

Arne Næss on Environmental Ethics

1. **Who** was Arne Næss and what are his key ideas on environmental ethics?

Arne Næss (1912-2009) was a Norwegian philosopher and environmentalist. He received his PhD from the University of Oslo, and was appointed as its youngest ever professor in 1939. In 1970, he resigned his academic chair and retired to his mountain hut (Tvergastein), where he spent the rest of the decade developing deep ecology and participating in environmental activism. In 1989, Arne Næss published *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, in which he described and explained his key ideas on environmental ethics (some of which are outlined below).

Ideology

A set of personal values that guides action, but is not logically supported.

Ecosophy

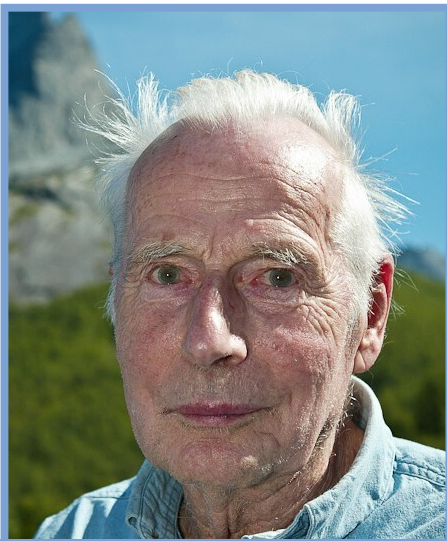
A set of personal values about the environment that guides action; a personal ethical system inspired by the environment.

The root cause of environmental issues is capitalist ideology: human beings are on an ideological capitalist mission to increase material wealth (i.e. produce and consume). This mission is not logically supported or necessary for survival, and it damages and destroys the environment.

Promoting ecosophy can solve environmental issues: to save Earth, human beings need to develop personal sets of values that are logically supported by fundamental values and inspired by the environment (i.e. philosophies developed from ecology). This should change human behaviour.

Deep ecology recognises the intrinsic value of all living things: the process of developing personal sets of values that are inspired by the environment leads human beings to deep ecology, which involves understanding human beings as interconnected and inseparable parts of their environments.

2. **How** do Arne Næss's key ideas on environmental ethics work?



Arne Næss

Arne Næss's key ideas support his view that human beings should radically change their ways of life to benefit both themselves and Earth. Taken together, they form an ethical argument that leads to the following conclusion: all living things have equal intrinsic value, and human beings should act in ways that acknowledge this. If human beings change their attitudes and behaviour, Arne Næss believed that environmental damage and destruction could be reduced and human quality of life improved.

The root cause of environmental issues is capitalist ideology: Arne Næss's first key idea is an argument itself. He argued that Earth's proximity to environmental disaster is caused by an ideological mission to increase material wealth. Arne Næss's reasoning is clear: there is abundant evidence that the environment is being damaged and destroyed. Damage and destruction is inflicted on the environment to increase economic productivity. Therefore, the ultimate cause of environmental damage and destruction is the global culture of materialism that fuels production and consumption at the expense of the natural world.

Promoting ecosophy can solve environmental issues: this key idea is also an argument itself. Arne Næss argued that Earth can be saved, but only if people change their philosophies (i.e. the value systems that inspire their actions). He argued that the global culture of materialism is ideological; in other words, it is a philosophy that lacks logical support. According to Arne Næss, there is no logical reason to increase material wealth beyond the level required to satisfy basic needs. Alternatively, he claimed that a global culture of environmentalism would be based on a philosophy with logical support. He argued that ecology (i.e. the study of the environment) can form the basis for philosophies that proceed logically from an understanding of human beings as interconnected and inseparable parts of their environments to environmentally friendly action. Arne Næss called these philosophies "ecosophies", meaning value systems that inspire environmentally friendly action and arise from studying the environment.

Deep ecology recognises the intrinsic value of all living things: this key idea of Arne Næss is also an argument itself. Although different human beings can develop different ecosophies, Arne Næss argued that they should all share eight core values: (1) all living things have intrinsic value; (2) richness and diversity of life has intrinsic value; (3) human beings have no right to reduce richness and diversity of life except to satisfy basic needs; (4) present human interference with the environment is excessive; (5) human life can flourish even if the human population decreases; (6) significant change requires political action; (7) quality of life is of greater value than material wealth; and (8) human beings who accept the first seven core values have an ethical responsibility to act to bring about the necessary change. Core values (1) and (2) recognise the intrinsic value of all living things, including the intrinsic value of the richness and diversity of all life forms, and it is from this essential insight that the other core values of deep ecology are derived.

3. **Why** are Arne Næss's key ideas on environmental ethics important?

Arne Næss's key ideas are important for several reasons, and three of the most significant are outlined below. In brief, they are rational, radical, and reactionary. They have alerted human beings to the magnitude of the change that is required to prevent irreversible damage and destruction of the environment.

They are rational because they are logically supported: Arne Næss's key ideas demonstrate that ecosophies are supported by fundamental values, unlike ideologies that promote the senseless production and consumption of natural resources (e.g. capitalism).

They propose radical change to solve environmental issues: additionally, Arne Næss's key ideas clarify the scale and scope of the change required to avoid environmental disaster. This includes the introduction of wide-ranging environmental policies, a widespread change in public attitudes towards standard of living, and a considerable reduction in the size of the human population.

They provide a reactionary response to shallow ecology: Arne Næss's key ideas deliberately undermine shallow ecology, which is an approach to environmental ethics inspired by anthropocentrism (the belief that human beings are the most important things in the universe). Arne Næss claimed that shallow ecology was conservation in name only, and that it would be unable to prevent environmental disaster.



Tvergastein: Arne Næss's mountain hut.

George Thinks

Arne Næss is an interesting philosopher, because he actually practised what he preached. Despite becoming the University of Oslo's youngest professor (at the age of 27), and being Norway's only professor of philosophy until 1954, he turned his back on the world of academia so that he could live according to the set of personal values that he had developed whilst mountain climbing: "Ecosophy T". In the 1970s and 1980s, Arne Næss became increasingly vocal as an environmental activist, eventually launching the deep ecological movement.

It seems to me that Arne Næss became disillusioned with developed society, and began to perceive the pursuit of both social status and material wealth as misguided personal goals. Eventually, he retreated to Tvergastein to lead a life guided by his environmental principles. There is something romantic about this, and it is certainly appealing to some (including me). However, as Arne Næss ultimately realised, only a much smaller human population could live this way: Earth's human population would have to be substantially reduced over time.