Arne Naess and the Task of Gestalt Ontology

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While much of Arne Naess’s ecosophy underscores the importance of understanding one’s ecological Self, his analyses of gestaltism are significant in that they center less on questions of the self than on questions of nature and what is other-than-human. Rather than the realization of a more expansive Self, gestalt ontology calls for a “gestalt shift” in our thinking about nature, one that allows for its intrinsic value to emerge clearly. Taking such a gestalt shift as a central task enables Naess to avoid some common criticisms of his view.

INTRODUCTION

One of the hallmarks of Arne Naess’s approach to environmental philosophy is that it employs relational thinking.1 In the early 1970s, when Naess formally introduced the “deep, long-range ecology movement” to the world, he argued that it was premised upon a “[r]ejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image,” the latter of which was explained as the view that things are constituted by their relations to other things, that there are “intrinsic relations” between entities. Hence, Naess’s rejection of the “man-in-environment image” amounted to a demand that the West rethink the very nature of humanity itself, a humanity that no longer could afford to view itself as separate and distinct from the natural world.2 Some years later, in the course of developing his personal viewpoint, “Ecosophy T,” Naess published several essays that again argued for the intrinsic relationality of things, this time as part of his ontology.3 Seeking to go beyond the prevailing atomism of

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3 I am referring to a number of essays written primarily in the mid to late 1980s, which are
the natural sciences, he offered a “gestalt ontology” that views reality as consisting not of discrete material parts, but of a network of interrelated elements. The real, he proposed, is not comprised of numerous, externally related components, but is instead a vast relational field.

In the years since Naess originally put forth these ideas, the deep ecology movement as discussed in the philosophical literature has become almost synonymous with the former strain of relational thinking: questions of the nature of the self, of humans as we are in relation to the natural world, have dominated the conversations surrounding deep ecological thought. While examining these questions certainly requires attention to broader relational principles, extended discussions of the specifics of gestalt ontology for the most part have remained in the background. This situation is understandable in light of the fact that deep ecologists other than Naess often have made consideration of the interrelatedness of humans and nature central to their own positions, whereas gestalt ontology has remained a more idiosyncratic component of Naess’s view. But despite this idiosyncrasy, we would do well to ask about the role of gestalt thinking in Naess’s philosophy. What is gestalt referenced below in the order that they are cited. It is true that some of the central ideas in these essays were indicated in rough form in previous works. See, for example, the essay, “The Place of Joy in a World of Fact,” originally published in 1973, and reprinted in Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), pp. 246–48. To my knowledge, however, it was not until these later essays that Naess fully elaborated his position. We should keep in mind that Naess distinguishes between his personal viewpoint, which he calls “Ecosophy T,” and the principles common to supporters of the deep ecology movement. As Naess consistently stresses, the commonly held principles outlined in the eight-point platform of deep ecology can be derived from a wide array of deeper premises, and therefore it is important not to treat Naess’s own views as coextensive with “deep ecology.” See Naess, “The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects,” in Sessions, Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century, pp. 64–84. In what follows, I deal most directly with elements of Naess’s ecosophy, and reserve the term deep ecologists to refer to those who embrace the deep ecology platform.

4 One might take as evidence of the equation of deep ecology with issues concerning the nature of the self Warwick Fox’s claim that it is precisely the emphasis on the self and Self-realization that is the most important characteristic of deep ecology as a position in environmental philosophy. See Fox, Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), chaps. 4 and 5. This move to equate deep ecology with elements of Naess’s own ecosophy has been challenged. See Andrew McLaughlin, “The Heart of Deep Ecology,” in Sessions, Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century, pp. 85–93; and Harold Glasser, “On Warwick Fox’s Assessment of Deep Ecology,” Environmental Ethics 19, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 69–85. Nevertheless, as the editors of Beneath the Surface point out in their introductory essay, “[d]espite Naess’s intention that each individual develop his or her own ecophilosophical total view, most advocates of deep ecology accept the fundamental ideas of Naess—identification and Self-realization—as being crucial to the meaning of deep ecology.” From Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology, ed. Eric Katz, Andrew Light and David Rothenberg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), p. xv.

5 This is a generalization, and there have been essays dealing with this subject, such as David Rothenberg’s “No World But in Things: The Poetry of Naess’s Concrete Contents,” Inquiry 39, no. 2 (June 1996): 255–72.
ontology, and what might it contribute to the dialogue that Naess’s work has sparked?

My argument in what follows is that while much of Naess’s work voices concerns about the ecological implications of our conceptions of self and humanity, his gestalt ontology is significant in that it makes a central place for questions about the like implications of our conceptions of nature and of what is other-than-human. I begin with an analysis of Naess’s gestalt ontology, and contend that what gestalt thinking calls for is not simply a return to our spontaneous gestalt experiences, but the development of alternative frameworks for understanding and encountering the natural world. Then I show how prioritizing such gestalt shifts in our attitudes about nature, instead of “Self-realization,” could prompt a subsequent shift in the meaning of some of the central terms of Naess’s ecosophy, such that it might respond to some of its most persistent criticisms.

GESTALT ONTOLOGY AND THE CONCRETE CONTENTS OF REALITY

Naess’s ontology is most easily understood as a response to views that seek to distinguish between reality as it is experienced and reality as it is independent of our experience. Naess sometimes refers to these views collectively as “Galilean,” their common feature being that they maintain some version of the distinction, already operative in Galileo’s thought, between things as they are “for us” and things as they are “in themselves.” This distinction, which often is discussed in the vocabulary of “primary” and “secondary” qualities, holds that certain properties or qualities can properly be said to belong to objects (the “primary” qualities), whereas others are simply subjective impressions that are formed when objects are sensed (the “secondary” qualities). Thus, it is claimed that while the primary qualities of, e.g., size, shape and motion are properties of objects “in themselves,” secondary qualities such as color and smell are not, as they are merely the products of the way in which our senses register the primary qualities, the way in which objects are “for us.” On this model water, for example, is in itself neither cold nor hot, but rather consists of matter in a particular state, which is perceived as either “cold” or “hot.” And what is said to be true of the secondary qualities is said to be equally true of “tertiary” qualities, what Naess calls the “perceptually complex” qualities such as the “grandeur” of a scene, or the “peacefulness” of a quiet stream, qualities that are thought to be completely dependent upon the perceptual and psychological

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constitution of a perceiver. For the Galilean view, then, to speak of secondary and tertiary qualities is simply to say something about one’s own perceptions, whereas to speak of primary qualities is to describe objects as they exist independent of such perceptions; it is to say something about the external world, about “reality itself.”

One of the most obvious consequences of this position is that it effectively severs reality from what is experienced, replacing the everyday experiential world with what Neil Evernden calls “a non-experienced reality.” As Naess puts it, the Galilean ontology leaves us with “a conception of nature without any of the qualities we experience spontaneously.” For Evernden, this replacement results from a process of “purification” that starts, as it must, with experience and then strips away all traces of sensory interpretation or “contamination,” ending, therefore, at a conception of “pure” matter as described by mathematical physics. What we end up with, that is, is a “picture of nature that . . . is not that of common experience, but one that no one would even suspect until introduced to the new model . . . .”

Like Evernden, Naess too finds that the Galilean ontology privileges the abstract, committing what Whitehead referred to as “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness”: it takes as most real that which is not only farthest from experience, but in some ways even antithetical to it. In contrast, Naess identifies the real with what is given in experience, and regards the notion of the “thing in itself” as an abstraction derived from this more fundamental ontological stratum. This thought is expressed in terms of the difference between the “concrete contents” of reality and its “abstract structures”: since, in immediate experience, “the secondary and tertiary qualities are the only ones at hand,” they are said to be real, part of the “concrete contents” of the world, while the primary qualities, which in experience “cannot be found,” are understood to be once removed from the concrete, they are “abstract structures” whose importance “cannot be overestimated,” but which nevertheless are “not contents of reality.”

In order to explain more precisely how the secondary and tertiary qualities belong to reality, Naess employs the concept of a “gestalt.” The term *gestalt* is

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13 Ibid.
notoriously difficult to explain, but Naess uses it to refer to a network of relationships whose various elements are mutually defining. To illustrate his thinking here, he often uses the example of listening to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Upon hearing the opening notes—“da da da DAH”—the last note is experienced as “low” in relation to the first three. The last note of the next four—“da da da DAW”—is also experienced as “low,” and perhaps even as “foreboding” or “ominous,” this time both in relation to the three notes immediately preceding it, and in relation to the first four. Each group of notes forms a relatively distinct unit or “phrase” (i.e., gestalt), and together these smaller, “subordinate” gestalts form larger and more comprehensive “superordinate” ones.16

It is important to keep in mind that for Naess the networks of relations in which things stand are comprised not only of those elements that are in the “perceptual field,” but include the perceiver as well. “If a person hears part of a well-known melody,” he writes, “the spontaneous experience that person has is colored by their attitudes towards the melody as a whole as well as by many circumstances, past and present.”17 Such circumstances may involve any number of things, from the people with whom one is listening to the music, to the place in which it is played, to one’s own musical literacy and previous experiences of the piece.18 All of these elements come together to form a complex gestalt in which the music may be “loud” or “soft,” “meek” or “powerful,” “somber” or “joyful.”

The fact that these qualities emerge in relations that include a perceiver quite clearly indicates that they are not to be regarded as belonging to things “in themselves” absolutely independently of experience. However, this fact does not force the conclusion that they must be regarded as “subjective” in the sense of somehow being located solely within the perceiver’s consciousness. Rather, Naess contends that the qualities experienced are reality itself, and that we have access to them via various modes of relation. This point might be most clearly shown by returning to the earlier example of the hot and cold water. It is evident that a glass of water could feel cold to one person and warm to another, or even cold to one’s left hand and warm to one’s right. But where the Galilean ontology takes this difference as evidence that the water is in itself neither warm nor cold, Naess takes it as an indication that the water is potentially

16 Naess discusses the Fifth Symphony in connection with “subordinate” and “superordinate” gestalts in the book-length interview with David Rothenberg, *Is It Painful to Think? Conversations with Arne Naess* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 159. See also Christian Diehm with Arne Naess, “‘Here I Stand’: An Interview With Arne Naess,” *Environmental Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 13. This same point is made in relation to musical experience more generally in Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, pp. 57–58.  
both, and that these various potentialities can be realized when one relates to it in different ways. In essence, where the Galilean ontology presumes the world to be so empty of secondary and tertiary qualities that they could exist only in the mind of a perceiver, Naess presumes the world to be so full of them that they cannot be experienced all at once, thus requiring multiple methods of approach or relation to encounter them. As he himself, interpreting Protagoras, puts it, “water has all kinds of qualities, but a sensitive being is only able to experience a limited number of them. What it will experience depends on its state.”

This insistence that gestalt ontology does not leave us mired in “subjectivism” is at the root of Naess’s frequent claims that he is not advocating some version of ontological “perspectivism” or “phenomenalism” that would posit that the contents of experience are simply the way in which some reality “in itself” appears to different perceivers in different perspectives. The qualities are not “relative”—not “in the subject” but “relational”—aspects of reality that emerge in specific networks of relations. Thus, when speaking of the “joyful” quality of an experience, Naess says that the joy is “not my joy, but something joyful of which the I and something else are interdependent, non-isolatable fragments.” Indeed, considering that in experience the secondary and tertiary qualities are given “as genuine qualities of matter or nature itself,” Naess concludes that it makes as much sense to say that they are “in the objects” as it does to say that they are “in the subject.” In his words, “[i]t’s all just as much out there as it is in you!”

APPERCEPTIVE GESTALTS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF VALUE

One of the reasons Naess takes such pains to articulate this ontology is that he believes it can help to clarify aspects of conflicts in which environmentalists often find themselves. He gives an example in which developers plan to build a road through a wooded area, and to which conservationists object on the basis of protecting it as a habitat for rare species. Naess argues that in such cases, the developers have a moral duty to consider the potential value of the habitat, even if it means sacrificing some short-term economic benefits. He cites the example of a powerful forest spirit that speaks to the conservationists, warning them of the dangers of deforestation. This spirit is an embodiment of the qualities of the forest, and is able to communicate directly with the conservationists, urging them to protect the habitat. Naess argues that such a spirit is not a mere figment of the conservationists’ imagination, but a real entity that can be experienced and communicated with. This example illustrates how gestalt ontology can be used to articulate the moral principles that underlie environmental ethics.
that the road will destroy the “heart” of the forest. The developers, however, mistakenly believe that by “heart” the conservationists are referring to the geometrical “center,” and feel that the heart can be preserved if the road does not pass through it. For Naess, this confusion is the result of the fact that what a conservationist “sees and experiences as reality, the developer typically does not see—and vice versa.”

For the conservationists, the heart is a quality of the forest that emerges in a complex gestalt: perhaps it is found in a particular grove of pines that stands adjacent to a meadow near a river, and that can only be accessed by walking through a stand of hardwoods, fording the river and making one’s way through the flowers that grow in the meadow. For them, a road that eliminated any one of these elements (or even the silence one encounters along the way) would effectively destroy the heart, even if it did not touch the pine grove. The developers, on the other hand, are said to be “neglecting the gestalt character of the forest.” They take as reality what is an “abstract structure of geography” and therefore treat the center of the woods as it appears on a map as if it were the heart; they see in the forest only “a set of trees,” overlooking the relations between them and thus not only completely missing the heart of the forest, but also finding any argument to preserve it fundamentally nonsensical.

This characterization of the conflict, however, although in some respects illuminating, is potentially misleading, for it fails to capture the fullest sense of Naess’s claim that the conservationists and developers see and experience reality differently. As Naess depicts it, the difference between the two groups is that the former are in touch with the concrete gestalts of the forest and the latter are not—that is, the conservationists experience the relatedness of the forest’s elements while the developers see only the elements themselves, as if they were listening to a series of musical notes being played but never hearing the melody. According to Naess’s ontology and epistemology, though, all experience has a gestalt character. Therefore, while it may be true that the developers present their proposal in terms of the abstract geometric space of maps and zoning areas, and while they may use appeals to these abstractions to discredit the conservationists’ arguments, it would not be true that they fail

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26 Naess remarks parenthetically that “[i]f you are deep in the forest and encounter a road, the forest as spontaneously experienced is no longer the same. The greatness and majesty, the dignity and purity, etc., is lost.” Naess, “Ecosophy and Gestalt Ontology,” p. 244.
27 Ibid.
30 That Naess holds this view comes across most clearly in Rothenberg, *Is It Painful to Think?* pp. 155–68.
to experience gestalts. Rather, it would seem that, for many of them, when they
survey the forest for possible road sites, the heart of the forest simply is not a
concrete content of their experience. As Rothenberg puts it in an interview with
Naess, the developers may “experience what they’re looking at in terms of
[the] figures and facts they are trained to assess . . .”31 and not in terms of the
qualities encountered by the environmentalists.

The problem, then, is not that the developers are dealing in abstractions while
the conservationists are speaking of concrete contents that are evident when
one is attentive to gestalts. Instead, the issue appears to be that the developers
hold an ontology that structures their gestalt experience of nature in certain
terms—terms that are likely to be antithetical to the aims of environmentalism.
Briefly stated, the Galilean ontology defines nature as devoid of thought or
will, lacking any internal ordering principles and operating strictly in accor-
dance with the laws of efficient causality; it is a realm in which all phenomena
are claimed to be accountable for in terms of matter and its motions, a sphere
in which even organisms are said to be mere assemblages of material parts that,
although admirably complex, are nonetheless without desire, feeling or pur-
pose.32 With such an ontology firmly in place, it is relatively easy to understand
why qualities such as the “heart” of a forest or the “life” of a river are not
aspects of reality in the experience of many people.33 Indeed, it would be
difficult to experience the “life” of nearly anything in the natural world, if by
“life” we mean something other than the predictable workings of chemical
processes. Walking through the woods, encountering tree after tree, it is
unlikely that the developer would have an experience of anything other than
“potential lumber” taking up “wasted space.”

Thus, the Galilean ontology, while dismissive of the very notion of an ontology
of gestalts, could be an integral part of the gestalts in which things are given,
gestalts in which nature appears as the bearer not only of certain sense-
qualities, but certain value-qualities as well. This view is in keeping with Naess’s
claim that spontaneous experience is inherently valuational: referring to
gestalts that include normative aspects as “apperceptive,” he states that in
normal circumstances “. . . all experience is apperceptive.”34 In other words,
value is as much a part of the reality we experience as the white of a trillium

31 Rothenberg, Is It Painful to Think? p. 162.
32 The critiques of what Naess is referring to as “Galilean ontology” are many in environmental
literature. See, for example, Evernden, The Social Creation of Nature; Carolyn Merchant, The
Death of Nature (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1980); Val Plumwood, Feminism and the
Mastery of Nature (London: Routledge, 1993); Freya Mathews, The Ecological Self (Savage,
33 Naess refers to the “life of the river” in Naess, Ecology, Community and Lifestyle, p. 66;
34 Naess, Ecology, Community and Lifestyle, p. 60. Of course, this statement means that the
distinction just made between “sense” qualities and “value” qualities is itself an abstraction,
albeit a useful one to convey the point at issue.
or the warmth of the sun. What values are given, however, remains to be determined. For the developer, assured of the truth of a reductive materialist ontology, the values that arise in the spontaneous experience of the forest are use values, or perhaps negative values due to the area’s lack of a substantial human presence.

The conservationists, on the other hand, relate to the forest in ways such that not only the heart is apparent, but different kinds of values as well; for them, the apperceptive gestalts reveal a nature that is valuable independent of its usefulness to humans. Such a revelation is articulated beautifully in Robert Frost’s poem “Hyla Brook”:

By June our brook’s run out of song and speed,  
Sought for much after that, it will be found  
Either to have gone groping underground  
(And taken with it all the Hyla breed  
That shouted in the mist a month ago  
Like ghost of sleigh-bells in a ghost of snow)—  
Or flourished and come up in jewel-weed,  
Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent  
Even against the way its waters went.  
Its bed is left a faded paper sheet  
Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat—  
A brook to none but who remember long.  
This as it will be seen is other far  
Than with brooks taken otherwhere in song.  
We love the things we love for what they are.  

Here it is unmistakably clear that the brook is valued for itself: as the last line of the poem emphasizes, we do indeed “love the things we love for what they are.” Yet it is equally clear that such affection goes hand-in-hand with a particular relationship to the brook, and a unique insight into exactly what it is. Those who “remember long” understand the brook’s cycles and seasons; in its babbling they hear choruses of frogs and the soft melting of the snow in the spring; when its waters have dried in the summer heat they find a parched blanket of leaves or the fragile stalks of jewel-weed as evidence that its energies are still pulsing, its life is still coursing. All of this contributes to a gestalt in which the brook is much more than what either the Galilean ontology or the narrow utilitarian account that follows from it would take it to be; it is an active presence in the lives of those who share it, something to be cherished—and protected.

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GESTALTS AND “GESTALT SHIFTS”

Our comments to this point show that while the Galilean ontology is premised on an abstract conception of the real, we should not underestimate the potential power that this abstraction yields. Gestalt thinking asks us to consider the ways in which nature becomes manifest, particularly in terms of the values that can be discovered there. Therefore, gestalt thinking urges us to be attentive to the role that the Galilean ontology itself plays in this manifestation, its contributions to the way that nature comes to be conceptualized and experienced. Consequently, for an environmental philosophy committed to gestalt ontology, it is not enough to encourage a return to spontaneous gestalt experience, as if it represented an inherently environmentalist turn away from the Galilean vision. Instead, such a philosophy should work toward various “gestalt shifts,” restructuring those gestalts that are informed by the Galilean ontology and within which nature cannot show itself in non-anthropocentric terms. What gestalt thinking ultimately calls for, in other words, is the expansion of the possibilities for experiences of nature’s worth of the sort described by Frost above, experiences that are the concrete reality in which environmentalists are rooted, from which they draw their inspiration, and to which they ceaselessly bear witness.

This task has not been ignored in the writings of supporters of deep ecology, but often it has been treated as subordinate to other philosophical questions, especially those that concern the self. For Naess, it is directly connected to his placement of “Self-realization” as the ultimate, or logically deepest norm in his own ecosophy. The notion of Self-realization is based on the idea that humans are intimately related to the natural world, but may lack awareness of the full extent of this relatedness. Such an awareness can be developed, however, and hence Self-realization is described as a process of “realizing [the] inherent possibilities”36 of one’s situation; it is a process through which one is able to understand the true depth of one’s connections to nature.37 Moreover, it is thought that once one actualizes this potential—that is, develops a sense of their “ecological Self”—the need to raise traditional moral questions about duties to nature is largely eliminated: since with an awareness of one’s ecological Self one recognizes that one’s own possibilities are intertwined with those of nature, or more straightforwardly, that nature is a part of one’s Self, the inclination to protect nature is said to become as natural as the inclination

37 The difference between the self understood as being essentially in relationship with others and the self conceived more individualistically oftentimes is marked by the use of capitalization, where “Self” indicates the former and “self” the latter. It is for this reason that Naess claims that “Self-realization” (with the capital S) is not to be confused with the maximization of one’s narrowly construed interests, or with “colossal ego trips” (Naess, “The Deep Ecological Movement,” p. 80; see also Naess, Ecology, Community and Lifestyle, p. 85).
to protect oneself. With this conceptual framework in place, it is clear that when Naess argues for “the supremacy of environmental ontology and realism over environmental ethics . . .,” his most immediate concern is not the sort of ontological questioning about the nature of nature that our previous discussions have taken up, but a revival of the inquiry into the nature of the self.

In addition to bringing questions of the self to the fore, the centrality of the notion of Self-realization in Naess’s work serves to contextualize other key terms, most notably identification. Like some other deep ecology supporters, Naess uses this term in at least two different senses, both of which cluster around the idea of cultivating awareness of one’s ecological Self. In one sense, to identify with nature is to recognize that one is a member of a larger biotic community, that one stands within the vast web of ecological relationships that comprise the natural world. This sense is similar to what Warwick Fox calls “cosmological identification,” and it is apparent in Naess’s claim that humanity is “capable of understanding and appreciating its relations with all other life forms and to the Earth as a whole.” With identification of this sort the self is thought to become greater insofar as it sees its own history and unfolding as bound up with natural processes and the well-being of natural entities, including ecological systems. In another sense, closely related to Fox’s “personal identification,” identification involves understanding that others are in certain respects like oneself; it is the recognition that there is in others “something similar or identical with oneself.” Naess frequently explains his thinking on this point with the example of watching a flea die in some chemicals on a microscope slide, and seeing in the flea’s gestures an impulse toward life and the avoidance of harm akin to his own. This sense of identification arguably is most important to Naess’s thought, and it is presented in conjunction with the account of identification as a “spontaneous,

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38 In Naess, “Self-Realization,” he says that when the ecological Self protects nature, it is “engaged in self defense” (p. 232).
39 Ibid., p. 236.
40 I do not mean to claim that these philosophical agendas are mutually exclusive. Questions regarding the self do involve us in questions about others and, as deep ecologists are adept at reminding us, in questions about nature. However, as I try to show in the remainder of the essay, whether we take questions of the self and Self-realization or questions about others as our leading problems may have important consequences.
41 Fox, Toward a Transpersonal Ecology, chap. 8.
42 Naess, Ecology, Community and Lifestyle, p. 166.
43 Fox, Toward a Transpersonal Ecology, chap. 8.
46 I say “arguably” since, in Fox’s estimation, it is a form of “cosmological” or “transpersonal” identification that is most important to Naess’s work (see Fox, Toward a Transpersonal Ecology, pp. 259–60).
non-rational, but not irrational process, through which the interest or interests of another being are reacted to as our own interest or interests.”47 In other words, the ability to see others as similar to oneself is a necessary condition of empathy or sympathy; when one identifies with others in this way, one is able to take pleasure in their pleasures and feel the loss of their failures.48 Doing so is said to expand one’s sense of self since through such identification one’s interests come to include those of others; it is a process through which one experiences the flourishing or failure of others as an important part of one’s own well-being.

To be sure, such a transformed self-understanding is rightly described as a “gestalt shift,” and it certainly would be experienced as such by many Westerners.49 However, this line of thinking has received its fair share of criticism. Some commentators contend that the stress Naess places on the ecological Self stems from his assumption that humans are basically egoists, and that the only way to motivate them to care for the natural world is to show them that they are connected to nature, so that its protection becomes a matter of self-interest.50 Others have claimed that viewing nature as part of one’s extended Self is reductive of difference.51 Of direct relevance to the present discussion of gestalt ontology, it has been argued that the foundational role played by Self-realization in Naess’s philosophy indicates that his thought is, at bottom, anthropocentric: it prioritizes the development of human potential and treats nature as a means to the end of human self-actualization and

48 See Naess, “Identification as a Source,” p. 262, where Naess writes that “[i]t is a necessary, but not sufficient condition of empathy and sympathy that one ‘sees’ or experiences something similar or identical with oneself.” The same point is made in Naess, “Self-Realization,” p. 229. See also Arne Naess with Per Ingvar Haukeland, Life’s Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World, trans. Roland Huntford (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), pp. 113–14.
51 This is part of a number of critiques of Naess, including ecofeminist commentaries and the “deep green” criticisms leveled by Katz. In other essays I have argued that this issue may constitute the biggest point of contention between Naess and some of his critics (see “Arne Naess, Val Plumwood and Deep Ecological Subjectivity”) but that there are elements of Naess’s thought that could be developed in such a way as to begin to address the problem. See Christian Diehm, “The Self of Stars and Stone: Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology and the Ecological Self,” The Trumpeter 19, no. 3 (2003): 35–49.
fulfillment. When interpreted in this way, even Naess’s appeals to gestalt ontology appear to be motivated by anthropocentric goals. Eric Katz, for example, points to Naess’s essay “Metaphysics of the Treeline,” in which Naess claims that at the treeline those who are sensitive to gestalts can find “a seemingly infinite variety of concrete contents,” and that “[m]ore is open to the human ecological self than can be experienced by any other living being.”

For Katz, this passage suggests that the true function of gestalt ontology is to provide a more experientially rich alternative to the impoverished materialism of the views Naess criticizes. In Katz’s words, gestalt ontology is part of a philosophical program that is geared toward “maximizing the positive human experience of value in a universe identified with one’s own self.”

**GESTALT ONTOLOGY AND THE DISCOURSE OF THE OTHER**

These criticisms are no doubt worthy of further examination; yet our reflections indicate that there are aspects of Naess’s thought that, when developed, may avoid these problems. Starting with the gestalt ontological considerations that Naess offers, instead of with a norm of Self-realization, we have found that emphasis ought not to lie primarily on expanding the self but on expanding the possibilities for new forms of encounter with nature and for a deeper understanding of the values it holds. What our considerations of gestalt ontology suggest, that is, is that rather than prioritizing the widening of one’s sense of self—a process in which the value ascribed to the self is spread out accordingly—we ought to prioritize expanding the conception of others such that their value may emerge more clearly.

Such a change in emphasis would occasion a corresponding change in the role of identification in Naess’s philosophical system. Rather than serving as a means to realizing the ecological Self, identification would be seen as part of a way of relating to other-than-human beings such that they are encountered outside of the exclusive parameters established by the Galilean ontology. As we have noted, this ontology attempts to deny nature any forms of purposiveness or intentionality, desire or feeling, allowing that such qualities exist—if indeed they are allowed to exist at all—only within the human sphere. Against this view, identification, as the experience of kinship and similarity between self and

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other, would enable us to understand others who are other-than-human in quite opposite terms; it would reveal them as entities with varying forms of conation and intelligence, varying kinds of excellences and vulnerabilities; it would show them to be beings for whom life is more than just a series of chemical reactions in a mechanical play of forces, as existents for whom existence is filled with importance and meaning.

In truth, this position is not different from what Naess himself says about identification of this sort. While usually somewhat vague about exactly what identification entails, in his most recent book Life’s Philosophy he tells us that perhaps identification sees in others “the life force, or that part of God that lives in all that is living. . . .” Elsewhere he says that identification is strongest in situations where others are suffering, quite possibly because it is in seeing others go through events that are contrary to their own desires and ends that the feeling and purposiveness of their lives is most apparent.

But despite this acknowledgment that identification gives us insight into the richness and complexity of other-than-human existence, what Naess seems to find most important about it is not what it shows us about others, but what it shows us about ourselves. Immediately following the above comments from Life’s Philosophy, for example, he says that although it might not be entirely clear what it is in others with which we identify: “Whatever it is, it is something that becomes part of yourself, or more correctly of ‘the great Self.’” Here Naess quite clearly is grounding his analysis of identification in a discourse about the self, instead of treating it as part of a discourse about the other. Thus, even though his account of identification recognizes that it can contribute positively to our understanding of other-than-human beings, he continues to regard situations of identification as significant primarily insofar as they widen our sense of self, and not insofar as they increase our appreciation of the depth and breadth of the lives of those with whom we are in relation.

Let me hasten to add that identification, taken as an element of the encounter with others, is not unproblematic. There is surely something questionable about relating to what is other-than-human on the basis of its likeness to what is human. Yet it is equally questionable to claim—as certain versions of the Galilean ontology do—that what is essentially human is absolutely foreign to nature. Accordingly, although identification cannot be taken as the only feature of the relations we are describing, it may nevertheless be an important aspect of them, integral to the experience of other-than-human beings as entities with their own ends, patterns and trajectories, as beings with unique styles and ways of being.

When identification is viewed in this way, as part of a wider philosophical

54 Naess with Haukeland, Life’s Philosophy, p. 114.
56 Naess with Haukeland, Life’s Philosophy, p. 114.
discourse regarding the other, it is clear that acting on others’ behalf cannot be regarded as an extended concern for oneself. Since on this account identification is not a means of linking self and other but a factor contributing to the recognition of other forms of existence, here caring for others is not some form of self-interest but is, instead, the product of a genuine appreciation of the fullness of their being and the value that it has, the result of a genuine concern for others themselves. Similarly, when distanced from the notion of Self-realization and placed against the background of the development of a less reductive ontology of nature, Naess’s gestaltism does not appear as a means of expanding the possibilities for human experience, but as a means of expanding the possibilities for thinking about the other-than-human. In other words, in the present context the aim of gestalt ontology is not the emancipation of more positive human experiences of the natural world, but the emancipation of the realm of the other-than-human from the restrictive confines of the Galilean ontology.

And what of the ecological Self? By suggesting the displacement of Self-realization as a most fundamental norm, have we left no room for the question of ecological subjectivity? We must certainly answer this question in the negative, as indeed we are, in the end, quite close to Naess’s notion of a self whose interests are inextricably intertwined with those of others. For the relations that we have been describing, relations that allow the other-than-human to appear in all its depth, are surely not a matter of indifference. To encounter others in this way is to recognize their existence as a positive value, to realize that their presence is a gain and their absence a loss; it is to have their successes and failures impressed—in an almost literal sense—upon oneself. That the encounter with others in the fullness of their being is a relation in which we are so thoroughly implicated is because to be truly open to others is also to be exposed to them; it is to be vulnerable to being stung by their pains as well as gladdened by their joys, to be capable of being uplifted by their triumphs and cast down by their losses. It is this phenomenon to which Naess points in his definition of identification as a process through which the interests of others are reacted to as our own. But again, what we are trying to stress here is not the widening of the self but the relations to others that support it. The self is undoubtedly “widened” or “expanded” through its connections with others—using these terms as a convenient, if not entirely appropriate, shorthand for caring for others to the point where one’s very self is bound to them—but prior to this event is the encounter with these others themselves. Questions regarding the nature of one’s self thus retain their legitimacy, but we should not forget that they point toward new horizons, toward the other-than-human which makes the ecological Self possible, toward a nature whose revelation is a central task of environmental philosophy.