

Arne Naess and Possibilism

Andrei Whitaker

Andrei Whitaker is finishing his Masters in Environmental Studies at Dalhousie University. His thesis is on the possibility of restoring wolves to the Canadian Province of Nova Scotia. The remarks below are a continuation of his conversation with Arne Naess held in Oslo in 2005. See his article "Five Things you Should Know about Arne Naess, the *Trumpeter* Vol. 22, No. 1, Winter 2006, pages 113–121. In this part of their talks they briefly explore Naess's version of possibilism. For an article by Naess on this topic see "Possibilism and Reflections on Total Systems," pages 29-42, *The Trumpeter*, Festschrift Section of Vol. 22, No. 1. There are also discussions of these topics in some *SWAN* Volumes, see especially Vol. IV: *The Pluralist and Possibilist Aspect of the Scientific Enterprise*, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2005, especially pages 119–133.

It is just past lunch and Kit-Fai is on the phone making dinner plans with the Dutch ambassador. Arne is smiling and sipping a Pepsi while I'm sliding down the couch in a well-fed glow. We have been talking about my recent hitchhiking trip around the Lofotens, a small chain of mountainous islands hovering just above the Arctic Circle. Arne laughs as I confess that I forgot my thermarest and was forced to sleep on a yoga mat a friend gave me in London. He knows from experience the ground is much too cold for that.

He starts to reminisce about camping and sleeping outside. He believes you need to go travelling and sleep under the stars while you are still young, though, knowing Arne, this statement probably has nothing to do with actual age. He tells me about his journeys on the Hurtigruten, the coastal ferry that navigates Norway's fjords, and is delighted to learn that I have taken it. I don't have the heart to reveal to him that I actually sneaked on board, but we do talk about sleeping on the upper deck in two chairs pushed together. I confide that I didn't sleep much up north and felt lost in the constant light. In the Arctic, time seemed stretched thin.

Arne nods and then hums to himself a little before saying, "There are an indefinite number of times. We can not possibly expect for there to be

only one time.” My puzzled face makes him laugh, so he explains further. “Even in the human experience we have of youth, middle age, old age etc.; age itself is not definite. There could be places where you get younger and younger instead of older.”

And with those simple words, I am introduced to possibilism, which as far as I can gather, is a philosophy that states that anything is possible, anything can happen.

Arne continues. “In pure logic this is all right to say, while factually it is meaningless. You need to understand, there is a difference between factual relations and logical relations. For example, when you leave my home, I am pretty sure you will be in Oslo, but you could step out into Ancient Rome. Probably not, but it could happen. It is different from what you expect, but not impossible. How can you prove it impossible? You could prove it silly, but not impossible.”

At this point I am starting to feel a little giddy, but luckily Kit-Fai interrupts my dizziness with a cup of strong tea. My thoughts are erratic and I desperately try to grasp something tangible. *Anything is possible?* That sounds like intellectual chaos. And then as if understanding my faltering mind, Arne suddenly gets up and starts to walk across the room.

Kit-Fai: “Where are you going?”

Arne: “I don’t know. How could I possibly know? But it seems like I am walking in this direction.”

Arne reaches a bookcase in the corner of the room and picks up a framed photograph of Einstein. He murmurs “beautiful man” and then holds the picture up to the light. “Imagine having such an imagination. The concept of it is staggering.” He walks back to the couch and we start talking about Einstein’s famous youthful daydream of riding a light beam across the universe—a daydream that arguably led to the development of relativity theory and quantum physics.

Quantum physics and space-time relativism have intrigued me since I was a boy, though I can’t claim to understand it all. Infinite is a hard idea to hold, especially when one considers the universe is both infinite and expanding. Luckily, Arne is knowledgeable on the subject and has even written a book on quantum physics and the work of Einstein and Niels Bohr. He believes the deeper you delve into science, the more philosophy there is to discover. As our conversation is dancing around a subject that has bothered me since childhood, I decide to shoot straight from the hip. Taking a deep breath, I lean forward and ask, “If the universe is expanding, what is it expanding into?”

As always when I am serious, Arne laughs as he answers.

The Universe is expanding—not necessarily into more space—but it is expanding into something. This is not a logical contradiction, but it is not possible to answer your question. It sounds contradictory, but perhaps it is like a dream. Dreams don't have any logic at all, yet while we are in them they seem to make perfect sense. It is not a contradiction to say that it is expanding, but not into something. Perhaps there are many places and no distances. This may seem like a factual contradiction, but we must not think that everything has to happen in space. Why does there have to be space?

“There's no space?” As I repeat that line to myself in bewilderment, my mind lets go and I finally understand what possibilism is about. It is a philosophy of imagination and dreams, an abandonment of the mundane to explore the empirically impossible. As this comes to me, I smile to myself. Arne notices and just says one word—“good.”