

Arne Naess: some non-philosophical aspects

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When I first met Arne at the University of Hong Kong where I was a student, I was surprised by what I called an incongruous combination: a professor who lectured on lofty subjects such as Kirkegaard and Pyhrronic Scepticism and who on the other hand was extremely friendly and 'plebian'. I was more used to lecturers who, though not unfriendly and in no way unkind, made the distinction between teaching staff and students felt in no uncertain terms. It was, after all, Hong Kong in the early 1970's.

Apart from his accent, the thing I noticed about Arne was his relaxed and cheerful demeanor. He always gave the impression of thoroughly enjoying what he was doing when he lectured. It was clear from the welcoming party the Philosophy Department threw for him that he looked upon students as equals. He asked us about something and listened attentively to the answer even though some of us had a dubious command of English as a second language and spoke rather hesitantly. For me, a naïve, rather sheltered young woman with shaky self-esteem, it was flattering. I sought him out for an informal discussion when I heard that he was giving a series of lectures on existentialism - something the University in those days looked upon as part of a literary discipline, not a philosophical one. I cannot recall if Arne said anything groundbreaking or enlightening about Jean-Paul Sartre (who was held by some in the Comparative Literature Department as a god) or anybody else, but I do remember the lightheadedness I felt when I left his office after our more than an hour long talk. It was so refreshing, almost intoxicating to be treated as if I were engaged in a philosophical discourse with the visiting professor on equal footing! He made me feel that I was *exchanging* ideas with him. The encounter was worth the risk of having to face my mother's displeasure when I forgot to call home to say I would be late for dinner. Later I learnt that Arne had in similar ways captured the hearts of my fellow students, male and female alike. I was not the only student with whom he had one-on-one dialogues.

I saw even with my untrained eyes at the early stage of our association that Arne had a great love for nature and that it was genuine and deep. Already

during our first walks in the very moderate hills behind the campus, I noticed almost with alarm his passion. 'Alarm' because by comparison I was an uncaring ignoramus. (During one of the first walks in Nature in Norway, I pointed at some plants and said "strawberries?" when my companion told me gently, "Eh, no, potatoes".) I was brought up to be impervious, or indifferent to nature. In my culture, at least in our home, most animals fell within the categories of either 'dirty and bacteria-bearing' and these were the creepy-crawlies such as snakes and lizards; or 'scary and dangerous', the likes of which were lions and tigers. My experience of nature consisted of an annual excursion to what was left of the 'countryside' that my school organized. Like everybody else, I looked at the few trees and tiny streams still spared from the already ongoing 'development', had our picnic lunch, took a few pictures of one another, and went home without any further thought to what I had seen. My only contribution or saving grace was I never littered. But for Arne, Nature and what was in it meant a lot more. He interacted with the things he saw in nature and as I learnt later, often identified himself with animals and plants. He seldom refrained from playing with cats and dogs. Clouds were always interesting to him. He had a huge ability to be fascinated by what he saw, even something as uninteresting to me as a housefly or a bee. If it was stationary Arne would stand quietly near it to observe what it was doing. Sometimes he would explain to me what he saw. When out strolling he would thrust his head into a cluster of blooming flowers to savour their scent. He walked into thick, unknown bushes without fear of getting lost or treading on a reclining snake - and Hong Kong had a few in those days, and not all of them innocent. This lack of fear I later learnt had something to do with his view that Man and Nature are one and there is no need to *fear* oneself. I was overwhelmed by the first waterfall he showed me in 1974 when I went to Norway for the first time to see him and later by his beloved mountain Hallingskarvet. They were both overpowering and awe-inspiring. I felt as if they would fall upon me or engulf me. Arne saw the fear in my face and found it amusing that anyone could be afraid of Nature. In the course of time, he understood that for somebody with my background and lack of 'exposure', it was not so unnatural.

It was said of Arne that he had a complex personality; character traits that contradicted each other. He was serious, but he was playful. He disliked small talk and yet he loved playing with words; he liked teasing others and

was partial to practical jokes. He could sit for long long hours inside to write or read (some years he had a windowless office), at the same time he had a strong need to be out in the open air - to climb, to go skiing, or with saw and axe in his knapsack, to fetch firewood in the forest near our house. Yet, his love for Nature was not of the tree-hugging kind. Nor did he feel that hills and dales had 'a spirit'. I tend to think that the ability to feel connected to Nature was innate in him. During a stay abroad with his widowed mother and elder sister, Arne spent a lot of time outdoors. One day, he came home to tell his mother with great excitement that he was "playing *with* the Mediterranean". He was 8. And already as a child of 5, he felt the mountain Hallingskarvet beckoning to him and he wanted to live up there when he grew up. Twenty years later he breathed life into this childhood dream by building a cabin he called 'Tvergastein' on this massive range of granite, 1503 meters above sea-level. A few years before his death, journalists asked him about his relationship to God - now that he was so old and could die any time. He would quietly admit that he had no religion, but "was not godless". When pressed, he would sometimes say that mountains were his God-surrogate.

His love for Hallingskarvet and Tvergastein was borne out by the fact that he had spent a total of 13 years of his life in the cabin, climbing, skiing and writing most of his books. He had dug a system of canals from the slopes uphill to irrigate the vegetation as well as for his own water consumption. He kept a record of the flora up there each summer, as it varied from year to year which flowers bloomed more than others. Every climb on the mountain itself was logged and the routes described in detail. Some of the huge boulders near the cabin had names, and all tiny flowers which defied the extreme climate to make an appearance was guarded carefully. We placed posters on the ground outside to warn tourists against treading on and hurting them. Arne was not unaware of the unnecessary and unfortunate footprints he had left. When the cabin was under construction, a pile of planks were placed just outside the site. They made an imprint on the vegetation which is still visible today, more than 70 years later.

The notion of 'being one with Nature' was strong. Later he wrote an article he named "Man not Apart" in reply to a young philosopher – humans and Nature are not apart *from* each other. In the course of our many years together, I heard time and again how Arne talked about himself as part of a

whole, of a greater entity, not something severed, cut off. When late in his life, he abandoned the use of words ending with –centric, I secretly believed that he didn't want any 'centre-periphery' dichotomy, neither in his rhetoric nor in his view of man, nature and their different roles in the world. I now regret not having extracted an explanation or a clarification from him.

On our way to our mountain cabin one summer, we had to cross a stream. I saw Arne squat down, look intently at the water for a long while and then put his hands in the ice-cold water. Up came the hands with a little fish in them. He looked closely at this fellow-creature before carefully putting the fish back into the water. I was struck by his tenderness. I had then been with Arne long enough to know that he did not catch the fish to eat it or to keep it, but I think he wanted *to feel* the fish to reinforce the feeling of togetherness. The episode reminded me of the time when we came out of the cabin and to our great surprise and delight, there was a herd of reindeer grazing nearby. Arne immediately signaled to me that I should keep my body as close to the ground as possible and preferably make myself invisible lest the animals would be disturbed and frightened. Then they would not feed.

His passion for climbing was astounding. He was already an old man in my eyes when I met him in 1973. Yet, he climbed every and any chance he had, preferably mountains, and if not, walls, trees. If I 'let' him, he would climb verandahs and balconies. He once scared a friend of mine senseless when he offered to climb down from her balcony. We were visiting her in her apartment in Hong Kong on the 11th or 12th floor. That there was a swimming pool directly under gave me no consolation or sense of security. And the thing with Arne was: we never found out if he was in earnest or was just teasing us, as one was as likely as the other. Later when he made similar attempts, I would say: "Not when I am watching". Sometimes he paid heed to what I said, sometimes not. As for me, sometimes I watched, other times I didn't.

It seemed that for Arne, the urge to climb was inbuilt. The city of Oslo did not avail him a lot of mountains to climb. Arne improvised. He would contemplate the wall of a building, or a rock face and say: "Hm, not easy to climb there!" I could see him working out a route in his mind even though he didn't say a word. After some years, some rudimentary training and a few

very amateurish attempts at the sport, I got used to the idea of climbing as part of my life with Arne. Sometimes we would look at a wall together and discuss the possible 'handholds' and 'footholds'. When he became too old to do vertical climbing, he resorted to climbing horizontally, never letting himself be more than a meter above ground so as not to hurt himself if he fell, and fall he did. With this new variation, I was relieved that I would no longer need to hold the rope and the responsibility of his life in my hands. It pained me to see him look at a mountain or a rock with longing as we drove past them the last couple of years of his life.

Edmund Hilary, the first man to be on top of Everest, was supposed to have said "because it is there!" when asked why he climbed. I think Arne's rejoinder to a similar question was equally if not more wonderful: "Why did you stop?" Why indeed, haven't we all climbed as children?

The first couple of years of our life together I was finding it hard to adjust. When we went out for a walk together, I wanted to feel that we were together. But it seemed to me that Arne was not with me, but with Nature. We seldom talked. He looked at everything with great interest and intensity. During one of my first skiing trips, I saw him 'greet' snowladen branches. He said they all said different things to him. I began to understand a bit more the rumour about Arne being 'mad' when I saw him lift one of his ski poles to a tree and said "Hello!". When I finally caught up with him and asked him what he was doing, he said: "Don't you see the different postures? This one is like a teapot with its handle broken and that one is saying welcome with open arms?" I certainly did not, as I was probably trying to catch my breath. And after departing his words of wisdom, he disappeared down the slope in a swoosh. He found it amusing that I trusted my behind more than my steering skills and instead of gliding elegantly down the slope as he did, I would as often as not just sit down and use my posterior as brakes. Although we rarely found ourselves at the same spot at the same time, he always found me and we always came home together. After several years, I began to understand his claim that he was a 'nature romantic' and I a 'people romantic'. We still didn't talk much years later on our walks, but it no longer bothered me or made me feel left out. As he grew older, he became weaker, but more playful. Often I offered to be his 'outboard' when we were walking up a hill by pushing him with my arms. He was never lazy or 'greedy'. When

he felt that he could manage on his own again, he would say, "Enough!", and I would stop pushing.

In 1989 I gave up my job as a school teacher to be Arne's assistant full time, and had been working in that capacity until his death in 2009. Neither of us had an official position anywhere, but we both worked hard, Arne especially. I had during that long period of time truly understood that for Arne, work and nature were the primary interests and concerns of his life. In 2007, a bibliography with over 3000 entries of Arne's books, articles, newspapers articles and interviews was compiled by someone working at the National Library. As late as 2007 and already living in a nursing home, Arne gave and published 7 interviews. He talked to a journalist for the last time in 2008, only months before he died.

Working for and living with Arne was like an undergoing an apprenticeship. Arne taught me a great deal about nature and about life by leading the life he did and by being the person he was. I have not been transformed into a nature-worshipper as such and my knowledge of deep ecology or ecosophy is skin deep despite the years. But I could safely say that I am no longer indifferent to or uncaring towards Nature. Once Arne stood by the roadside of a busy Hong Kong street. The year was 2006 I think, and he was staring at the tiny blades of grass that had grown out of a crack in a concrete wall - the remnants of a building being torn down. There were rubble and rubbish everywhere. I watched him looking at those brave slender blades of grass, I understood. He was admiring the life force of the grass, the *elan vitale*, he would say, in a very inhospitable environment. I took his hand as we walked away. Who needs words in such a situation?

Later he stumbled over the rhetoric of "equal" and "the same" right when people asked him the difference. But in real life, he treated all living beings as having 'a right to live and blossom' and he tried to practice it. He often reacted to people's seeming need to see 'spectacular' nature and their seeming indifference or even belittling of natural scenery that is not so breath-taking, even though he did enjoy seeing the Grand Canyon. For Arne the joy and pleasure Grand Canyon gave was not bigger than the blades of grass in the crack. They were just two *different* experiences which he would probably call *spontaneous* or *immediate* experiences. He was not more fascinated by the saltwater crocodiles his nephew took him to Northern

Australia to see than by the ants in an anthill, or the small lizards we saw in an Arizona desert. I found this unwillingness to 'grade' nature and natural things endearing. I think Arne too sometimes found flies and mosquitoes bothersome. I had even seen him wave them away from his unprotected bare head when he once got a crown of them on our way to the cabin. But they too have a *right* to live. His way of showing this was commendable. We once saw a group of young children squatting flies on a windowsill with obvious glee and apparent pleasure. Arne went to them and said with his characteristic smile "Don't you think they want to live too?". There was no hint of reprimand, or blame in his voice. The boys looked at him and then they just left the flies alone.

In the 1990s a few of his friends were given awards of one kind or another. He was never envious. I half jokingly said to him: "When are you bringing home one of those so that we could replace the leaking roof?" He looked at me, taken aback, for I had never said anything even remotely similar to him. He then smiled and said: "Probably never. You mustn't forget that I am very controversial". When he finally got his awards, (and I got our roof repaired) he was grateful and pleased. Yet I suspect he would not have become jealous or bitter if he had never been given *one*.

Someone once commented that Arne was vain; that he liked being recognized and talked to by strangers in the streets. If that were the case, I would have no explanation whatsoever why Arne was equally pleased to see small children and babies in prams who didn't have the foggiest idea who he was. He talked and played with them all, adults and toddlers alike. It is my impression that he did not have an inflated ego or opinion of himself either professionally or as a person. Once on a glorious summer day when we were running downhill from our cabin, tripping over brooks and stones, I said to him, "Doesn't this make you feel like a gazelle?", to which he replied: "More like a hippo!" I hardly believe the Norwegian Government gave him a State funeral for his vanity!

Before the funeral the minister who was to officiate the ceremony asked me what word I would use to describe Arne. I said "spaciousness" almost without thinking. Arne was of course not without his faults. But he had room for other people being wiser, cleverer, richer, more famous, more published and recognized. He never cared about those things, and I admired him for it.

(Although I did learn that I shouldn't comment on another man's *broad* shoulders too often)!

Arne was not perfect, but he was perfect for me. So even though neither of us believed in an afterlife, we wanted to play it safe by placing an order with the powers that be that in the unlikely event that there *is* life after death, we would choose each other as spouse again. But we both shunned the thought of being together forever, for as Arne said, "how much eternity could a person take?", and knowing myself, I would find even paradise boring after a while.