

# “Here I Stand”: An Interview With Arne Naess

Conducted by Christian Diehm  
15-16 December 2001

*The following interview was conducted by Christian Diehm in the home of Arne Naess near Oslo, Norway, in December of 2001. At eighty-nine years of age, Naess was preparing for the English-language release of his latest book, *Life's Philosophy*. We are pleased to provide a transcript of a large part of the conversations that spanned two afternoon dialogues.*

CD: I would like to ask you some questions about the relation between your thought and the work of those philosophers who we might classify generally as being a part of the “phenomenological and existential” tradition. I know that you studied many of the figures in this tradition, and you mention some of them—Kierkegaard for example—favorably in your writings.

AN: Very long ago I found out that in the United States I could talk about Kierkegaard at rather high levels. At that time Kierkegaard was not read; he was just a poet, not a philosopher. I had a nice time teaching Kierkegaard, but that was a long, long time ago.

CD: In your own philosophy you often talk about “total views,” but Kierkegaard was opposed to “totalizing” philosophical systems.

AN: What I call a “total view” or “view of the whole” is always temporary and hypothetical. You must also ask whether you believe in it or not believe in it, what it means to believe in it or not believe in it. What does it mean to use it? If you have a personal philosophy, a “total philosophy,” you must ask what it’s like in a certain situation. What does your philosophy tell us about it? So there’s always a relation to kinds of situations—not particular situations, of course, but kinds of situations.

I don’t like the word “total”; I prefer “whole,” a “view as a whole,” which then includes your personal philosophy and the world. The German term *Weltanschauung* expresses this.

CD: That is usually translated in English as “world-view.”

AN: *Weltanschauung* is something different from “world-view.” A “view” can be totally rendered in language: “My view of the world is so-and-so.” But *Anschauung* has to do with what you feel and see, so the *Weltanschauung* has to do with the integration of this view with feelings; it is how you *feel* yourself and how you *feel* the world. And because it has to do with what’s immediate—how you feel the world and how you feel yourself—the *Weltanschauung* cannot be properly expressed in language. Here, if someone asks, “Exactly what do you mean by that?” it’s impossible to answer; you can’t express it. You say, “I feel it is right to do this.” Well, what are the reasons? “I have some reasons, but I know that they are not adequate descriptions of my motivation.” Often in life as you get to ethics and politics you sometimes say, “I feel this is wrong.” But why, exactly? “Well, I cannot but feel that it is wrong.” You

can be clear about your feeling but you cannot express it. To make this point I sometimes refer to Luther, who reportedly defended his ninety-five theses by saying, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise." It's Kierkegaard when he talks about the leap.

Sometimes, too, you think that you adequately express yourself but you don't; something happens and you see that your description does not express what you really think. So I think that people should introduce sentences by saying, "I feel that . . .," "I feel that it is more reasonable . . .," and this shouldn't be looked down upon. In a public discussion you should say, "I feel that . . ." instead of, "I have a counter-argument . . ." because you are not *wholly* verbalizing where you stand.

CD: So we are all in the existential situation of "leaping," or as Luther had it, "standing": at some point the "total view" fails to be total; there is always something left over.

AN: Always something that is not properly verbalized. Verbalization is, after all, a very complex thing. In very serious discussions you should always be permitted to say, "There is something there that I cannot express." Through your behavior you can point at it, which is why I think that in many relations your body language is more important than verbal articulation.

CD: In the book *Four Modern Philosophers* you discussed Carnap and Wittgenstein, but also Heidegger and Sartre, and I'm curious about your relationship to French existentialism in general and Sartre in particular. Were you drawn to his work?

AN: I liked Marcel more than Sartre. I thought that what Sartre was doing was very important, although I didn't like his writings very much. I felt that he was not outgoing, that he was making existentialism something apart from what was going on politically and otherwise. So I think that those who liked Sartre were very passive; they were not active politically and socially and I felt that people should be active in these ways. And Heidegger was active politically but in a bad way.

But I liked Sartre's focus on human existence. What does human existence mean? It is important to ask this question. For me, I think of the millions of years behind us, and wonder how we can really behave at a level that reflects this history. Existence, human existence, is different from that of other beings; to be a human being is extremely special, unique on this planet. When we realize this we must put an end to things such as war, the humiliation of the planet. Within the next several hundred years we should begin to feel that these things are childish—not that we are more ethical but, really, to kill things? That is immature. There is a kind of optimism here—some of us think humans are human and some do not.

CD: In *Four Modern Philosophers* you briefly mention Maurice Merleau-Ponty in connection with Sartre (271). Did you familiarize yourself with Merleau-Ponty's work?

AN: I studied and very much liked Merleau-Ponty, but I didn't feel that his philosophy was showing a way to activism. I felt that one could be very close to Merleau-Ponty and

then do nothing. I always ask, “What does your philosophy tell you to do in your society? Politically? In education? In the most important areas of life? What are the implications?”

CD: It’s interesting that you say that, because there are certainly environmental philosophers who think that Merleau-Ponty’s thought has significant implications for environmentalism.

AN: Yes, they think that, and that’s important. To what extent that is an appropriate deduction, I don’t know. Personally, I don’t think it is, but I’m very glad that others are doing this, because Merleau-Ponty is never superficial. And it’s very good to have a relation to a philosopher who’s rather abstract, and then be able to derive practical consequences from his philosophy. As someone who is very interested in the relation between premises and conclusions, I find that Merleau-Ponty’s thought is not adequate to deduce what I do. Nevermind! Other ecologists deduce their conclusions from Merleau-Ponty, and that’s all right.

CD: Of course Heidegger, too, is sometimes a source of inspiration for environmental philosophers, and he was one of the figures you wrote about in *Four Modern Philosophers*. Of all of the people we’ve been discussing, Heidegger seems to come up most often in your work.

AN: When I wrote *Four Modern Philosophers*, I didn’t like Heidegger, so I was sure that my chapter on him would be negative. Therefore, for every sentence I wrote I asked myself, “Is this negative?” The result is that readers say, “Ah-ha! Arne Naess likes Heidegger more than the other three!” But the opposite was the case! In those years I was convinced that I must be a philosopher who was able to talk about very different kinds of philosophy, and that there shouldn’t be any sentence that wasn’t adequate in relation to the works I was writing about.

CD: One of your most well-known essays on deep ecology is entitled “Self-realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World,” and clearly the notion of “being-in-the-world” is taken from Heidegger. In the chapter on Heidegger in *Four Modern Philosophers* there is a passage where you are talking about giving a phenomenological account of doing a daily task, and you write: “One of the points Heidegger stresses is that the description can hardly convey any report of an ‘I’ confronting an external world and contriving to manipulate it. There is something that cognitively precedes the subject-object distinction. . . . [I]t is this feature that is indicated by the expression ‘being-in-the-world’”(196).

AN: This is getting underneath the relation between the human being and the world; it’s underneath the polarity between the human and the world. In the expression “being-in-the-world” the term “in” means you are *completely* in. There is a state-of-affairs—*Sachverfassung*—that we tend to describe with certain concepts, like the concepts of “human being” and “doing something.” It should be possible, however, to describe the state-of-affairs such that when you read it you understand that there is a human being doing something, but

the description itself should be neutral with regard to the distinction between the human being and the world.

CD: And once you started developing your ecosophy this thought became very important for you?

AN: Yes. There are some tiny flowers—beautiful, tiny flowers—high in the mountains where I have my hut. I feel like I am together with these flowers—they are more beautiful than me, but we are together as one entity. This is very striking, because I couldn't feel that way with flowers anywhere else. The conditions there are so extreme, and the identification is so deep, that we are one.

CD: But you don't usually use the notion of "being-in" in conjunction with identification. Rather, it occurs in the context of encouraging people to stop thinking of themselves as subjects who confront a world of objects; it is a way of trying to articulate a different sort of relation to the world.

AN: Yes, but what I mean is that there is not a situation of "being-in" in which I am somehow different from the flower in a basic way. No, I am there, me and this flower. "Me-this"—what's existing there is a combination. So there is the loss of an ego in a sense.

This is something that's usually looked at as just fantasy, but there is a level of existence such that you don't have that feeling about what you feel and what is. Being with those flowers and really concentrating, I find that a unity exists, that there is an *existing* unity—a unity that is not just in feeling but in *existing*. It is a unity of something I call "me" and a "flower," but those terms are wrong to describe the situation.

CD: The distinction between the two would, in some way, come afterwards?

AN: It comes when you speak about it, but in immediate experience itself there is a unity.

CD: You find, therefore, that the subject-object distinction is false?

AN: There is not a subject and an object. There is an existence that you do not adequately describe when you say, "There is Arne Naess and there are these flowers." Many would take it as a kind of poetry, but I think it is a description of the world, a description of what there is, what genuinely exists.

CD: Do you think that in order to convey this level of existence you have to engage in some kind of phenomenological description?

AN: The subject-object distinction needs to be overcome. We do not have a duty always to ask where the subject and object are. We shouldn't be harassed into conceding this distinction. But I must say that phenomenology, as a very important branch of philosophy, is overwhelmed by a vast number of concepts that are introduced which I think hide an

extremely simple core. You get published but you don't easily get to the extremely simple core that we've been talking about. I think that Heidegger is profound, but his position is so complicated that you cannot go out to people and say, "Read Heidegger." I try to write in a much simpler way. I think that the really important things can—must—be said in a way that can be understood by quite a lot of people.

CD: In *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, however, you say that phenomenology can be very helpful for articulating a "non-utilitarian" consciousness of nature (51). Are you now saying that it is not so helpful, or just that we need to be careful about the way we do phenomenology, that we need to do a certain *kind* of phenomenology?

AN: Even that wouldn't help much, I don't think. All right, you're a phenomenologist. That might help, but it might not, because there are so many concepts there that it's difficult to concentrate on the things we're talking about; you verbalize too much and make things overly intricate. There is a tremendous complexity in philosophical phenomenology. Phenomenologists have so many, and such difficult, concepts, that I wouldn't recommend to many people that they read phenomenology. British or Scotch philosophers (like David Hume and John Locke) insisted that philosophers do not need a special language, that they could use an everyday language. The Germans are just the opposite, introducing tremendously complex vocabulary—the French as well. When what we are driving at are the kinds of things I was just talking about, difficult phenomenological terminology is a sign that we are going in the wrong direction. If you use words to describe experiences in nature, as long as you are really deep in your experiences those words should be very simple.

CD: What if phenomenologists were to simplify their vocabulary?

AN: Then you don't call it phenomenology, I think.

CD: Really?

AN: I don't think so, because the word has been used so often within a system of concepts that are much too complicated, and what we are talking about is something extremely simple.

I have to mention this. If you have small children and are with them in nature, bend all the way down to the ground, point to something, and say, "Look at this." The children might say, "There's nothing there." But you insist that they look, and say, "Oh yes there is! There is a little plant here that just started to grow in the early spring. In the wintertime there was something underground that you couldn't see that was alive." Then you tell them a bit about the life of such a little thing. But the most important thing is that you bend all the way down, so the children get the impression that this must be something very important. "Father is bending all the way down!" The children will easily grasp that there is something phenomenal about a living being—not necessarily something beautiful, but something . . . life.

CD: Let's drop the term "phenomenology," then, and just say that we're trying to give

descriptions of certain experiences in nature. How are these alternative sorts of descriptions helpful for environmentalists?

AN: If we take it as a great task to save this planet, to save areas that are not obviously tarnished or influenced by human activities, to gradually widen those areas, then we must develop philosophical views that are not explicit but often implicit among those involved in ecology.

But descriptions will always be to some extent inadequate. When I was in Tokyo lecturing I invited people to go out at sunrise and experience something. There were eighty or ninety people, and I said that for sixty minutes they should not talk, but just listen to what the trees were saying, to just stand and listen to what the trees were expressing to us. And what I meant is that some of the trees were somehow depressed, some were feeling very big, some were smiling and some were bending towards us. The people carried this out, and some of them got a new understanding from this. I'm very glad I did that, and I'm sorry that I haven't done similar things in Norway.

CD: My experience with things like this—whether in classes I teach or just with people I know—is that most people do not come out of these experiences with new understandings.

AN: That's unfortunate. Small children understand this more easily.

CD: That might be, but I would think that of those eighty or ninety people you were with in Tokyo very few understood what you were doing.

AN: But some immediately grasp it. For you, if you have a class there will be one or two or three grasping it. If you get ten percent of them to understand it, then the rest will try it, because they will agree that it is not a pointless exercise. So it can be done. I haven't had the opportunity to do this very often; but when I have, I see that some people grasp it, and they grasp something that's new to them. And they understand that they can talk about it and influence others.

When I was in California I went with some graduate students to an extremely beautiful place in New Mexico. We set up camp after dark and in the morning we came together and I said, "For sixty minutes no words. Just see where you are." They found that very strange. I tried to influence them by looking around, at the water over there, etc. I bent down looking at an organism—a small snail—and after a few minutes they came down and said, "What are you looking at?" I said, "Shhh!" They were talking, asking about what we should do, and I tried to convey to them that any such being is worth not just a half a minute of their time, but half an hour.

CD: It sounds like you are talking about a notion of "dwelling."

AN: I talk about dwelling quite a lot: "We are to  *dwell*  here." In the desert there was a spring, and I thought we should look intently at it for a few minutes. But it was difficult for the graduate students to do it for more than half a minute.

CD: Well, it's hard to dwell in a situation that you have been taught throughout your life to regard as unimportant.

AN: Or you think it's worth mentioning but then you go on. But some people grasp it and it gets to be very important and very special to them, so it's not so impossible.

CD: Another term of great importance for you is "identification," which you define as a "spontaneous, non-rational, but not irrational, process through which the interest or interests of another being are reacted to as our own interest or interests"(261). When I think of experiences that would fall under this heading—witnessing the suffering of another being, for example—it seems to me that they are largely bodily experiences, experiences that are felt before being thought.

AN: If you are sitting by a stream and you see a little animal about to fall in and you make a little movement with your finger to help it, completely spontaneously, without thinking at all, I would say that you have, for a moment, identified with it. You can see that it would be bad to get lost in the stream, that if you were a thing like that you wouldn't like it.

CD: Yes, but afterwards when we talk about it we tend to speak as if it were a predominantly cognitive process: we say, "I saw the animal and *thought* it was having a certain experience." But this seems to be an overly "mental" description of the actual experience.

AN: Oh, yes, there is something being done that we then explain in certain ways, but really it just happens, without a trace of deliberation or anything like that. Your arm moves. It moves! When you ask why your arm moved you then, hypothetically, so to speak, imagine that you saw the situation as one that was not good for this being. You reconstruct it, because otherwise you would just say it was meaningless. But it was a meaningful movement, and not an act of consciousness.

CD: So it would not be too much to say that identification takes place on the level of the body, "beneath" consciousness in some sense?

AN: Surely, but then to some extent—even if it is only a very small extent—it becomes conscious. Even a little movement with your finger is a tremendously complex thing in the body. Verbalizing it, you might describe it in one fairly short sentence, but this is a vast simplification of what was happening bodily. The full description of it could fill ten volumes. What's happening bodily is so meaningful, and so complex in its meaning, that we don't have words for all that's happening. The movement is tremendously complex, and only describable as bodily.

CD: But we have to be careful with these descriptions, don't we? It seems to me that we shouldn't describe these things in ways that imply that the body is a tool that consciousness

uses. I think, too, that if the bodily gesture itself is meaningful, then that would mean that the gesture cannot be understood apart from the situation in which it takes place.

AN: That's right. Here we are dealing with internal relations. These are relations such that we destroy the meaning of what we are trying to say if we separate 'this' from 'this' from 'this.' We say these are internally related, but we do not describe internality.

Yes, these things belong to a whole. But how do they belong to the whole? This is very difficult. In Beethoven's Fifth Symphony you have the opening phrase "da da da dah," and then the next phrase is "da da da daw." These phrases are wholes, *gestalts*. And then you have more and more inclusive *gestalts* until you arrive at the whole composition, which is a tremendously subtle *gestalt*.

CD: This is a kind of holism, then.

AN: Yes, it is an interdependence such that we cannot define things independently of each other; to do so would indicate a lack of preciseness.

CD: A question often asked of holistic views is whether or not they replace individuals with collectives. Do you think that your holism denies talk of individuality?

AN: No. This is clear in music. In the Fifth Symphony you have the "da da da dah," and then "da da da daw." You can separate these and view them as different wholes, but together they make the piece. There are wholes within the wholes.

It's interesting that in the first movement of the symphony there is a marvelous preciseness of the togetherness, but in the second the parts are much more loosely, more freely, connected. That's a very interesting difference between the first and second movements. This shows that in some cases you can, even if you talk very precisely, see differences, whereas in other cases the more precisely you define things the less you are able to separate them.

CD: That your holism is a *gestaltism* seems to me to be an important thing to keep in mind.

AN: We are basically *gestalt* entities experiencing *gestalts*, rather than particulars. I have said this better in other places, but I take it to be a very important philosophical point. Most philosophers do not see this as an opportunity to formulate something rather basic about themselves and the world. It's a very bad sign.

CD: In your writings you stress the importance of the "ecological self." With this you are trying to move away from a conception of the self defined atomistically and towards an understanding of the self as essentially related to others.

AN: I talk about the ego and the social self, where you feel that you are a part of and not separate from society. Then, ecologically, you are a part of nature, in the sense that you are



internally related to it.

When I was a boy there weren't any lights along the roads, so you had much more time to look at the stars. In the vastness of this manifold there was obviously the feeling of being a microscopically small being, and the feeling that by the contemplation of this vastness you got greater—not as great as the stars, but still greater. From dwelling on your tinyness, from concentrating on the immeasurable greatness of the universe, you get even greater, not smaller than you were. You get some of the properties of the starry heavens.

So you can have an "I-Thou" relation with nature and with specific beings: with trees, for instance, or with the stars. You can have an "I-Thou" relation to the heavens, a kind of "we" feeling, with the starry heavens. I have this sort of relation with this mountain in Norway, Hallingskarvet.

CD: You borrow the "I-Thou" from Buber, but I think of Heidegger's *Mitsein* when I hear you speak of the "we." Did either of these philosophers influence your thinking on this point?

AN: I read Heidegger too late for this, so it must have been there previously—perhaps badly articulated, but nevertheless there. At Tvergastein I have the experience that Tvergastein does not belong to me but I belong to it. Of course Tvergastein is alive, and the stars are just outside the window of my hut, and they peek in at night. My relation to these things is intimate, internal; they are part of myself. So I start from this oneness.

CD: Deep ecologists are sometimes criticized for thinking that a transformed self-understanding will solve environmental problems. Is what you are talking about really enough to address the huge problems environmentalists face?

AN: Probably not enough, but it makes you automatically have certain notions of protection: "How *could* you interfere here? Let it be! Let it be!"

Down south there were some people who wanted to dynamite a big hill because it blocked the sun for certain periods of the day. If they felt that the hill was, in a sense, alive, they could not do it. With feelings like this, activism within the ecological movement becomes a higher priority; you get a different sense of what the best way for human beings to treat nature is. When you are a supporter of the deep ecology movement, some things are so obvious you cannot do them. And you can be a supporter of the deep ecology movement even if you don't know anything at all about the eight points of the deep ecology platform. It's nice to see many people outside of the movement say, "That's how I felt all the time!" That's very interesting.

CD: These comments remind me of a question that I often ask myself about your work. You use the term "living" to speak of things that are, in the biological sense, non-living. Do you make any distinctions here? Is the way in which a rock is alive different from the way in which a tree or an animal is alive?

AN: There are differences, I guess, but I have known the rocks at Tvergastein since I was very young, and they *look* at me. I *look* at them and they *look* at me. Therefore I stopped

treating them as if they weren't alive.

There are some very big rocks near my hut at Tvergastein—they are a part of Hallingskarvet—and I was interested in why they were there. There are large fissures in the rock above Tvergastein, and they expand as water freezes in them. Every year they grow a little, and after so many years the rocks fall down. Gradually they lose their very nice position at the top of the mountain with a tremendous view, and tumble down to a flat place. Learning about the history of these big stones near the hut and about what has happened to them—it's a way of experiencing even rocks as alive.

CD: I'm sure that at some point you have encountered people who say, "Arne Naess is hopelessly anthropomorphic." How do you respond to this?

AN: I have experienced that. People say I am unduly anthropomorphic, "humanizing" the stone. But in another way I am also "stoning" the human. The movement is mutual; it goes the other way also.

CD: You aren't projecting the human onto the natural, but trying to integrate them, seeing the inter-relations between human beings and the natural world, between yourself and those stones.

AN: That's right. It goes both ways.

CD: If there are two overarching themes in your work, the first is the need for a new ontology, and the second, which you began to speak of a moment ago, is that with this new ontology a new ethics will follow. We don't need to develop a formal ethics once we do ontology differently.

AN: Yes, once we do that differently we would talk about ethics as somehow strange: "Yes, we *shouldn't* do so-and-so, but how *could* we do that?" Motivation is very important: how could you possibly be motivated to do so-and-so? With the stones at Tvergastein, how could I possibly move them? I am something that contains in me those stones, and have for so many years, such that I couldn't move them. As I feel the sense of belonging to Tvergastein, my motivation is always, without any reflection, adapted to this feeling of being-there-together. Here the ecological self gets a meaning, because ecology has to do with what you *do* with the surroundings.

CD: In English we use the term "orientation" to indicate that one is "turned in a certain direction," or "ready to go a certain way." One's orientation does not determine the path that one takes, though, it just points one in a general direction.

AN: I don't use that term, but I should be aware of it. It's a good term; it's vague in the sense that you are not saying *what* you are doing, but *how* you are.

CD: So you think that more important than one's ethics is one's general orientation, and

that one's orientation has largely to do with one's ontology.

AN: You see, what you get from ethics you get without articulating an ethic. When you ask, "What's your ethic?" the ethic is embedded in a larger whole; it is within the view. The constant need to formulate ethical norms is pointing to a weakness in us as persons. When you get really involved in ethical conflicts you are already breaking loose your wholeness as a person.

CD: It seems that if you refuse to dissociate ethics from ontology, then in order to explain ethical claims fully you must try to articulate an entire world-view.

AN: In discussions you should tell the truth, but there is a distinction between telling the truth and telling the *whole* truth. The whole truth is human-sensitive; it includes what's in the background. This is important: the whole truth—what influences you, what you are driving at, your complex motivation. So to give the whole truth you must try to explain these things also, especially if you are writing about doing something, and saying that others should also do it.

CD: Yet, despite the complexity, we cannot give up trying to articulate these things. You're not trying to say that we are excused from explaining ourselves, our views.

AN: No. And when I do this many of my sentences are normative, ending with an exclamation point—especially "ought" terms. I do not try to hide that. If I have an "ought" sentence I ask myself how I validate it. Well, certain norms are the premises of other norms, and where I go back one more step and have no premises, then I say I have what I call an intuition: "Of course this is right and that's wrong." But I do not have a concept of intuition such that an intuition is automatically true or valid. I permit myself to use the term "intuition," but it doesn't mean that I see the truth.

This is where I refer to Luther saying "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise," because I cannot verbalize something deeper. An intuition is rock bottom for me. And if you think that you don't "stand," I doubt that you are completely honest with yourself. You also have ultimate premises: "I don't have reasons for that. It's ultimate for me."

Of course I see the necessity of considering whether these ultimates should be formulated or said otherwise. I don't mean that some special sentence or formulation is ultimate. An ultimate can be revisable but the revision will not be deeper; it will be just another way of saying it, or a more understandable formulation of it. This other formulation could be better, especially if I think about your orientation or your way of thinking and speaking.

This reminds me of my time with the logical empiricists in Vienna. We would disagree, and they would ask, "But could you formulate your thought in a different way?" Then I would re-formulate it. "Is this the only adequate way of expressing it?" So I'd give a third formulation. "A-ha! That also is adequate, so we agree." But if I had gone through this and there was still disagreement, then we would have been really disagreeing, not just verbally; it would have been a really substantial disagreement.

CD: When you say that certain premises are ultimate "for you," and other premises are ultimate "for others," it seems clear that you do not think that ultimates are necessarily shared, that people will "stand" on different ground.

AN: All right, you have that ultimate and I don't. That's fine. We shouldn't try to change the other every time we disagree.

In stating what my philosophy is, I would very soon within the description say, "Here I am a pluralist." I think that for human beings it is so important that there are really different world-views. There should be certain limits, but within those broad limits there would be very different views of life, of the world, of trees. There should be pluralism. It's only non-violence that limits this. Otherwise it's impossible to be together even one day. But opposite needs, opposite values—that's fine.

So . . . much greater pluralism. To people who think there are too many conflicts, I say there should be many more, much deeper conflicts, but these should be non-violent. More conflicts! Yes, more conflicts! I hope so.

CD: It's interesting that you are open to this sort of "conflict," because your writings place such emphasis on the ability of people to come together politically. Is this conflict compatible with common practice?

AN: It's bad if you try to conceive every difference as an ultimate difference. In politics there is a tendency to do this, to overdo the differences by saying that on certain issues you can never agree because it's so deep. Therefore you say your opponent is completely wrong, "completely" meaning that it goes all the way down. That's bad for democracy; it makes democracy much more difficult if you say that you can never agree. You have to come together in politics.

Sometimes we do have *basically* different opinions, and trying to describe the reasons is difficult, so we give up agreeing on ultimate premises and focus on what's necessary for us to cooperate on. We can go together, and work together, even though we are ultimately different. A long time ago I was invited by thirty Christian priests who wanted to go skiing somewhere for ten days or so over Easter. People thought, "This must be very strange for Arne Naess, as an atheist, to be there with thirty priests." But I said, "Not at all! Not at all! I'll be completely relaxed." I had nothing in common with them, but sometimes I think that's better.

CD: So you're saying that there could be points of convergence for people whose basic views were very divergent; if we have different views or ultimate premises, our lives might intertwine, even if only in somewhat superficial ways, like on a ski trip or something.

AN: If we are on an expedition together and we have to make an extremely important practical decision, we would have to cut out abstract principles to explain exactly what decision is to be made. What I'm saying is that, logically, if we try to formulate precisely the way from these rather abstract notions to the situation where we have to make the decision,

there are so many steps that we simply have to cut most of them out and look at the immediate consequences, and make the decision on that basis. We must give up the notion that it is only from one of our views that we can validly decide to go to the right or the left. If we have different basic philosophies—completely different—then there is simply no way: we must toss a coin or we get mad and one of us leaves the expedition. But there are so many steps on the logical stairway that we should try to forget our philosophy and just look at the nearest consequences. Let us do that—otherwise we’ll simply have to stop going together.

I think it is important as a philosopher to be as clear as you can, but if you are a good philosopher you will be able to cut out steps and when you disagree you will not always gather your philosophical burden. You must concede that there are so many steps, you shouldn’t see everything as a matter of deepness.

CD: This derivation of concrete actions from more basic norms that we’re now talking about is a frequent theme in your work, and I agree that it’s very difficult to articulate precisely the relation between them. But is the difficulty only due to the “depth” of the derivation, or is it sometimes due to other things? Aren’t there always aspects of our views that escape us, or internal tensions, inconsistencies?

AN: In the U.S., you cannot walk in the desert in the springtime without crushing flowers. With every step, you kill. People ask how I could justify doing this while at the same time holding the principle of deep ecology that every living being has value in itself. And I say that I can’t; it is an inconsistency in my practical philosophy. If I were more engaged in this philosophy I wouldn’t do it, or I would only do it when the flowers were already dying; that would be more consistent. I have a very easy excuse—but it’s bad, it doesn’t work—which is that others will come and the flowers will be crushed anyway. But this is not enough to justify walking around and killing living beings, which according to my philosophy is something you shouldn’t do unless you have very special reasons. So I say, “All right, I am inconsistent.” We should be clear that this is inconsistent when we are talking so wonderfully about the life of a living being.

I think it’s very important for philosophers to concede inconsistencies. We should be able to admit fallibility, that humans are through and through fallible. Once I went to the Antarctic by air. It was atrocious to go that far by air. In Uruguay or some place I stopped and lectured for a week, so I said to Mother Earth, “Please consider that! Remember that I stopped there for a week, that at least I did that also! Please note that!”

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