Arne Naess' Meta-Philosophy:
From 'Empirical Semantics' to 'Deep Ecology'

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Abstract: *After describing Arne Naess' early empirical investigations in semantics it is shown how those works fertilized his later environmental philosophy (i.e. 'deep ecology'). Based on this a criticism is formulated: namely, the neutrality of Naess' 'empirical semantics' is questioned. It is finally explained that this has also consequences for 'deep ecology'.*

Keywords: *Arne Naess, deep ecology, empirical semantics, environmental philosophy, naturalism*

Introduction

My aim is to shed some light on the inner relations of Arne Naess' (Næss) philosophical work. At a first and superficial glimpse, Naess' early investigations on 'empirical semantics' – mainly the analysis of the use of terms by interrogating persons about their understanding of terms, phrases and sentences – have nothing in common with his later and mature 'deep ecology'. Deep ecology was and is interpreted as an alternative to the established, dualistic and anthropocentric environmental philosophy.

As a consequence, Naess' deep-ecology-approach is put aside (by, e.g., analytic philosophers) with bluntly irrationalistic philosophies, which *claim* the intrinsic value of all beings and a kind of mythological connection of everything (cf. Krebs, 1999, pp. 69–77; Sylvan, 1985, pp. 11, 26ff; Mahner & Bunge, 2000, p. 170). This view might be substantiated by a long list of

Naess' contributions. At a first and perfunctory glimpse, deep ecology is really radical (cf. List, 1993): Naess sets the stage for "biospherical egalitarism", the "rejection of the man-in-environment image in favor of the relational, total-field image", the "principles of diversity and of symbiosis" to name just the subsections of his seminal paper (Naess, 1973). He also pleads for intrinsic value of "natural diversity", "plant species should be saved because of their intrinsic value"[1] and so on.

Indeed, deep ecology served as a guideline for environmentalist groups like EarthFirst! and inspired "radical" and "alternative" thinkers.[2] Thus, the conclusion seems to be obvious: Naess started as a "serious" philosopher and ended up degenerately as an adherent of irrationalism and *spiritus rector* of "radical" activism.

This conclusion is bluntly wrong. I will show in the following that Naess' *later philosophy, his deep ecology, cannot be understood properly without considering his early work*. Any interpretation of deep ecology has to take into consideration the author's early writings; otherwise its central feature cannot be grasped. To be sure, given the introductory nature of this paper, a comprehensive and in-depth overview about Naess' work is not intended. After arguing for my interpretation, I will hint at some problematic points in deep ecology.

My central hypothesis concerning his philosophy as a whole can be formulated as follows: *Naess' goal was not to formulate a generally binding philosophical system but to provide "technical" means to clarify and specify the existing philosophical beliefs. Roughly speaking, the techniques developed were 'empirical semantics'; the technique applied was the formulation of the deep-ecology platform.*

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[1] For a critique of Naess' inconsistent use of the concept of 'intrinsic value' see O'Neill, 2003, p. 140, note 1 and 4.

[2] Those are labeled currishly by Sylvan 1985, p. 1 as 'West Coast American intellectuals'.

Empirical semantics

Semantics is the philosophical discipline which investigates meanings, that is, the relation between signifiers and objects. Naess, in his earliest works, analyzed this relation empirically with the help of questionnaires (cf. Naess, 1938; Ness [sic], 1938; Naess, 1953, p. 408ff; for an overview see Naess, 1981/2005), thus investigating how certain terms, phrases or statements in question are used.

People were asked to discriminate between a set of statements. If they responded that the statements mean the same for them, they were regarded as synonymous. In a second step, statements could be ordered concerning the levels of discrimination: the result was a tree-like diagram. Gullvåg summarizes Naess' central ideas, adding the notion of the frequency of use:
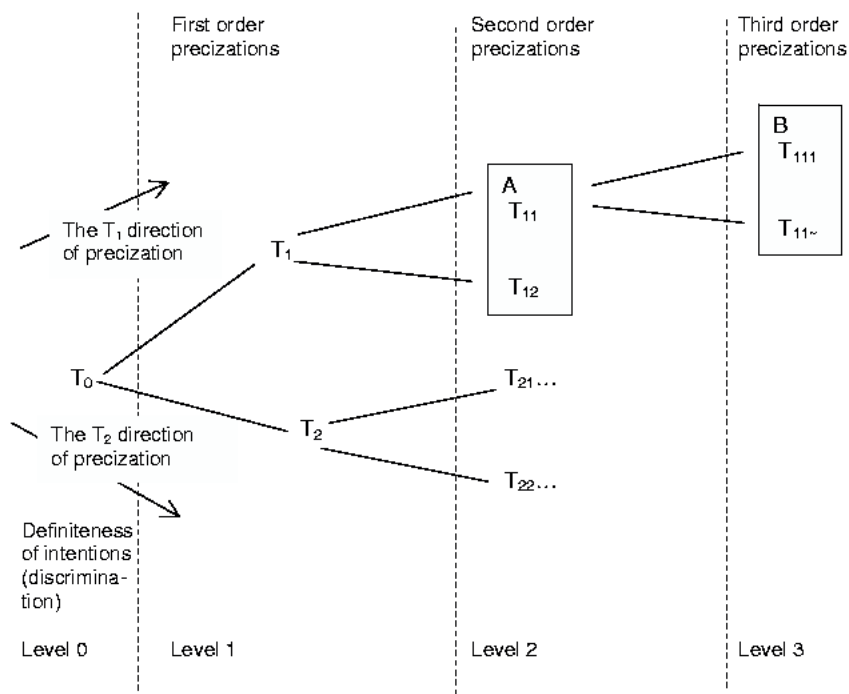
> Roughly, we may say an expression [...] is *ambiguous* if and only of it has non-synonymous instances (tokens); one expression is an *interpretation* of another if and only if both are (would be) synonymous for some person in some (type of situation); one expression is a *plausible* or *standard* interpretation of another if and only if they are (would be) synonymous for *many* persons in *many* (types of) situations; hence a standard interpretation of a sentence may be said to indicate a frequent use of it. Finally, one expression is a precision of (or more precise than) if and only if the set of standard interpretations of the former is a proper subset of the set of standard interpretations of the latter. (Gullvåg, 1983, p. 34, Gullvåg's italics)

The intuitive idea behind 'empirical semantics' is the following: Given a low-level (unspecific, vague) term (phrase, or statement) T_0 the term could be rendered more precise in different directions (T_1, T_2, T_3, $T_{...}$) on the subsequent level, on the second level the same procedure might take place (T_{11}, T_{12}, T_{13}) and so on. Naess' definition of "more precise than" is the following:

> »'a' is more precise than 'b'« is equipollent to » There is no interpretation of 'a' which is not also an interpretation of 'b' whereas there is at least one interpretation of 'b' which is not an interpretation of 'a', and there is at least one interpretation of 'a'«. (Naess, 1953, p. 60; cf. Gullvåg, 1975, p. 394; cf. Naess, 1975, p. 22).

There is synonymity along the branches (T_0, T_1, T_{11}, T_{111}, ...) but not at the *same* level (cf. Naess, 1953, p. 78). Hence different people might understand the same root-term differently and/or at a different level of intention/discrimination. The

following diagram (taken from Naess, 1970/2005, p. 114[3]) helps to illustrate this issue:

This helps to understand one of Naess' later key concepts: the 'depth of intention' *(*Naess, 1953, p. 386) Here, as already mentioned in secondary literature (Glasser, 1998), the depth metaphor occurs for the first time. One has to keep in mind that the most vague terms (sentences and phrases) are used on level 0 (T_0). Naess speaks in this context, slightly misleadingly, of 'shallow terms'. Only the more precise terms, sentences or phrases on subsequent levels have a remarkable depth of intention. Hence 'depth of intention' correlates positively with 'definiteness of terms'.[4] Those unspecified T_0-terms are those which are used among lay people; only after some "training" and learning one is able to use more specified terms.[5] Beyond that, Naess claims according to Alastair Hannay (1975, p. 417; cf. Naess, 1953, p. 151) that on the T_0-level

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[3] I would like to thank Michael Caley for giving me permission to reprint this diagram.
[4] For a critique see Gullvåg 1983, p. 36: "We might say that 'preciseness' is a concept of socio-semantics on a macro-level, referring to social usages; whereas 'depth of intention' refers to the thinking and understanding of individuals. In view of this, the whole approach to depth of intention in Naess' semantics seems unnecessarily circuitous."
[5] Naess was inspired by Otto Neurath's *Ballungen* in this (Naess, 1956/2005, p. 188; 1972, p. 134. Cf. in this context Feyerabend, 1957/1958, p. 242).

'instinctive *behavior*' is analogous to the utterances of an expression with the lowest level of preciseness. Accordingly, instinctive believing cannot generate the propositional content necessary for it to stand in a logical relation to a judgement.[6]

The central question is whether Naess has reached a *neutral basis*. That he does *not* becomes clear if one analyzes the analogy between 'instinctive behavior' and utterances of the lowest level terms more closely. It might be argued (as Feyerabend, Wittgenstein, Peirce and others claim) that the context (and thus the use, cf. Naess, 1953, p. 271ff) determines the utterance's meaning. Hence the utterances (as verbal behavior) and their meaning are causally dependent from the contextual setting and one can consequently scrutinize whether this (verbal) behavior is adequate or not, that the person in question shows the correct behavior. This amounts to say that the information about the context (or the speaker's environment) determines the *researcher's (interpreter's)* judgment whether the instinctive behavior is to be regarded as adequate behavior or not. (Naess is aware of this problem, cf. 1953, pp. 85, 156, 196ff, 281.)

If a certain (verbal) behavior is uttered willingly because it amounts to the formulation of a T_0-term which is the starting point for a precization[7] or is interpreted by an observer as adequate, both the attentive observer and intent speaker need appropriate information about the context in which the utterance of the T_0-term arises or how it could be rendered more precise in the intended direction. The linguistic researcher observes certain verbal behavior, documents its use, and comes to the conclusion that this utterance is instinctive *in relation to the context*.

I would suggest that if the context of an (instinctive) utterance is reconstructed, one has to assume against Naess' definition that a T_0-term stands in relation to other terms and statements – namely those which describe the context in which the T_0-term is asserted. It is not necessary to claim that the speaker is conscious about this context; it is sufficient that the researcher takes the context of the utterance into consideration. By doing so, it becomes clear that this process is a

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[6]   See also Naess (1971, p. 46, italics J.R.): "Confident behavior, including *verbal behavior*, is one kind of event among others. But just as verbal expressions of confidence are not necessarily expressions of statements to the effect that one is confident, so confident action in the world is not implicitly a matter of affirming that something is the case." "To assert that something is true is one thing; to give one's impression is quite another. In the former case one makes use of clear-cut distinctions and concepts [...] while the latter is no more than, as it were, letting the events speaks for themselves – a case in which the speaker functions 'angelically', as not more than a messenger of the appearances".

[7]   Here and in the following I will use Naess' term 'precisation' or (as in Naess, 1953) 'precization' (*Präzisierung*) instead of the common English term 'specification'.

kind of clarification which helps to understand the speaker better and to *evaluate* his utterances in relation to their adequacy.

Naess argues that the idea of 'synonymity' is intuitively clear but he claims also that he is very indefinite on this (Naess, 1957, p. 88)[8] – that is, a quotidian understanding of synonymity is his point of departure for his painstaking elaborations. In any way it is shown by Naess that "synonymity is relative" (Chapman, 2008, p. 131; see, e. g., Naess, 1953, pp. 168, 362). If it would be a purely neutral account then this whole documentation of the usage of terms, the investigation of synonymity, would be nothing more than asserting trivialities (Feyerabend, 1957/1958, p. 239). But if, however, one has the impression that one *learns* through the term's precization a lot, then this analysis cannot be purely neutral (cf. Kraft, 1960, p. 19).

Naess explores the philosophical implications of his method. Putting the linguistic aspect of this issue aside, one might ask about the importance of low-level terms. The empirical substantiated hypothesis put forward by Naess seems to be that those terms are the core of the classical philosophical systems. Naess (1981/2005, p. 62; 1953, p. vii) uses the term 'embryonic' to describe this. It is important to understand the concept 'philosophical system' in a very broad, holistic sense; as an example, the systems of Descartes or Spinoza might be helpful. If one takes such a system, one might identify key concepts which are explored and specified in different directions and, as a result, a philosophical edifice is erected. To be sure, by doing so, some empirical hypotheses and normative axioms are added; only then a precization could be accomplished. After the process of precization one is "caught" in a philosophical system:

> [A]s soon as we start precisation and articulation of a conceptual framework, it is difficult to stop before we find ourselves standing inside the frame of presuppositions of a quite specific kind of philosophy (Naess, 1982/2005, p. 12).

Naess combines this holistic meta-philosophical approach with the claim that any critique of an existing system presupposes another system. There is no point behind or beyond a 'total view' (Naess, 1964; 1953, p. 114). This also implies that everyone has his own "private" total view.[9] Given this statement a *descriptive* interpretation, this seems true and uncontroversial: Every individual

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[8]   I cannot go into details here but this amounts to the abandonment of a strict separation between analytic and synthetic sentences (cf. Naess, 1953, pp. 165ff and 362).

[9]   In order to accomplish a precisation one needs empirical and axiological hypotheses to do this. Nobody can rest on the shallow level of intention, since communication and argumentation bases on certain level of intention. "Be precise, but not too precise" might be an appropriate slogan to summarize this.

has its "own" ontology, axiology and epistemology, but only very few were and are able to "think it through". Naess' aim is *neutral* meta-philosophy, a thorough and structured reconstruction of a philosophical system, not its critique.[10]

The second use of the depth metaphor is reported by Harold Glasser and is based on 'premise-conclusion chains'. This becomes intuitively clear in Glasser's own words since it mirrors the common understanding[11] of deep thinking.

> A premise-conclusion chain, $p \subset q$ and $q \subset r$ and $r \subset s$, can be formed from a series of premise-conclusion statements, p, q, r, and s, where $x \subset y$ symbolizes, from premise x, or set of premises x, follows conclusion y. Naess characterizes an argumentation pattern starting with q as 'shallower' than one starting from p (Glasser, 1998, p. 162; cf. Naess, 1986/2008, p. 108; 1982/2005, p. 130).

This can be understood as a logical, transitive relationship and cannot be regarded as controversial. The difference between the semantic concept of depth and the premise-conclusion chain concept is that the latter is important for reasoning and action likewise. The fusion between both is given by Naess in his deep ecology approach.

Deep Ecology

The term 'deep ecology' is ambiguous. Glasser (2001, p. 4041) distinguishes between three different meanings. [1] The 'deep ecology movement', that is the name for different groups (like EarthFirst!) which are supporting actively deep ecology, [2] the 'deep ecology approach' and [3] Naess' personal ecophilosophy, his personal spelling-out of the deep ecology approach, 'Ecosophy T'[12]. I refer mainly to the deep ecology approach and partly, as a matter of illustration, to Ecosophy T. The development of the deep ecology approach by Naess and his followers will be excluded.[13]

In a concise overview Naess makes clear that his deep ecology approach is constructed as a 'platform'. That means that different individuals with very

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[10] Whether Naess reached this aim of neutrality is a controversial matter. Cf. Gullvåg, 1975 with Naess, 1977/2008.

[11] Cf. Sylvan, 1985, p. 21: "Ecosophy T is pretty much an old-fashioned hypothetico-deductive system [...]".

[12] 'T' refers to the name of Naess' remote and self-built mountain hut Tvergastein.

[13] For a systematic overview see Sylvan, 1985, p. 53.

different "cultural background" share the basi c principles of deep ecology. These principles are spelled out as *vague* slogans so that every engaged individual could identify with them (Naess, 1986/2008, p. 105). In addition, Naess claims that these "slogans" – the deep ecosophical platform – can be found among supporters of the deep ecology approach (Naess, 1986/2008, p. 116): that is, those slogans can be interpreted as statements actually asserted and documented. It is not the task to argue for this platform but merely to mention that there *is* a platform.[14] It is, to use a Kantian notion, a *quaestio facti* not a *quaestio juris*.

More important is to mention that these platform-principles are themselves derived from ultimate premises. Naess says that the same class of platform-principles can be derived from different sets of ultimate premises (Naess, 1986/2008, p. 115; cf. Naess, 1981/2005, p. 74). This can also be understood as uncontroversial as long as one keeps in mind that *de facto* different persons of different cultural backgrounds engage in environmental matters. Naess claims that several ultimate premises are often incomprehensible for outsiders. This can be interpreted as an uncontroversial factual statement. Practical norms or a general policy is derived from the platform-principles.

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[14] Therefore it is not quite correct to state, as an anonymous reviewer of this paper denoted, that the concepts of deep ecology would necessarily be reached through precisation. According to Naess, vague sentences or phrases are used and could be rendered more precise in different ways. However, it is a factual problem whether and how those sentences and phrases are used. Additionally, there is not any a priori necessity that all participants of communication will agree on the same set of sentences and this inquiry also amounts to an empirical investigation which is far beyond the scope of this paper. Besides, Naess never intended to formulate a kind of generally binding philosophical system. My claim could be substantiated either by listing some examples of "environmental discourse" or by quoting Naess himself. Due to the lack of space I prefer the latter: "Some people scattered around the world seem to feel at home [with Ecosophy T, or some other ecophilosophy] in the sense of feeling what its sentences mean and more or less experience an agreement. This is important for common action in the spheres of social and political movements [...]" (Naess, 1982, p. 264). This quotation expresses his intention of formulating a 'platform'. He continues by stating: "In the exposition of Ecosophy T and formulating basic views within the deep ecological movement, I make free use of *key terms*. These words or short expressions acting more like headings or like flags, than expressions of ideas. [...] These expressions are then made more precise through definitions and elaborations" (Naess, 1982, p. 265, Naess' italics). To sum up: One *starts* with (vague) "key terms" and tries to specify and elaborate them. Recently Benjamin Howe comes to the same conclusion as I do (cf. Howe, 2010, pp. 376; 378, 380ff). The vague slogans of deep ecology do not constitute the endpoint of a philosophical procedure (like for example Kant's 'transcendental deduction'), but they are regarded as useful points of departure for an argumentation. As noted above, the endpoint of that very precisation is open.

The result of Naess' efforts is an interesting four-level scheme (cf. the diagram in Naess, 1986/2005, p. 63). It should be clear that different 'worldviews', 'ultimate premises' and 'ecosophies' can function as the logical basis for the deep ecology platform. Naess does not aim to formulate a certain closed platform, the principles on level 2 – which are not discussed here[15] – are regarded as hypotheses. Besides this it is uncontroversial that different policies (level 3) and particular decisions etc. (level 4) can be derived logically. This plurality I would like to interpret in a purely descriptive manner which can be supported empirically: There is no one and only policy, no alternative to existing actions and so on. In an explication of a *concrete action* and its *preceding argumentative decision process,* motivational, psychological aspects are excluded but those aspects may influence the formulation of the respectively higher levels: "The direction from bottom-up offers the genetic and historical derivation – including all the motivations and impulses in formulations of norms and hypotheses" (Naess, 1989, p. 196).[16]

Concluding critical remarks: Naess as "empirical" philosopher

A worldview or, to use Naess' wording, a total view is spelled out through a process of precization *and* obviously through the addition of normative and descriptive hypotheses,[17] but immediately some problems arise: The starting point is on the one hand at level 1 and there, at the very beginning lay T_0-terms, which have, according to Naess, no propositional character.

On the other hand it is stated by Naess that in the deep ecology approach the neutral, hence vague, terms can be found at level 2; and those are already deduced from an ultimate set of premises. Therefore one has to conclude that the vague terms are only allegedly neutral, that they are the outcome of a still unformulated premature philosophical position. But then it is questionable that due to precization a philosophical system is reached; a better formulation would be that due to precization a philosophical position is systematized but *not* created.

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[15] For a critical discussion from a different point of view see Sylvan, 1985. However, Sylvan does not mention and discuss Naess' central notion 'depth of intention'. Nevertheless his critique is valuable because he adheres to a different ontology as Naess, namely a kind of Meinongian value-objectivism.

[16] This is also a remarkable thesis which is not discussed as controversial among philosophers of science under the label 'inference to the best explanation'.

[17] For a nice example see Naess, 1974/2005, pp. 48–84, 157–161.

Besides this, a further question is how the different directions of decision-making took place, if the core consists of non-propositional statements. This is arguably a question which is beyond the scope of empirical semantics but, could be, as I suggest, explained empirically. To be sure, the very problem is also logical: One has to choose the hypotheses in such a way that the whole system is consistent. The precization has to be performed in such a way that the outcome – the total view – is guaranteed. Hence one is faced with the objection that if the result is already given, then the system's erecting is superfluous, besides one aims at a more thorough formulation of the underlying intuitions (cf. Naess, 1953, p. 386).

I think it is possible to inerpret Naess as a "naturalistic" philosopher. This holds for both his empirical semantics and his later deep ecology approach. It becomes clear that the latter is not only a description of environmentalist's attitudes from all over the world, it is not only proposed as a means to prevent the destruction of our planet, but it also witnessed Naess' deep conviction as a political human. Consider as a last example of the preceding the sketch of his own total view his Ecosophy T (Naess, 1989, p. 196ff): 'Self-realization!' as its basic norm must already be seen as precization of the very vague T_0-term 'self-realization' (Naess, 1989, p. 84). One cannot argue for this most basic norm, so Naess can only show with the help of examples how to make sense out of it.[18] And therefore his examples (e.g., his autobiographical sketch [Naess, 1983]) are of utmost importance. The skeptical reader might get the impression that Naess is correct in his description of his basic insights. But here an interesting complication arises. Naess claims correctly that his Ecosophy T and deep ecology are *incompatible* with other *ganzheitlich* totalitarian ideologies, like fascism (Naess, 1982/2005, p. 4).[19] This is obviously true as fascism is not compatible with 'self-realization!'. So, one faces the following situation: Either Naess discovers, finds the basic insight in 'self-realization!' by his *friluftsliv* (Drengson, 2008, p. 22) or some form of hidden (unconscious) vindication took place and 'self-realization!' found its place in Naess' mind not only by living and contemplation but by a kind of searching for it. In my opinion this is a more

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[18] Naess (1989, p. 172) gives a list of examples but then mentions that identification with nature does not dissolve the individual: "The above seems to point in the direction of philosophical mysticism but the fourth term, 'self-realisation' (identification, oneness, wholeness are the other terms, J.R.) breaks in and reinstates the central position of the individual [...] The widening and deepening of the individual selves somehow never makes them into one 'mass'. [...] How to work out this in a fairly precise way I do not know."

[19] The point in question made by Naess seems misleading: Although Naess rightly claims that any fascist ideology lacks consistency; this lack of consistency does not prevent individuals killing others in the name of inconsistent views.

probable version of how the things might have happened – and one that could be substantiated by Naess' own autobiographical remarks. An analogous point makes the intended neutrality of empirical semantics dubious.

As already mentioned, Naess gives a lot of examples in his deep-ecological writings. That is no coincidence. As the most basic T_0-assertions are the logical premises of the subsequent conclusions, it is impossible to deduce them from other premises. Hence the philosopher has to "show" them; they must be intuitive for those who are in need of a justification. This process is understood psychologically by Naess – he rejects a phenomenological approach (Naess, 1954; but see Rothenberg, 1993, p. 155). This kind of reasoning has the form of an inference to the best explanation. Naess seems to subscribe this because he mentions several examples of thinkers (or groups of individuals) who developed a monistic worldview. The problem in question, which awaits justification, is to make another way of living plausible. To *show* that the way of living is practiced (and not only considered theoretically) is not an explanation at all but a kind of education; explanation would consist in formulating some abstract principles from which subsequent conclusions might be derived. I cannot see how a person alien to such ways of life might be convinced solely through a descriptive reconstruction. For those who already share the philosophical system in question it might be a help for maturing their position by analyzing their own arguments and those of his or her fellows. Those examples provided, might nevertheless be a help for those who are wavering or even in strict opposition. Empirical semantics provides for Naess a useful tool to formulate a "neutral" deep-ecological platform. During the process of precization (and by adding normative and descriptive hypotheses as premises) a philosophical system is erected. So long as this process is described no problems arise.

Is this descriptive, "empirical" philosophy? I think so. Naess does not argue *for* a certain kind of worldview but shows that it can be spelled out in a concise manner. He explicitly does *not* assert that his Ecosophy T is the *only possible* formulation (precization) of ecophilosophical insights. There are many others possible. He explicates his own assumptions and their logical relations, analyzes empirically the use and interpretation of expressions, gives (admittedly sketchy) examples. His partly extreme vagueness is owed to his empirical semantics. The linchpin is the alleged neutrality of T_0-terms. His preference for environmental matters reflects his own value preference but this is uncontroversial since the choice of a proper topic of investigation always reflects a scientist's preferences and interests. The "neutrality" Naess is looking for is, in my eyes, neither possible nor necessary.

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