Philosophical Dialogues

Arne Næss and the Progress of Ecophilosophy

Edited by
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Preface

Dialogue—one of the most fetishized concepts of our time—is much easier to talk about than to implement as a modus operandi. All too often the ostensibly pluralist and dialogic turns out to be a discreetly disguised exercise in the monologic imagination: a cult, a school, an ordinance, the Word of the Father. In the pages that follow we have tried to register what we consider to be one of the more genuine and seminal intellectual dialogues of the latter part of the twentieth century. Its instigator is the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss; its concern is the fate of the planet.

More than thirty years have passed since Næss first broached the main premises of the deep ecological project. Seldom has such a laconic—and open-ended—statement provoked such an avalanche of response and spurred so many initiatives. How to account for this? After all, here was a daring, radical vision of social change being propounded at the very twilight of utopias. Its magnetism derived not merely from its appeal to an unspent idealism but, first of all, from its sheer common-sense formulation of the roots of and remedies to environmental crisis.

Despite the myriad of explications and anthologies of Næss's thought, none has hitherto presented the ways in which deep ecology matured and mutated through dialogical confrontation and polemic. All too often nonspecialist scholars and commentators, unaware of the growth and development that has taken place within ecophilosophy over the last thirty years, draw on or refer to isolated pronouncements or materials published during the movement's infancy. During this period Næss not only attempted to address emerging postmodern and feminist perspectives but to rethink his own vision and methodology in the light of critique and controversy.

Hence this volume, although celebratory, is not a piece of hagiography. On the contrary, it attempts to bring together the most significant—and hard hitting—exchanges between Næss and his interlocutors. Some have been hitherto unpublished, other difficult of access because they took place in television studios or in the depths of Norwegian forest.

The book is dialogic in a triple sense. First, it tries to show the sheer breadth of Næss's engagement with other thinkers. They range from encounters with Sir Alfred Ayer and Paul Feyerabend, through exchanges with ecofeminists such as Karen Warren, to polemics with Indian intellectuals such as Ramachandra Guha. In a real sense, dialogue and confrontation remain Næss's element. Even as we go to print close to his eighty-fifth birthday, he has been excitedly taking up the challenges presented by some of his opponents in this volume, rethinking his position and preparing further responses.

Second, to bring this work up to date and to introduce a fresh perspective

on earlier exchanges, we have invited a number of significant scholars in the field of environmental philosophy to comment briefly on crucial areas of concern. How does deep ecology rate at the end of the twentieth century? Is it, as some claim, a spent force or does it remain at the cutting edge of ecological thought as we enter the new millennium?

Third, the latent scenario in this book is that of a Platonic symposium, with Næss cast in his favorite role of Socrates. Like Socrates, Næss has always wanted to be a "respectable pest." This book goes some way towards illustrating his achievements in this regard. Recall the famous feast, where a lively debate on the nature of love is broken up by the entrance of the drunken Alcibiades. Socrates's pupil first extols his master and then asks him for guidance. Socrates, however, evades both Alcibiades's advances and his desire to turn him into a guru. In the subsequent confrontation, Alcibiades is all emotional commitment, a shard of a "broken timber of humanity"—set over against Socrates's stoic sang-froid. The feast ends in the philosopher's triumph: Socrates maintains his sobriety to the end of the revels, then throws himself into a totally different debate where he puts everybody to sleep, and finally goes off to swim in the Leykon and pursue his daily routines.

For some readers, Næss's "symposium" may well exhibit a similar anti-climax. Næss's engagement in the search for the truth, his passionate interest in the moral improvement of the world, and his exquisite debating stamina forever clash with his ultimately skeptical, even playful detachment from the pedantries, intensities, and insincerities of academic debate.

Næss's "progress" is intriguing. His green writings sprouted from logical empiricism and the Vienna Circle—a dry and seemingly infertile ground. Consider his earlier texts on language, or the philosophy of Spinoza, and compare these with his later polemical and morally engaged writings. What a metamorphosis! The desert cacti have come to blossom. Challenge and provocation enter the titles of his articles. The style becomes more engaged and combative. A green *homo ludens* replaces a gray *homo pedanticus*.

The method, however, stays the same: Næss's basic philosophical equipment is still that of the logical empiricist. Ecosophy T is laid out as a series of prescriptions that could be endorsed by an emotivist. The deduction of actions from underlying principles is set out as if in a textbook of empiricist philosophy of science. The famous apron diagram has a Hempelian flavor, reminding us that Næss is no stranger to the deductive-nomological method. How striking, that this Spartan approach should produce such a flourishing of ideas, controversy, and new moral demands.

This flourishing, we propose, is not simply a consequence of the urgency of Næss's thought its timing or phrasing. It is equally a response to the poetics of ambiguity that characterize his later work. As Harold Glasser has noted:

> Following the zetetic skeptic tradition [Næss] eschews dogma by asserting that his own work is searching, "on the way," it is necessarily fragmentary and ever amenable to improvements, modifications and elaborations. Caveats aside,

> Næss's penchant for revising can make it difficult to pin down his interpretation of particular elements of the deep ecology approach.[1]

Næss claims that the open texture and methodological vagueness of his work have been a semantic device which encourages widespread acceptance of deep ecology. Even if this is true, the present volume illustrates that Næss's work has provoked an unprecedented philosophical argument and attracted multiple interpretations. What is included here is only a sample of a larger colloquium between Næss, his apologists and critics.[2] A number of interlocutors and long-time collaborators had to be omitted because their exchanges with him, however enriching for Næss's thought, belong to the genre of exegesis rather than polemics. This applies, for example, to the significant body of work produced by David Rothenberg and by many of Næss's Norwegian students and collaborators.

The essays and comments which follow speak for themselves, making further introductions unnecessary. They record an astonishing moment in the history of western philosophy; its premises threatened to unhinge centuries of value theory based on the idea of humans as the only entities which possess moral worth in their own right. Like any genuinely subversive philosophy which has inspired a movement and a wide following from politicians to poets, Næss's vision has been subject to a gentle rebuttal, if not to side-tracking, by mainstream philosophers.

An unsympathetic observer might wonder if the deep ecology platform sets out an effective political agenda. One might also question the dubious nature of some environmental movements claiming their credentials from the deep platform (see for example the section on "schisms" in this volume). Finally, one might object that the core preoccupations of the followers of deep ecology are too narrowly fixed on the forest, the mountain, and other wild places. Næss's disciples have neglected, for the most part, the habitats in which the majority of humans live and act: the city, the savannah and the shores of seas and lakes.

So much for reservations. Despite their undoubted force, the exchanges printed here go some way towards addressing them. They illustrate that Næss has never stood still: he has come increasingly to recognize that his own vision is only part of a larger agenda of moral and political concern, embracing the situation of women, the prospects for peace, and the advancement of human rights. Today's deep ecology may have lost some of its earlier spikiness. But this represents a change to an ever more open and dialogic stance.

Leszek Kolakowski, a philosopher who has advocated the praise of inconsistency, talks about a "chronic conflict in philosophy, which seems to be able to marshal its history: the conflict between the quest for the absolute and a flight from it, between fear of oneself and fear of losing oneself in the very principle, in which sustenance is hoped for." Kolakowski divides all philosophers into priests and jesters. The jester is the eternal *puer*, a skeptical observer of social order: active, critical, questioning all that appears self-evident; he embodies imagination, pluralism, individuality, playfulness, relishes the tensions between

ideals, and enjoys exploring the future, the possible, the hopeful. The priest is the *senex*, a conservative who believes in a harmonious system of values; he guards the absolute, defends the past, orthodoxy, tradition and sanctity. "The priest and the jester both violate the mind; the priest with the garrote of catechism, the fool with the needle of mockery."[3]

Næss confounds this dichotomy. As this volume will show, in his dialogic vision the priest and the jester constantly exchange roles, defy one another—and their critics. A skeptical priest and a pious jester are joined in a paradoxical alliance.

Notes

[1] Harold Glasser, "Demystifying the Critiques of Deep Ecology," in *Rethinking Deep Ecology*, Nature and Humanities Series, ed. Nina Witoszek (Oslo: Center for Development and the Environment, 1996), 93–94.

[2] Papers reprinted in the present volume have been left as close to their original form as possible. In particular, no attempt has been made to rewrite articles so as to remove gender uses of "man" and "he" in application to persons in general.

[3] Leszek Kolakowski, "The Priest and the Jester," in *Stalinism and Beyond*, trans. Jane Zielonko Peel (London: Paladin Books, 1971), 124, 127.

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We are especially grateful to Lóránd Lukács Jr. for his generous graphic and technical assistance in the preparation of this volume. The enormous task of typing and formatting the debates has been eased by the contributions of Kit Fai Næss, Peder Anker, Yeuk-Sze Lo and Pål Deberitz. We also owe a special debt to Sigmund Kvaløy, Arne Næss's long time collaborator, for his illustrations which adorn our book.

Finally, we are grateful to the publishers of those articles which originally appeared elsewhere for permission to reprint them in the present volume.

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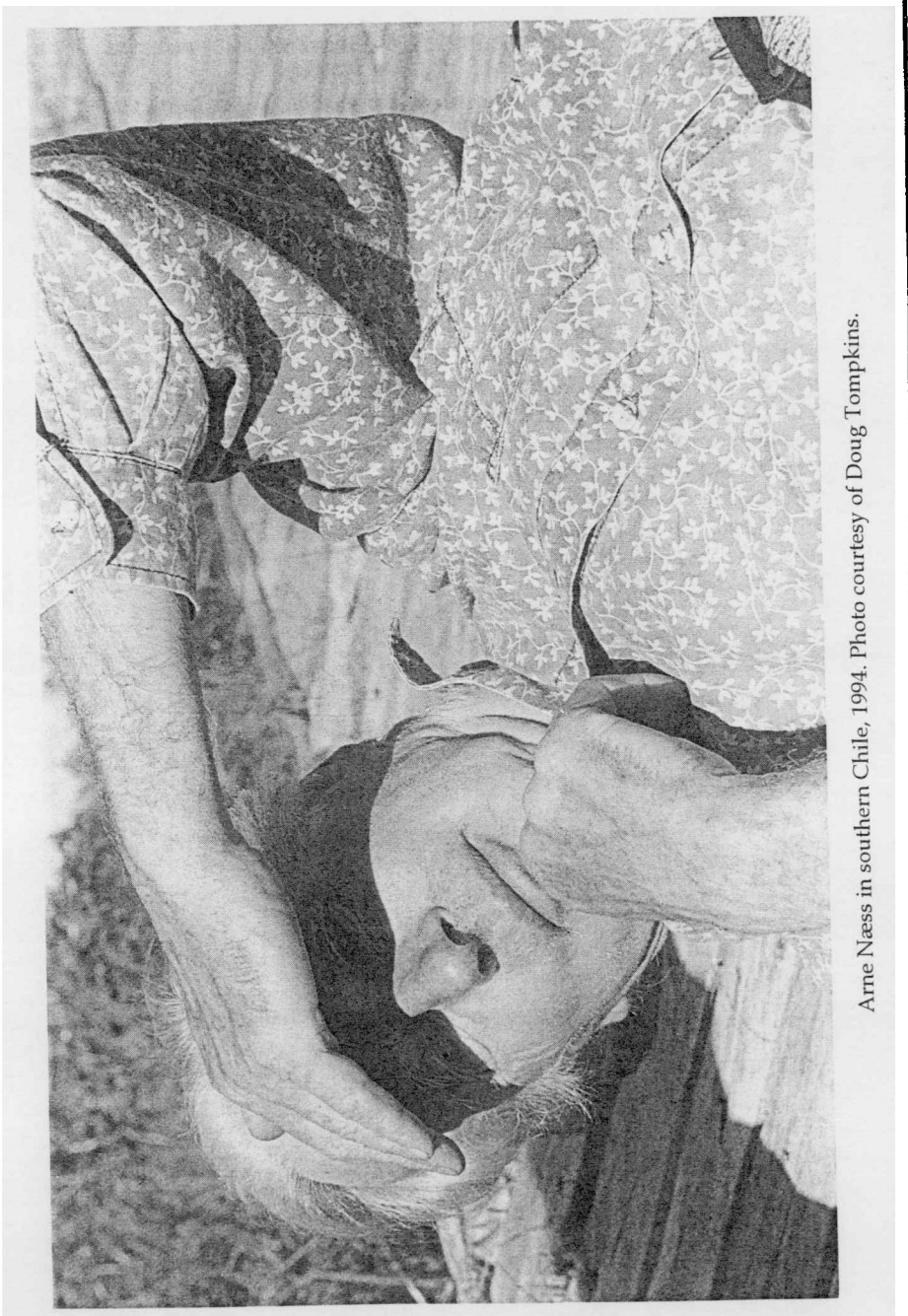

Arne Næss in southern Chile, 1994. Photo courtesy of Doug Tompkins.

Part I

Philosophical Systems and Systems of Philosophy

Figure 1. The Ecophilosopher.

Chapter 1

The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements: A Summary

Arne Næss

The emergence of ecologists from their former relative obscurity marks a turning point in our scientific communities. But their message is twisted and misused. A shallow, but presently rather powerful movement, and a deep, but less influential movement, compete for our attention. I shall make an effort to characterize the two.

I. The Shallow Ecology Movement

Fight against pollution and resource depletion. Central objective: the health and affluence of people in the developed countries.

II. The Deep Ecology Movement

(1) Rejection of the man-in-environment image in favor of *the relational, total-field image.* Organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations. An intrinsic relation between two things A and B is such that the relation belongs to the definitions or basic constitutions of A and B, so that without the relation, A and B are no longer the same thing. The total-field model dissolves not only the man-in-environment concept, but every compact thing-in-milieu concept—except when talking at a superficial or preliminary level of communication.

(2) *Biospherical egalitarianism* in principle. The "in principle" clause is inserted because any realistic praxis necessitates some killing, exploitation, and

suppression. The ecological field-worker acquires a deep-seated respect, or even veneration, for ways and forms of life. He reaches an understanding from within, a kind of understanding that others reserve for fellow men and for a narrow section of ways and forms of life. To the ecological field-worker, *the equal right to live and blossom* is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom. Its restriction to humans is an anthropocentrism with detrimental effects upon the life quality of humans themselves. The quality depends in part upon the deep pleasure and satisfaction we receive from close partnership with other forms of life. The attempt to ignore our dependence and to establish a master-slave role has contributed to the alienation of man from himself.

Ecological egalitarianism implies the reinterpretation of the future-research variable, "level of crowding," so that general mammalian crowding and loss of life-equality is taken seriously, not only human crowding. (Research on the high requirements of free space of certain mammals has, incidentally, suggested that theorists of human urbanism have largely underestimated human life-space requirements. Behavioral crowding symptoms, [neuroses, aggressiveness, loss of traditions, etc.] are largely the same among mammals.)

(3) *Principles of diversity and of symbiosis.* Diversity enhances the potentialities of survival, the chances of new modes of life, the richness of forms. And the so-called struggle for life, and survival of the fittest, should be interpreted in the sense of the ability to coexist and cooperate in complex relationships, rather than the ability to kill, exploit, and suppress. "Live and let live" is a more powerful ecological principle than "Either you or me."

The latter tends to reduce the multiplicity of kinds of forms of life, and also to create destruction within the communities of the same species. Ecologically inspired attitudes therefore favor diversity of human ways of life, of cultures, of occupations, of economies. They support the fight against economic and cultural, as much as military, invasion and domination, and they are opposed to the annihilation of seals and whales as much as to that of human tribes and cultures.

(4) *Anti-class posture.* Diversity of human ways of life is in part due to (intended or unintended) exploitation and suppression on the part of certain groups. The exploiter lives differently from the exploited, but both are adversely affected in their potentialities of self-realization. The principle of diversity does not cover differences due merely to certain attitudes or behaviors forcibly blocked or restrained. The principles of ecological egalitarianism and of symbiosis support the same anti-class posture. The ecological attitude favors the extension of all three principles to any group conflicts, including those of today between developing and developed nations. The three principles also favor extreme caution toward any over-all plans for the future, except those consistent with wide and widening classless diversity.

(5) Fight against *pollution and resource depletion.* In this fight ecologists have found powerful supporters, but sometimes to the detriment of their total stand. This happens when attention is focused on pollution and resource depletion rather than on the other points, or when projects are implemented which reduce pollution but increase evils of other kinds. Thus, if prices of life necessities increase because of the installation of anti-pollution devices, class differences increase too. An ethics of responsibility implies that ecologists do not serve the shallow, but the deep ecological movement. That is, not only point (5), but all seven points must be considered together.

Ecologists are irreplaceable informants in any society, whatever their political color. If well organized, they have the power to reject jobs in which they submit themselves to institutions or to planners with limited ecological objectives. As it is now, ecologists sometimes serve masters who deliberately ignore the wider perspectives.

(6) *Complexity, not complication.* The theory of ecosystems contains an important distinction between what is complicated without any "Gestalt" or unifying principles—we may think of finding our way through a chaotic city—and what is complex. A multiplicity of more or less lawful, interacting factors may operate together to form a unity, a system. We make a shoe or use a map or integrate a variety of activities into a workaday pattern. Organisms, ways of life, and interactions in the biosphere in general exhibit complexity of such an astoundingly high level as to color the general outlook of ecologists. Such complexity makes thinking in terms of vast systems inevitable. It also makes for a keen, steady perception of the profound human ignorance of biospherical relationships and therefore of the effect of disturbances.

Applied to humans, the complexity-not-complication principle favors division of labor, *not fragmentation of labor.* It favors integrated actions in which the whole person is active, not mere reactions. It favors complex economies, an integrated variety of means of living. (Combinations of industrial and agricultural activity, of intellectual and manual work, of specialized and nonspecialized occupations, of urban and non-urban activity, of work in city and recreation in nature with recreation in city and work in nature.)

It favors soft technique and "soft future-research," less prognosis, more clarification of possibilities. More sensitivity toward continuity and live traditions, and more importantly, towards our state of ignorance.

The implementation of ecologically responsible policies requires in this century an exponential growth of technical skill and invention but in new directions, directions that today are not consistently and liberally supported by the research policy organs of our nation-states.

(7) *Local autonomy and decentralization.* The vulnerability of a form of life is roughly proportional to the weight of influences from afar, from outside the local region in which that form has obtained an ecological equilibrium. This lends support to our efforts to strengthen local self-government and material and mental self-sufficiency. But these efforts presuppose an impetus towards decentralization. Pollution problems, including those of thermal pollution and recirculation of materials, also lead us in this direction, because increased local autonomy, if we are able to keep other factors constant, reduces energy consumption. (Compare an approximately self-sufficient locality with one requiring the importation of foodstuffs, materials for house construction, fuel, and skilled labor from other continents. The former may use only five percent of the energy

used by the latter.) Local autonomy is strengthened by a reduction in the number of links in the hierarchical chains of decision. (For example, a chain consisting of a local board, municipal council, highest sub-national decision-maker, a state-wide institution in a state federation, a federal national government institution, a coalition of nations, and of institutions, e.g., EEC top levels, and a global institution, can be reduced to one made up of a local board, nation-wide institution, and global institution.) Even if a decision follows majority rule at each step, many local interests may be dropped along the line, if it is too long.

Summing up then, it should, first of all, be borne in mind that the norms and tendencies of the Deep Ecology movement are not derived from ecology by logic or induction. Ecological knowledge and the lifestyle of the ecological field-worker have *suggested, inspired, and fortified* the perspectives of the Deep Ecology movement. Many of the formulations in the above seven-point survey are rather vague generalizations, only tenable if made more precise in certain directions. But all over the world the inspiration from ecology has shown remarkable convergences. The survey does not pretend to be more than one of the possible condensed codifications of these convergences.

Secondly, it should be fully appreciated that the significant tenets of the Deep Ecology movement are clearly and forcefully *normative*. They express a value priority system only in part based on results (or lack of results, see point 6) of scientific research. Today, ecologists try to influence policy-making bodies largely through threats, through predictions concerning pollutants and resource depletion, knowing that policy-makers accept at least certain minimum norms concerning health and just distribution. But it is clear that there is a vast number of people in all countries, and even a considerable number of people in power, who accept as valid the wider norms and values characteristic of the Deep Ecology movement. There are political potentials in this movement which should not be overlooked and which have little to do with pollution and resource depletion. In plotting possible futures, the norms should be freely used and elaborated.

Thirdly, insofar as ecology movements deserve our attention, they are ecophilosophical rather than ecological. Ecology is a limited science which makes use of scientific methods. Philosophy is the most general forum of debate on fundamentals, descriptive as well as prescriptive, and political philosophy is one of its subsections. By an *ecosophy* I mean a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy is a kind of *sophia* wisdom, is openly normative; it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe. Wisdom is policy wisdom, prescription, not only scientific description and prediction.

The details of an ecosophy will show many variations due to significant differences concerning not only "facts" of pollution, resources, population, etc., but also value priorities. Today, however, the seven points listed provide one unified framework for ecosophical systems.

In general systems theory, systems are mostly conceived in terms of causally or functionally interacting or interrelated items. An ecosophy, however, is more like a system of the kind constructed by Aristotle or Spinoza. It is expressed verbally as a set of sentences with a variety of functions, descriptive and prescriptive. The basic relation is that between subsets of premises and subsets of conclusions, that is, the relation of derivability. The relevant notions of derivability may be classed according to rigor, with logical and mathematical deductions topping the list, but also according to how much is implicitly taken for granted. An exposition of an ecosophy must necessarily be only moderately precise, considering the vast scope of relevant ecological and normative (social, political, ethical) material. At the moment, ecosophy might profitably use models of systems, rough approximations of global systematizations. It is the global character, not preciseness in detail, which distinguishes an ecosophy. It articulates and integrates the efforts of an ideal ecological team, a team comprising not only scientists from an extreme variety of disciplines, but also students of politics and active policy-makers.

Under the name of *ecologism* various deviations from the deep movement have been championed—primarily with a one-sided stress on pollution and resource depletion, but also with a neglect of the great differences between under- and over-developed countries in favor of a vague global approach. The global approach is essential, but regional differences must largely determine policies in the coming years.

Notes

This chapter is reprinted with minor revisions from a summary of an introductory lecture at the World Future Research Conference, Bucharest, 3–10 September 1972. Published in *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95–100. The original paper was confiscated by the Ceaušesku-regime, and, doubtlessly, it preserved somewhere in the archives in Bucharest. Arne Næss comments, "I found some years later that the seven points made the deep ecology movement too narrow—a kind of sect. Also, the word 'equal intrinsic value' should be cut out in favor of 'some intrinsic value.' "

Chapter 2

The Deep Ecology Platform

Arne Næss and George Sessions

1. The flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth has intrinsic value. The value of nonhuman life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
5. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
6. Significant change of life conditions for the better requires changes in policies. These affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of intrinsic value) rather than adhering to a high standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.

Notes

"The Deep Ecology Platform" has been cited in numerous studies by Næss. See, for example, A. Næss, "Will the Defenders of Nature Please Rise?" *Conservation Biology*, ed. M. E. Saulé (Sinauer Associates Inc., 1986), 504–515.

Chapter 3

The Glass Is on the Table: The Empiricist versus Total View

Arne Næss, Alfred Ayer, and Fons Elders

ELDERS: Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome you to a debate which will, I suppose, be of interest in many respects. I would like to lose as little time as possible in beginning this philosophical contest, in which you will see an avid football fan, Sir Alfred, and a lover of boxing and alpinism, Arne Næss, debating with each other on central issues of their own philosophies. First of all, we have to discover what kinds of philosophical views both philosophers have. Sir Alfred and Mr. Næss, would you each explain to the audience what you consider to be your tasks as philosophers? Sir Alfred?

AYER: Well, I suppose to try to answer a certain quite specific range of questions that are classified as philosophical questions—and are very much the same questions that, I think, have been asked since the Greeks, mainly about what can be known, how it can be known, what kind of things there are, how they relate to one another.

In general, I would think of philosophy as an activity of questioning accepted beliefs, trying to find criteria and to evaluate these criteria; trying to unearth the assumptions behind thinking, scientific thinking and ordinary thinking, and then trying to see if they are valid. In practice this generally comes down to answering fairly concrete specific questions.

And I hope, in a sense, to finding the truth.

ELDERS: And you, Mr. Næss?

NÆSS: Well, I see it a little differently, I think, because I would rather say that to philosophy belong the most profound, the deepest, and the most fundamental problems. They will change very little, and they have not changed much over the last two thousand years. So we have different conceptions of philosophy, but we agree that the epistemological question, "what can we know?" and the ontological one, "what main kinds of things are there?" belong to philosophy. As I see it, they are among the most profound questions we can ask.

AYER: Yes, but how do you measure the profundity of a problem? I mean, a problem may often look quite trivial and then turn out to be profound. In a sense, you try to answer what you're puzzled by. Now this may be something very profound, it may even look quite superficial, then turn out to be profound.

NÆSS: How do we measure? Well, that's one of the most profound questions of all. How do we know? I suppose it will vary with cultural and social circumstances. It involves fundamental valuations, not only investigations of fact or logic.

ELDERS: Sir Alfred, would you give an outline of a skeptic?

AYER: Well, I was going to talk about this. It seems to me that, perhaps not so much in ancient philosophy, but certainly in modern philosophy since Descartes, a lot of problems have arisen out of a certain very characteristic skeptical argument. I should say that a skeptic is always someone who questions one's right to make certain assumptions—often assumptions about the existence of certain kinds of things—on the ground of their going beyond the evidence.

I mean, a very obvious and classical example would be skepticism about other minds. People will say, well, all you observe is other people's behavior; all you observe is their actions, the expressions on their faces. How do you know that anything goes on behind? How do you know that everybody isn't a robot, or whatever? And so you get skepticism also tied up with a certain neurosis, I think. It has also a certain emotional tone.

Or again take the classical example of the skepticism of David Hume, the skepticism about induction. Hitherto, when you lit a cigarette, it would smoke, and so on; when you have walked on the floor it has supported you. How do you know that this will happen in the future? How can you extrapolate from past evidence to future occurrences? And then you are proving that the argument is, in a sense, circular, always presupposing something that you can't justify. And a lot of philosophy comes out as the posing of arguments of this kind and the attempts to find replies to them. And you could even characterize different sorts of philosophy by their different ways of meeting the skeptic. Now, I think one mark of a philosopher, why I think that Arne Næss is a profound philosopher, is to take skepticism seriously. Would you?

ELDERS: But in *The Problem of Knowledge* you are quite critical about skepticism.

AYER: I think I rather cheated in *The Problem of Knowledge*. It seems to me that I gave skepticism a good run, and then in the end somehow some little strong John Bull common sense came out in me and I took away from the skeptic the victory he had won, like a referee in a boxing match.

NÆSS: [. . .] I'm sorry to say but in some ways I feel miserable to be defending skepticism now, because there is a very tragic conflict between the attitude I hold in my integrated and concentrated moments, which is more or less skeptical, and the requirements of consistent action. For instance, when we believe that we really must do something about some terribly pressing problem, we must somehow narrow down our perspective. The vast plurality of possible worlds—and how do we know in which world we live—are suddenly not only irrelevant, but contemplation of them undermines the willingness and capacity to act. Most people are only willing to act forcefully and consistently when they have a belief in the truth and close their minds to all else.

AYER: But I should have thought this was a field in which a certain kind of skepticism anyhow was very desirable and fruitful. It's very healthy indeed not to listen to the rhetoric about democracy, but to look at the facts. Look and see what actually happens: see how people live their lives, see what is actually done in the law courts, look behind the words to realities. This is in a sense a formal skepticism, although you're not skeptical about the words that we use to mark them with. And I would think there that your approach is thoroughly skeptical and at the same time constructive in this field.

NÆSS: Yes, it's desirable that people should be like you in this way, but mostly they seem not to be like that. The students say that we must get rid of particular textbooks of Næss because they undermine convictions and will undermine collective action now and over the next five years. And this is real; it is a tragedy, because they need rhetoric and dogmatism, I think. Scepticism breeds passivity. I do not feel that way, but the students do.

ELDERS: But, Sir Alfred, if you are stressing this point of the relationships between certain philosophical schools on one hand and certain values on the other hand, do you see any relation between your empiricism and your role as director of the Humanist Movement in Great Britain?

AYER: Yes, I see some relation. I don't see a relation in the sense that I would be able to deduce my political or my social views from any set of metaphysical or epistemological principles. I don't think that, in this sense, I have a coherent system or that there can be one. But of course I think that there is some relation, inasmuch that if one has an empirical, even skeptical temper of mind,

then one will be hostile to rhetoric, or at least one will look for the facts behind the rhetoric.

I've been a humanist, for example, partly because I could see no reason to believe in the existence of God. And therefore I would be opposed to people who not only maintained this, but also based political or social programs on it.

I would be a humanist in as much as I think I would be professionally opposed to humbug of any kind: the kind of humbug that you too often find in people in power, in judges and people of that sort. And, in a sense, I would expect an empirical philosopher to be radical, although if one looks at history, this isn't always so: Hume, who was the greatest of all empiricists, was in fact, if anything, a Tory. This was partly because of his skepticism. He was so skeptical about schemes of human improvement.

ELDERS: Like Schopenhauer.

AYER: Yes. But in general it has certainly been true in the last century or so that there has been a close association, so close an association between empiricism and radicalism that it couldn't entirely be an accident. But I think it's a matter of a certain habit of mind, a certain critical temper in the examination of political and social as well as philosophical questions, that is responsible for this, rather than some deduction from first principles.

ELDERS: Yes, but these are not really arguments, but merely a piece of history.

AYER: I'm giving you an explanation. You asked me what I thought the connection was, and I . . .

ELDERS: The historical explanation. But we're talking now on the level of arguments about the relation between empiricism and humanism.

AYER: But it's slightly more than this, because I think a certain habit of mind, a certain critical temper that you would develop if you did philosophy in the sort of way that Næss and I do it, would on the whole tend . . . after all, you bring the same intelligence to bear on any of a wide range of problems, even though they aren't necessarily the same problems, and this would, I think, tend to have the effect of making you a liberal radical in social and political questions. This would be more than just an historical accident, as it might be if I happened to be both Protestant and have brown eyes; it's not as accidental as that. There is, I think, some causal connection of a very close kind.

But I don't think that I can, from any kind of empiricist premises, deduce a political program. I mean, you can't get rabbits out of hats that don't contain them. Do you agree?

NÆSS: Well, no! First of all, you expect that as philosophers we should somehow be able to deduce them, whereas I would say our responsibility is to connect our views—our ethical and epistemological as well as our political views—in a fairly decent way so that we get a coherent whole. The connections may be looser than ordinary scientific connections, looser than deductions. I think we disagree here on how we conceive of our roles as philosophers. I consider myself a philosopher when I'm trying to convince people of nonviolence, consistent nonviolence whatever happens. That is a fairly fantastic doctrine, considered descriptively or empirically. I must therefore make clear, to others and myself what kind of normative principles I also make use of, and derive from them the special norms and hypotheses characteristic of Gandhian strategy of conflict behavior. I think I believe in the ultimate unity of all living beings. This is a very vague and ambiguous phrase, but I have to rely on it. It is a task for analytical philosophy to suggest more precise formulations. Because I have such principles, I also have a program of action, the main outline of which is part of my philosophy. So I might suddenly try to win you over to consistent nonviolence and to persuade you to join some kind of movement—and this in spite of my not believing that I possess any guarantee that I have found any truths.

AYER: I can see you might indeed try to persuade me of this, but I don't think you'd persuade me of these methods. The ultimate unity of living things: I mean . . .

ELDERS: Is this metaphysics, in your opinion?

AYER: Well it could be an ordinary scientific statement. In fact it would include not only living things but also inanimate things, if they were all made of atoms; in this sense they are homogeneous. Then I suppose there is more homogeneity between organic things, although the difference between organic and inorganic is so slight.

It doesn't seem to me that on any scientific basis of this sort, one is going to build an ethical view. After all, civil wars take place, and the people who fight each other in them don't deny that they're each human beings and even belong to the same nation: but it doesn't stop the fighting.

So, in fact, this alone is not going to be sufficient. You have to put up some moral principle, which is not going to be deducible from any factual or metaphysical one; that it is wrong to take life of any kind. But do you then extend this to all life, mosquitoes and the like, or just human life? I'm not saying this ironically: I think that it's a perfectly defensible position to be vegetarian and so on—I'm not, but I think . . .

ELDERS: But will you try, Mr. Næss, to give the metaphysical foundation for your belief in nonviolence, about which we can speak later? We are still at the level of principles and arguments for or against metaphysics.

AYER: And it's partly political too, isn't it? It's not just metaphysical. How well Gandhi did against the British, he would have done less well against the Nazis.

NÆSS: Yes, metaphysical and political and anthropological, all at once, all in one: therefore systems are unavoidable. Gandhi as a leader in Germany? Perhaps one million Jews killed before 1938, none after. He advised resistance, not submission. The metaphysical principle here of course belongs more to the Indian than to the European tradition.

AYER: Yes, I would say so.

NÆSS: But the ecological movement may change the European tradition. The formulation "all living beings are ultimately one," is neither a norm nor a description. The distinction between descriptions and norms and even imperatives can be put in afterwards, semantically speaking. It is the kind of utterance you make in support of something I would call an intuition, by which I do not mean that it is necessarily true. In moments of concentration you are aware of vast perspectives: yes, that is the thing, ultimately life is one!

And then you start to ask yourself how you can argue for this and what does it mean; and at this moment you need a norm, a system of ethics and an ontology and plenty of hypotheses in many fields covered by the sciences. And you say: a mosquito and myself are obviously not biologically the same, so I must mean something different from it. For instance, something like: if I hurt you, I hurt myself. My self is not my ego, but something capable of immense development. Think of a picture from the war: a young man is just going to throw a grenade and there is another young man, the so-called enemy, very similar to him, also intending to do the same at exactly the same moment. It's a case of "him or me," but they are also obviously aware of the fact that they are the same kind of being and that to throw grenades at each other is really nonsense. They are one.

AYER: Well, I share your moral sentiments, but I think what you've been saying is very largely just false. It's like the schoolmaster who is going to beat the boy and says, "This is going to hurt me more than it'll hurt you." That's an absolute lie. It isn't going to hurt the schoolmaster at all—on the contrary, in only too many cases it's going to give him pleasure.

NÆSS: The boy also if he's a masochist.

AYER: The boy also if he's a masochist, yes. But, in fact, what you are saying simply isn't true. I mean, not only a mosquito, and I but even you and I are not one. Of course, if I sympathize with you and you are hurt I shall be sorry, but I shan't be hurt in the same way. It's indeed true, empirically true, that to a rather limited extent human beings sympathize with one another; with peo-