-realization means the process by which a being “realizes inherent potentialities”<sup>12</sup> within itself and its situation. But if we seriously identify with other living beings, we engage in the process of expanding our narrow egoistic self into a larger ‘Self’ that encompasses all those other beings with which we experience a commonality of interests. We cannot simply develop our own personal potentialities. True self-realization means participating in the developing potentialities, the self-realization of all other beings. This is the complete process of self-realization, the development of full potential of all living beings, experienced as part of our own development and self-realization through the process of identification.

For Naess, the full process of self-realization eliminates the need for the system of moral obligation. When we achieve the full process of realization i.e., the self realization of all, the development of full potential of all living beings, naturally we will not harm anyone. For harming a tree becomes as if we are harming our very self. So the morality becomes a way of life than an obligation or duty. We do not need moral laws, for morality becomes part and parcel of our lives. He advocates the notion derived from Kant, of the ‘beautiful action’ – the harmonious fusion of self-interest and right action, not commanded or directed by a sense of moral law. For Kant an act becomes ethical when the act is universal (i.e. accepted by all), necessary, and disinterested. So if we think in Kantian way, our

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<sup>12</sup>Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, 229.

action becomes ethical only if we have these three characteristics. The deep ecological expansion of the self, through the process of identification, towards the goal of self-realization is quite different, however, from the moral extensionism according to which moral horizon ought to be extended to other beings (animals, plants, species, and the earth) that traditionally are not thought of as having moral standing. In moral extensionism we ought to give a moral standing to the non living things. There is a pressure from outside for this action. According to Naess, however, there is no one to force us from outside; this moral ‘love’ towards the non living beings comes from within.

### 5.3. Holistic Ontology

It is to be remembered that, in the deep ecological expansion of self, it is not our consideration of moral value that is extended; it is our identification, our empathy, our commonality of interests that are extended. We extend our selves: we see ourselves more and more connected to the rest of the natural world.

So from two directions then we have arrived at the third core idea of the philosophy of deep ecology: the holistic ontology. First, we have Naess’ denial of ethics being the primary focal point of deep ecology. The supremacy of ontology is demonstrated by the identification of interests and the expansion of the self as the source of actions regarding the preservation of nature. Second, the expansion of self and the goal of self-realization are seen to be components of the ontological claim about the interconnection of humankind and nature.

The advocates of deep ecology, in other words, are primarily concerned with developing the proper deep understanding of the interconnections of all entities in the natural world. Any ethical principle will have to be derivative of the fundamental ontological positions. As Naess writes, “what I am suggesting is the supremacy of environmental ontology and the realism over environmental ethics.”<sup>13</sup>

The interconnection of entities is clearly the key idea. Deep ecology rejects an atomistic metaphysics, in which all entities are

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<sup>13</sup>Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, 236.

separated from each other. An individualistic-atomistic metaphysics would conceive human beings as a separate individual standing alone, free and unconnected to all other entities within the environment. But from the perspective of deep ecology, just the opposite is true; all entities are related. The individuals are constituted and defined by its relationships to the whole. This is the essence of holism. The holistic interconnection of all entities in the natural world is the basic ontological commitment of the philosophy of deep ecology.

The foundation and justification of the holistic ontology is based on Naess's 'relational epistemology' and 'Gestalt ontology' as explained in the book, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*.<sup>14</sup> Naess first argues that all qualities and characteristics of the objects in the world are relational, dependent on the perspective and location of the observer, and indeed on the observer's total view. This relationalism has an ecosophical value. It makes it easy to undermine the belief in organisms and persons as something which can be isolated from their environment.

From this relationalism he re-defines the idea of matter. He calls it as 'relational field' which refers to the totality of our interrelated experience.<sup>15</sup> When he talks about the different qualities of an object he says, the secondary and tertiary qualities are more real than the abstract mathematical qualities of objects. Naess calls these secondary and tertiary qualities as 'concrete contents' of reality and these concrete contents with the abstract qualities make the relational field, i.e., matter in the universe. For Naess, the concrete contents of the relational field can be explained only through an understanding of 'gestalts' and 'gestalt thinking.'

A gestalt is a spontaneous experience of a whole, and it is at once comprehensive and complex. The gestalt is the basic and immediate form of understanding and perception. Only later do we analyze our gestalts into parts, into separate objects and

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<sup>14</sup>Naess, *Ecology, Community and Life Style*, 56.

<sup>15</sup>Naess, *Ecology, Community and Life Style*, 55.

qualities. Gestalt thinking explains how the various contents of our experience in the relational field ‘hang together.’ In speaking of a piece of music, Naess explains how we will experience the first few notes differently if we are familiar with the piece.<sup>16</sup>

## 6. Ecoself

At the heart of deep ecology stands the insight that the world is a delicately balanced web of life, and the place of human beings is in it, not above it! Hence, any harm that is done to our environment is harm done to ourselves. Our way of life is defined and determined by our surroundings (environment). By surroundings we generally refer to that domain that has a direct bearing upon our everyday life. In the past, one’s surroundings meant one’s farm, village, town, city or even nation. Naess expands the surrounding to mean the entire planet earth. The new eco-consciousness reminds us that every local act is a global act. In every place around the world, what we do in our own locale is affecting a global system, which in turn affects all in the planet. So our planet earth is something more than a place of living.

Naess’ view of identification and self-realization corresponds to the recognition of our interconnectedness with the universal ‘substance’ and a consequent expansion of our self-love to embrace it. We must not only see the universe as a substance but as also as a self, in whose self-realization we also participate. Only if we view universe as a Self, striving to achieve its own potentialities through Self-realization, is there a reason for us to identify with it and to preserve it. If we consider universe as a self, then it must strive for its self realization, i.e., it must realize its inherent potentialities. According to Naess, as we aspire to realize our own inherent potentialities, earth also has the same desire to realize the potentialities. And through identification we will naturally allow it to realize the same. So when we consider the Universe or more clearly the earth as a self, we won’t harm the Universe. Since our self realization depends on self realization of the Universe, we would naturally then be inclined

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<sup>16</sup>Katz, *Beneath the Surface*, 31.

to protect the Universe. This tendency to protect the Universe is not out of a sense of duty or an ought from outside; it comes from within.

## 7. Conclusion

Naess's critics come from several directions. The most radical 'Green persons,' who are involved in different environmental movements, would say Naess was in a way lending greater moral weight to non-human life.<sup>17</sup> Naess' philosophy expresses an idealist view and the practical application of his philosophy seems to be difficult if not impossible. For example, identifying the self interest with that of an animal. Yet others argue that Naess's notion of 'self-realization,' with its Indian roots, is too 'mystical' to provide a foundation for hard-headed environmental policy.<sup>18</sup> Naess quoted Bhagavat Gita VI. 29:

*Sarva- bhūta-sthamātmānamsarva-bhūtāni cātmani  
Iksate yoga-yuktātmāsaroatrasamadarsanah*

(He who has yoked himself in discipline sees the same everywhere, he sees himself as in all beings and all beings in himself.)

Naess argues, however, that the self realization described in the Bhagavat Gita should not necessarily be conceived as a mystical or meditational state. He has removed his interpretations to a great degree from Hindu religious context. He clearly says, "The self realization does not postulate an eternal or permanent self. My idea of self realization (realizing oneself with the world) does not correspond to the idea of realizing the absolute atman."<sup>19</sup> Naess further explains that "the verse is freed from any connection to Hindu metaphysics and comes closer to the modern political idea of empathy and solidarity with all

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<sup>17</sup>Katz, *Beneath the Surface*, 29.

<sup>18</sup>The idea of self realization is one of the important themes in the Indian Philosophy, especially in the Orthodox and Heterodox systems. And many misunderstand the self realization of Naess with the idea of self realization in the Indian Philosophy. Katz, *Beneath the Surface*, 232.

<sup>19</sup>Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 195.

humans, though it is expanded to include all nonhuman living beings as well.”<sup>20</sup>

Though Naess proposed the idea of ecocentrism rather than anthropocentrism in his ‘Ecosophy T’ the three main ideas of deep ecology, i.e., self-realization, identification, and holistic ontology fail, however, to escape the bias of anthropocentrism. All these three core distinguishing ideas of deep ecology are deeply embedded in a human-centred worldview and they are based on human categories of thought and human notions of value. Since deep ecology is a philosophical system developed by human beings, this anthropocentric perspective is, of course, not surprising, but perhaps unavoidable.

Despite of his many critics, Naess’s influence has been immense. One of his successors to his chair at the University of Oslo states: “Philosophy’s place in Norwegian academic life, as in the society at large, is due in large measure to Naess.”<sup>21</sup> The Norwegian ‘core curriculum’ with the emphasis on self-awareness and the environment, bear the unmistakable stamp of Naess’s ideas. His influence is reaching everywhere in the world now, because we live in an era of technological revolution. We see many great changes around us in technology, production methods, the communication methods, etc. There is also a continuous decline of the quality of life. Even the very existence of the life system is threatened by the way of interaction with the environment.

The people from all walks of world, culture, belief can adopt this method because it is a holistic philosophy. This is the era where we see a lot of environmental crisis; yet we are often not aware of the importance of nature and its value. I think if we polish our thinking patterns in tune with the Naessian approach, in the coming years we can see a change in the human attitude towards the nature. We need to ‘feel’ the nature.

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<sup>20</sup>Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 195.

<sup>21</sup>A. Hannay, “Norwegian Philosophy,” in Ted Honderich. ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 627.