

From Depth Psychology to Deep Ecology: Scepticism and Psychoanalysis in Arne Næss's Thinking

Tommaso Priviero

Queen Mary University of London

Abstract

This paper examines Næss's personal and intellectual engagement with psychoanalysis to illuminate its role in shaping his 'philosophy of life' or 'ecosophy'. It locates three key areas where Næss's reflections intersect with psychoanalytic thought: (1) his exploration of the psychotherapeutic potential of philosophical scepticism; (2) his critical stance on the scientific status of psychoanalysis; (3) his developing interest in the idea of a 'Spinozistic psychoanalysis'. These focal points reveal a consistent theme: while Næss acknowledged certain aspects of psychoanalysis as valuable, he situated them within a broader, pluralistic philosophical framework, thereby challenging some of its more absolutist epistemological claims. In addition to tracing the presence of psychoanalytic ideas in Næss's thinking, the paper considers how his perspective contributes to psychoanalytic theory, particularly through his emphasis on scepticism as a philosophical and therapeutic stance.

Keywords

Arne Næss, deep ecology, depth psychology, psychoanalysis, scepticism

DOI

10.54432/scand/DXPJ9136



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Introduction

In his native Norway, the mountaineer, philosopher, and activist Arne Dekke Næss is surrounded by a legendary aura. Accounts of his life and work verge on the mythical, portraying him less as an academic philosopher than a modern sage and philosopher of life (Rothenberg 1993, Glasser 2004, Dengson 2008). There is little doubt that over the long arc of his 96 years, Næss's life was, in many ways, extraordinary. He was a prolific author, with more than thirty books and hundreds of publications under his name, let alone a substantial part of his work (about two hundred papers) which remains unpublished. In 1939, at the age of 27, he was Norway's youngest professor of philosophy. Later in life, he became primarily concerned with Gandhian non-violent activism, and was the inspirational figure behind 'deep ecology' (a term that he coined in 1972): a non-anthropocentric environmental philosophy that attempts to emphasise the intrinsic value of all living beings and ecosystems. He held academic posts around the world and conducted research across a wide range of cultural contexts. Nevertheless, in contrast with his reputation at home, Næss has yet to receive broad-scale appreciation outside Scandinavia. Even though he had already started to publish widely in English in the 1980s, the publication of *The Selected Works of Arne Næss* by Springer only appeared in 2005. As Glasser observed, Næss's English prose can be exceptionally opaque and confusing (2004: xxix), and highly technical from a philosophical point of view. As one might expect, intellectually engaging with Næss is no gentle stroll. Rather, it resembles climbing one of those Norwegian mountains so dear to him: it requires patience, effort, and commitment, as well as a philosophically trained frame of mind. This paper responds to the call for a more thorough academic investigation of neglected areas of Næss scholarship. In particular, it focuses on his engagement with psychoanalysis —the system of theory and clinical practice ideated by Sigmund Freud, one of the pioneers of modern psychology. The paper begins with an assessment of Næss's personal involvement with psychoanalysis, before moving on to consider the intellectual implications of psychoanalytic theory in his thinking.

'Motives for Psychoanalysis'

In 1934, a 22-year old Næss moved to Vienna, Austria, drawn by the mixture of spectacular mountains and vibrant cultural life. At the time, Vienna was one of Europe's artistic and intellectual centres. Næss soon became involved with the Vienna Circle, one of the most influential groups of

philosophers in the early twentieth century, inspired by the ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell. He was a regular participant in the seminars of the logical positivists and exchanged ideas with prominent figures such as Moritz Schlick (the founder of the Vienna Circle), Rudolf Carnap, Friedrich Waismann, and others. Vienna was also home to Freud's teachings and the flourishing field of psychoanalysis, which focused on the study of the 'unconscious' mind through analytic treatment: an intensive form of psychotherapy in which patients explored their unconscious thoughts and dreams through rigorous analysis, often several times a week. Prompted by intellectual curiosity—and by the humorous suggestion of a Norwegian friend that Næss might be schizophrenic because he preferred organ concerts to social drinking—he decided to embark on a six-times a week intensive analysis with Dr Edward Hitschmann, an Austrian physician and psychoanalyst who had been a close collaborator of Freud and, for some time, Freud's family doctor. At least in its initial phase, Næss appeared to approach psychoanalysis as an auxiliary discipline to philosophy and an aid to self-discovery, more than a cure. In the essay 'How My Philosophy Seemed to Develop' (1983), he recalled:

Psychoanalysis was at that time very close to the center of cultural attention in Vienna. It was therefore inevitable that I should ask myself, If I am to be an honest philosopher or scientist, would it not be prudent to go through a psychoanalysis? Was it not suspicious that in the first draft of my doctoral thesis I had introduced the notion of the 'achievement' (*Leistung*) rather than the 'meaning' of a sentence as a basic dynamic concept? Might it not have to do with my own, perhaps unwise, achievement-mindedness?

Soon I was in a deadly serious fourteen-month analysis, 8 to 9 A.M. every morning except Sundays, with the old collaborator of Freud, Edward Hitschmann (1983: 301).

In the same essay, he provided a psychoanalytic genealogy of his philosophy, connecting personal experiences to the natural world. He linked a sense of estrangement from human relations to a precocious identification with nature. He wrote that he did not see much of the brutality some people attributed to nature; instead, it seemed to him that it was more manifest among human beings (1983: 302). As a child, spending time along the shorelines and observing the small creatures of the sea taught him 'an

enthusiasm for *diversity*’ and ‘a lack of incentive to judge something (some life-forms) as unquestionably higher, nobler, more right, than any other’ (ibid.). By contrast, the mountains represented for him the ‘contemplation of totality’, a sense of ‘unruffledness and equimindedness’, and the symbolic presence of a ‘benevolent’, protective father (ibid.: 304). These naturalist experiences inspired an early form of scepticism: ‘Some points of view (like some animals) are clearly vulnerable from some other points of view (or some other animals), but why imagine that one definite point of view (one kind of living being) would not be vulnerable from *any* other?’ (ibid.: 305).

The youngest of six siblings (two died when they were two or three years old), Næss lost his father when he was one year old. As his mother became preoccupied with his elder brothers who were in their teens, he was left in the care of a maid named Mina. He developed a deep affection for her, as she was kind-natured and patiently submitted to all his wishes. However, when he was three, his mother decided to send Mina away, viewing her excessive indulgence as harmful. According to Næss, this event represented a traumatic ‘catastrophe’ that left him lovelorn, leading to a severe and irreparable estrangement from his mother and frequent nightmares in the years that followed. The rupture provoked what he described as a ‘not insignificant urge to self-destruction’, which, interestingly, remained ‘psychoanalytically rather obscure in spite of intense work’ (ibid.: 303). In his conversations with David Rothenberg, a more intimate and less intellectually detached account of psychoanalysis emerges. As Næss confided, ‘psychoanalysis teaches you to look in a most brutal way at your emotions and values, with bitter clarity—not brutality but ferocious honesty’ (Rothenberg 1993: 30). He gave an account of the psychoanalytic technique of free association (ibid.: 32), which Hitschmann employed, whereby the patient was encouraged to verbalise without censorship whatever thoughts came to mind, no matter how embarrassing, illogical or irrelevant. The process led to a relevant insight:

I saw that I should talk about things that were more painful for me to talk about or private like sexuality or really naughty things I had done. But this analysis proceeded, and after some weeks it was clear that I had a real serious infantile neurosis and that my behaviour and my thinking were still expressions of that neurosis, even if somewhat adapted to society (ibid.).

Næss’s memories of his analysis were not without humour. He described Hitschmann as ‘a very fat and big old man, probably over sixty years old’,

who 'didn't understand this climbing business at all' (ibid.) and philosophy even less. Yet it is clear from his recollections that Næss took the analysis seriously and carried with him insights that he continued to reference throughout his life. One of the most recurrent of these was the psychoanalytic notion of *Panzercharakter* (more accurately, *Charakterpanzer*, 'character armour'), a term introduced by the Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. It designated rigid patterns of behaviour that individuals develop as defence mechanisms, like an 'armour', a protection against uncomfortable feelings and emotional pain. To describe the emotional distance he built towards his mother, he said he had developed a 'kind of *Panzer*, a shell', acknowledging that beneath this protective layer lay his true self, increasingly difficult to reach and ultimately inaccessible to others (Rothenberg 1993: 7). He described himself in similar terms on other occasions. For example, when the Germans marched into Oslo in 1940, he noted: 'I found it mildly exciting, but I reacted against this extreme excitement as usual, as part of my old *Panzercharakter*' (ibid.: 104). Similarly, when his friends and partners asked him questions about anything he wished had been different in his life, he reflected: 'This *Panzercharakter*, is still there. I still live too much in my own world. This is worst when it compromises the norms of friendship' (ibid.: 186).

After almost two years in Vienna, Næss felt constrained and wanted to move on. To his amusement, when he complained about this to his analyst, Hitschmann suggested he become a member of the psychoanalytic society so that he could start seeing patients. However, Næss was adamant that this was not his vocation:

Even if I wasn't sure I wanted to be a teacher, I was certain I wouldn't be an analyst. So I stopped and he of course thought this was a pity, but we were good friends and he wrote many letters to me, although I wrote little to him. He gave me some offprints, which I still have—one that says, 'To Arne Naess, who will aim his sights high.' He was sorry I never ended up an analyst myself (Rothenberg 1993: 35).

In fact, Næss did gain some clinical experience working with patients, when Hitschmann tentatively sent him to a psychiatric clinic to make observations and speak with them. He would go there in the evenings, dressed in a doctor's white robe, and conduct rounds, closely following a few patients. He regarded this experience as tremendously informative. Unlike the characteristic distance he maintained elsewhere, he felt genuinely close to

the patients and their suffering, showing support and empathy. He gained a new understanding of mental distress, suicide, and isolation. Although it remained the only experience of his life as 'Dr Næss', it left an unforgettable mark:

I never seriously thought I would be a psychiatrist, but I was grateful to all those who showed me these things. Much later, I gave a lecture to the students of Oslo University on the meaning of life, because so many young people search for something they can do that really would make a difference for humanity. I said, 'Well, it's very easy, just sit down. Sit down with somebody who is in extreme pain.' It's tremendously simple if you have some empathy. Go out to either the prisons or the clinics. I was not the same person after I heard those screams (Rothenberg 1993: 38).

Scepticism and Psychotherapy

'I have been sceptical since my infancy' (Rothenberg 1993: 99). Næss liked to call himself an avowed sceptic, not merely in the common sense of a person inclined to question accepted opinions, but in connection with the ancient tradition of philosophical scepticism. He wrote a book on scepticism (*Scepticism: Wonder and Joy of a Wandering Seeker*, 1968) and frequently touched on this subject in his scholarly works. Notably, his analysis of scepticism presented it as serving a kind of psychotherapeutic function. This section explores this connection, highlighting a few points of contact between Næss's psychological formulation of scepticism and psychoanalytic technique.

The Greek word *skeptikos* ('inquirer') designated the disciples of Pyrrho of Elis, who lived approximately from 360 to 270 BC. Since Pyrrho did not produce any written works, most of what is known today about Pyrrhonism comes from Sextus Empiricus, a Pyrrhonist philosopher who lived over four hundred years later. The Pyrrhonian sceptic was characterised as perpetually engaged in inquiry, suspending judgment on all matters, and rejecting any claim to certain truth. For Næss, who embraced philosophy as an empirical and pluralistic inquiry in opposition to absolutist claims, ancient scepticism represented a major source of interest. He approached scepticism as a way of life rather than a purely intellectual exercise. Although this was a typical stance in Greek philosophy, it was especially characteristic of the sceptics. As Hadot (1995) pointed out, the

sceptics criticised other philosophers for not observing the common conduct of life with its customs and laws. In contrast, they chose to live with full respect for the 'appearances' of society, applying their philosophical outlook to the problems of everyday life.

Following Sextus Empiricus, Næss described the development of the mature sceptic as falling into seven stages (1968: 3-6), which can be summarised as follows: 1. Frustrated by the contradictions of the world, the neophyte sceptic sets out to evaluate all kinds of doctrines and arguments to restore peace of mind; 2. In doing so, they become philosophers and fall into three classes: (i) those who claim to have found at least one truth (Dogmatists), (ii) those who claim that truth cannot be found in any way (Academics), (iii) those who neither claim to have found truth nor declare it unattainable, but persist in seeking (Sceptics); 3. Choosing the third path, they learn that for any argument in favour of a proposition or theory, there can be found at least one equally strong argument against it (law of balance of the opposites or *isostheneia*); 4. This leads to a particular psychological disposition: the suspension of judgment (*epoché*); 5. Suspension of judgment produces peace of mind (*ataraxia*); 6. The mature sceptic follows the rules and conventions of their community and adopts a profession; 7. While leaving all questions open and living 'without beliefs' (*adoxastôs*), the sceptic continues seeking, free from the expectation of gaining peace by finding truth. According to Bett, this procedure shows that scepticism should be understood essentially as an ability (*dynamis*) aimed at producing freedom from mental disturbance and valued primarily for its 'psychological effect' rather than its rational conclusions (Bett 2019: 110).

Næss's psychological description of ancient scepticism reveals a connection with Paul Ricœur's interpretation of psychoanalysis in *Freud and Philosophy* (1965), published only a few years before *Scepticism*. In this text, Ricœur proposed that Freud was, alongside Marx and Nietzsche, one of the three great 'masters of suspicion' (1970: 32), since he formulated a theory, psychoanalysis, based on the premise that the perceived truth of reality was deceptive. According to Freud, consciousness is largely an illusion, as human behaviour is driven by unconscious motivations, which he ascribed to two primary biological drives: Eros, the sexual instinct, and Thanatos, the death instinct. This view was largely indebted to Nietzsche's perspectivism, which rejected the notion of objective truth and held that knowledge is always shaped by individual perspectives and biases—or, as Nietzsche famously posed it, 'there is no such thing as moral phenomena, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena' (Nietzsche 2008: 64). As Berry has shown (2010), Nietzsche's engagement with Greek scepticism played a crucial role in his own reflections on truth. Nietzsche even identified himself

as a psychologist 'without equals', through the sceptical analogy of 'philosophising with a hammer' (*Twilight of the Idols*), using a hammer to dismantle hollow 'idols', i.e., false beliefs and preconceived assumptions. Freud had been reading Nietzsche since he was young and was deeply affected by his ideas, so much so that he later (mis)claimed to have postponed reading Nietzsche until later in life, fearing he would be overly swayed. Freud's psychoanalysis thus inherited an approach in which, as Ricœur pointed out, sceptical echoes continued to resonate. For example, in his *Papers on Technique* (1911-1915) Freud described the psychoanalyst's work in ways that can be compared to a modern sceptic. The analyst must listen openly to whatever the patient brings forth, without clinging to preconceived notions of truth. This recalls the sceptic's style of listening as a 'chronicler' or 'reporter' (Næss 1968: 7), taking note of mental or physical facts impartially, without affirming fundamental truths. The psychoanalyst's 'attitude' aims to suspend judgment to create a welcoming environment for the patient. Similarly, sceptics referred to *epoché*, suspension of judgment, through *isostheneia*, balancing opposing arguments to achieve internal neutrality. The British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion echoed this approach with his expression 'without memory or desire' (1970), describing a therapeutic attitude unburdened by past interactions or desires for a specific outcome. In the psychoanalytic setting, patients' beliefs are not assessed for validity per se but for their practical effects on the patient's life. For Freud, the analyst must carefully inspect these beliefs, probing whether they serve defensive purposes (perhaps to avoid unpleasant feelings) and offering alternative interpretations, in a way analogous to the sceptic use of counter-arguments. The suspension of judgment is also reflected in the psychoanalyst's typical language, which favours subjunctive phrases like 'it seems that', 'it sounds as if' or 'it may be'. This cautious phrasing helps avoid misleading affirmations of truth. Næss observed that Sextus Empiricus also avoided imperative or unambiguous expressions, choosing words such as 'perhaps', 'presumably', and 'it seems', to clarify that his statements did not assert ultimate truths but conveyed a different kind of meaning (Næss 1968: 9). Næss also recognised that the sceptic notion of *epoché* was taken up (and popularised among philosophers) by the German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, who employed it as a method of suspending belief to examine pure experience in a non-conceptual form. While phenomenology generally took a critical stance towards psychoanalysis, a dialogue between the two traditions emerged, for example, in the work of Ludwig Binswanger, Freud's close friend and a pioneer of existential psychology.

Ricœur contrasted Freud's 'hermeneutics of suspicion' with 'faith', not merely religious faith but any outlook based on beliefs and the

expectation of finding truth beneath the layers of symbols. Psychoanalysis, by contrast, was iconoclastic. Ricœur, however, cautioned against confusing psychoanalysis with a nihilistic theory. Suspicion and destruction should be read as necessary steps towards a new foundation of meaning: 'All three [Marx, Nietzsche, Freud] begin with suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness, and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering; all three, however, far from being detractors of "consciousness," aim at extending it' (Ricœur 1970: 34). He elaborated further: 'What Freud desires is that the one who is analyzed, by making his own the meaning that was foreign to him, enlarge his field of consciousness, live better, and finally be a little freer and, if possible, a little happier' (ibid.: 35). Similarly, Næss interpreted scepticism as therapeutically constructive, not destructive. He identified practical benefits of applying scepticism both (1) among professional psychotherapists and (2) in broader social contexts:

Today I surmise that there are many psychotherapists who are not far from scepticism in their basic attitudes, however full of certainty they may sometimes be in their speech. This makes it easier to help unburden over intellectualized minds of unnecessary, unending reflections about truth and falsity and validity and invalidity. I should think therefore that scepticism of the radical kind we are discussing should not be wholly without practical importance for psychotherapy; here at least is one context in which it may be considered practically desirable. [...] One might reasonably predict important social implications coming from widespread scepticism, even from the fragmentary, unphilosophical kind. It should effectively undermine closed societies with their demands for explicit adherence to certain doctrines and the systematic rejection of counterargument. And in more or less open societies, scepticism should help both in the reshuffling of political priorities and in the elimination of rigid ideological reasoning that lacks any basis in spontaneous thought and feeling (Næss 1968: 69).

Following Næss, the concern for the psychotherapeutic value of scepticism gained increasing scholarly attention (Burnyeat 1983, Barnes 1990, Nussbaum 1994, Bett 2019). Nussbaum in particular spoke of 'sceptic purgatives' and referred to 'sceptical therapy' as an ability based on systematic suspension of judgment and freedom from psychological

disturbance (1994: 286). Sextus Empiricus himself was a doctor and sceptical teachings were prominent in the empirical and methodical schools of medicine (ibid.: 295). Nussbaum emphasised the pragmatic force of scepticism, arguing that 'good therapeutic arguments' were only effective when they were 'well directed toward their practical goal'; the 'good sceptical teacher' was a doctor who 'basing himself on the evidence before him, selects precisely the right remedy for the particular patient's disease' (ibid.: 296). In the context of Eastern philosophy, this observation invites comparison with the teachings of the Buddha, who likened himself to a physician treating the ailments of suffering. The Buddha explicitly encouraged sceptical inquiry, advising followers not to accept teachings on hearsay, tradition or authority, but to test them through direct experience. Nussbaum noted this parallel, suggesting that sceptical practice had a great deal in common with 'Eastern therapeutic philosophies' (ibid.: 312). Beckwith explored this connection in depth, referring to Pyrrho as the 'Greek Buddha' (2015). Curiously, however, Næss did not highlight this parallel in his study of scepticism, despite his well-documented interest in Buddhist philosophy.

Psychoanalysis and the Scientific Enterprise

One significant outcome of Næss's study of scepticism was its influence on his view of science, which in turn shaped his approach to the contested issue of whether psychoanalysis could be regarded as a science. While Freud firmly presented psychoanalysis as a scientific project, this claim met significant criticism, most notably from Karl Popper, who argued that psychoanalytic propositions were unfalsifiable. Other critics, such as Hans Eysenck and Adolf Grünbaum echoed similar concerns. On the other hand, thinkers such as Ricœur and Jürgen Habermas offered more supportive accounts of psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic science. More recently, scholars such as Mark Solms have sought to link psychoanalysis with neuroscience, exploring how brain science might substantiate psychoanalytic insights. Næss's contribution to this debate is best understood within the context of his broader philosophy of science.

In *The Pluralist and Possibilist Aspect of the Scientific Enterprise* (1972), the Norwegian philosopher argued that scientific theories are not autonomous or absolute. They must be understood in relation to the wider context of human rationalities from which they spring ('pluralism') and they must reject dogmatic claims to causal certainty or absolute truths ('possibilism'). This position was clearly modelled on a mature sceptical viewpoint, as outlined in his previous work. On one side, he criticised scientists who acted as if the prestige of science depended on the

emergence of one definite world picture, the scientific truth, as opposed to all the unscientific ones (Rothenberg 1993: xviii). On the other, he remained a staunch advocate of empirical analysis, scientific rigour, and analytic thinking. For Næss, science functioned primarily as a procedural framework rather than a truth-finding enterprise. Like the ancient Greeks, for whom science and philosophy were inextricably intertwined, he considered science an indispensable tool, but not the only valid form of understanding. Similarly, he was critical of Freudianism when it affirmed the epistemological truth of the 'unconscious', attempting to define itself as superior to all psychological theories (which he considered a common problem in psychology). However, he acknowledged its value as a method of systematically examining human passions and subjecting psychological phenomena to empirical scrutiny. In this sense, psychoanalysis could retain a legitimate place within the modern scientific enterprise, provided it maintained a 'pluralist' and 'possibilist' outlook and resisted the temptation to assert Freudian doctrine as universal truth.

In *The Pluralist and Possibilist Aspect of the Scientific Enterprise*, Næss dedicated a section to evaluating a range of psychological theories, using various criteria such as theoretical clarity, practical applicability, generalisability, methodological precision, and empirical verification. He warned against treating this classification as a ranking of strengths and weaknesses. Instead, it was intended as a categorisation of different types of theories, each suited to specific contexts. He listed major contemporary psychologists, such as Brunswick, Hull, Lewin, Piaget, Skinner, Thurnstone, Tolman, and Freud, whom he assessed for two distinct theories: (1) the theory of psychoneuroses and (2) the theory of suppression in verbal associations (Næss 1972: 31). According to Næss, Freud's theories were less ambiguous in practice than in theory and scored high in generalisability. However, he noted that psychoanalytic claims often blurred the line between programmatic (ideological) statements and scientific hypotheses, making critical evaluation more difficult. Still, he acknowledged that psychoanalysis had achieved a degree of success in producing verifiable predictions. Most notably, Freud's work was the only theory in Næss's comparative table marked for its 'significance for social problems and reforms' (ibid.). Social relevance, rather than the formal rigour of Freud's theorems, represented psychoanalysis's most distinctive and effective contribution.

In the same context, Næss also addressed Popper's critique of psychoanalysis as a pseudoscience. Popper had argued that early psychoanalysts, such as Freud and Alfred Adler, constructed their theories in terms which made them amenable only to confirmation (1962), which failed Popper's criterion of falsifiability (i.e., a theory must be capable of being

proven wrong through empirical testing). Næss, who had met Popper during his research at Berkeley, disagreed with this assessment. Firstly, he recalled that at Yale University, psychoanalysts and behaviourists 'successfully collaborated in translating some of the ideas of psychoanalysis into a more testable form' (Næss 1972: 33). He also argued that 'there has never been anything definitely "wrong" scientifically with psychoanalysis as a whole, perhaps only some persistent weaknesses' (ibid.). Secondly, he claimed that if one wished to present a serious critique of psychoanalysis, a 'fair trial' was required, in which all published psychoanalytic hypotheses were properly analysed. Yet if such a trial were conducted, he suggested, clear-cut demarcation formulae were apt to break down and psychoanalysis as a whole could withstand scientific scrutiny more robustly than Popper supposed.

As these observations briefly outlined, Næss placed the theoretical and practical implications of psychoanalysis under careful consideration. The limitations he identified were not unique to psychoanalysis but reflected a broader problem within science and psychology: the tendency of competing schools of thought to promote their systems as superior to all others, often in the service of professional competition and market dynamics. He referred to this as the problem of 'autarchy' within psychological schools, which he described as follows:

When psychologists have nothing more serious to do, they construct 'systems'; they 'define' psychology, isolate themselves from one another (autarchy of schools), and give outsiders the impression that scientific progress depends on finding the best psychological system. There are more than half a dozen in the behaviouristic style, and several in the vein of Gestalt psychology, psychoanalysis, and philosophy of mind—to mention only the ones that are most vocally expressed. The efforts to unify psychology and all other sciences are given an unfruitful direction when one tries to find watered-down formulations that will satisfy all systems, on the basis of an analysis of the so-called fundamental concepts of the various systems (Næss 1937-1939: 187).

For Næss, the problem of 'autarchy' was not merely a danger within psychological schools. It represented a broader distortion that could be misused by science and philosophy alike. More fundamentally, it was an epistemological issue (the illusion of 'truth') distorting scientific and

intellectual inquiry and capable of leading to serious political consequences, including dogmatism, violence, and exclusion. The antidote, he insisted, was to maintain a sceptical frame of mind: to remain open to all ideas with equal attention and critical thinking, avoiding the temptation to impose one's own supposed truth on others. Consistent with this position, Næss had a strong interest in William James and the pragmatist tradition in psychology, which similarly rejected closed intellectual systems that claimed abstract sovereignty over lived experience, in favour of a pluralist outlook. A fuller examination of Næss's epistemological critique in relation to pragmatist psychology, however, constitutes a promising avenue for future research.

Between Freud and Spinoza ('Spinozistic Psychoanalysis')

After considering the relations between psychoanalysis and science, Næss next explored its proximity to philosophy, especially Spinoza, which represented the culmination of his engagement with Freudian thought. Since the 1920s, intellectuals have noted correspondences between psychoanalysis and Spinoza's philosophy. During his lifetime, Freud expressed admiration for the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher of Jewish origins (Hessing 1977: 169). In his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, he compared Leonardo's creative process to Spinoza's mode of thinking (Freud 1910: 75). Later, he acknowledged 'extraordinary respect for the person and work of the great philosopher' (Freud 1933: 293), although, like Albert Einstein, he refrained from engaging directly with Spinoza's metaphysics. More recently, Vermorel (2017) identified 'Spinozean undercurrents' in Freud's correspondence with the novelist Romain Rolland, arguing that Freud's main study of religion, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), built upon Spinoza's critique of superstition and dogmatic religion (Vermorel 2017: 1242). Næss, too, was a lifelong reader of Spinoza. Unlike Freud, however, he explicitly incorporated Spinoza's philosophy into his work, occasionally positioning it as a corrective or complement to Freudian thought.

In 'The Place of Joy in a World of Fact' (1973), Næss addressed the challenge of experiencing joy in the face of global ecological crisis. He regarded 'pessimistic' philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Wittgenstein as somewhat unprepared to provide adequate answers, suggesting instead a turn to Spinoza. For Næss, Spinoza's idea of joy transcended the divide between internal and external worlds. Joy was not a by-product of action but a fundamental condition for engagement with the world. It depended on concentration, presence, and activeness, more so than on laughter and smiling. For Spinoza, joy comprised three levels of development: a state of repose in oneself (*acquiescentia in se ipso*), an

increased knowledge of things beyond the personal sphere, and the joy that arises from active interaction in the broad field of reality (Spinoza's concept of 'nature'). Therefore, Næss argued, Spinoza's formulation of joy stemmed from a rational process, although not in the modern sense of the word 'rational': 'Spinoza in many ways anticipated Freud, and his term *ratio* must not be translated into our term *rational* or *rationality* unless we immediately add that his *ratio* was more flexible and internally related to emotion. Rational action for him is action involving absolutely maximal perspective' (Næss 1973: 117). Spinoza identified pity and commiseration as principal obstacles to joy, which could be addressed through rational analysis. 'Spinozistic psychoanalysis' (sic), Næss pointed out, 'tries to loosen up the mental cramps that cause unnecessary pain' (ibid.: 118). However, for Næss, there was an important difference between Spinoza and psychoanalysis. Freud had introduced the concept of 'superego', which described the part of personality that acted like a moral compass, based on internalised parental and societal standards of 'right' and 'wrong'. When it became coercive, a pathological 'superego' pressured an individual to pursue impossible ideals and punished failure with shame. According to Næss, Spinoza's idea of *ratio* had something in common with the psychological concept of 'superego', but it focused much more on the healthy potential of rational capacities:

The superego, through its main application in explaining neuroses, has a rather ugly reputation: it coerces the poor individual to try the impossible and then lets it experience shame and humility when there is no success. In Spinoza's analysis, the *ratio* also functions as a kind of overseer, but its main function is rather one of consolation. It directs our attention to what we can do rather than what we cannot, and eliminates feelings of necessary separation from others; it stresses the harmony of rational wills, and of well-understood self-interests. (ibid.: 118).

Næss continued this line of inquiry in 'Through Spinoza to Mahāyāna Buddhism, or Through Mahāyāna Buddhism to Spinoza?' (1978). He observed that the increased general interest in Buddhism in the West led to the search for a philosophy that could bridge Eastern and Western traditions. He proposed Spinoza as one of the possible answers, as Spinoza was not only one of the great rationalists of the seventeenth century, but was also influenced by Jewish and Middle Eastern mystical sources. The central theme of this essay was freedom through cognition of the mind. Spinoza

advocated a systematic training in observing one's mental processes whereby an individual gradually and painfully achieved a clearer understanding of their affects. Næss compared this process to psychoanalysis. Spinoza identified two remedies against the passions, which justified Freud's admiration for the Jewish philosopher. Firstly, (1) one must attain mental clarity through cognition of the affects; a process akin to what Freud referred to as analytic 'insight'. Secondly, (2) one must learn to separate affects from the projection of external causes, which Freud regarded as the essential analytic work of withdrawing projections. However, Næss placed great emphasis on the partial, painful and gradual nature of this process. He warned that key aspects of Buddhist philosophy and meditation could hardly be understood without undertaking a Freudian analysis first. The sharp clarity of Buddhist insight meditation was contrasted with the slow, painstaking training of both Spinoza's philosophy and psychoanalysis:

The work required to get 'a clear and distinct idea of a passion' may be, and has been, conceived as an analysis of the kind worked out by Freud and later 'depth' psychologists. At least so much is established, that for a person to get a deep insight into an affective-cognitive complex acquired in infancy is extremely difficult and takes a long time. The trust in substantial egos and permanent things is acquired in infancy. The Buddhist theory of nonsubstantiality [...] undermines or destroys conceptual frameworks acquired in infancy. So, it seems very strange, from the point of view of psychology, that any kind of *instantaneous* clearness could be brought about. More likely, there may be a gradual and partial elucidation of passions. (Næss 1978: 273-274)

Næss revisited the intersection of psychoanalysis and Spinoza once more in 'Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World' (1986). In this essay, he explored the concept of the self, drawing parallels with depth psychology. Firstly, he distinguished the narrow 'ego' and the broader 'self' (Næss 1986: 515), echoing one of the most distinctive contributions of psychoanalysis, i.e., the confinement of the 'ego' to a marginal place within the landscape of the 'unconscious' mind. As Freud famously put it, '*the ego is not master in its own house*' (Freud 1917: 143; or. italics). He then expanded this model into the notion of 'ecological self', encompassing relationships not only with other human beings but with the broader natural

world (Næss 1986: 516). He linked the maturity of the ecological self to achieving increased self-realisation (in Norwegian *Selv-realiserings*), i.e., following Spinoza, the unfolding of a person's full potential and enhanced capacity to experience joy. Curiously, Næss did not reference another depth psychologist, the Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology Carl Gustav Jung, who had earlier developed a similarly expanded concept of the 'Self'. Jung defined the 'Self' as the totality of an individual psyche, encompassing personal and collective parts, and called 'individuation' the lifelong process whereby conscious and unconscious aspects of personality were integrated to achieve wholeness or self-realisation. This omission was relevant because Jung's model of the Self expanded Freud's narrower definition of the self, by enlarging the hypothesis of the unconscious psyche from personal to collective proportions.

Næss found an alternative reference for this discussion in the German philosopher and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, who was influenced by Spinoza in various ways. In *The Art of Loving* (1956a), Fromm differentiated between narcissistic love, which implied a shrinkage of self-perception, and unselfish love, which was grounded in genuine love towards oneself and others, leading to a broadening of self-perception. Love, Fromm wrote, 'is not an "effect" in the sense of being affected by somebody, but an active striving for the growth and happiness of the loved person, rooted in one's own capacity to love' (Fromm 1956b: 59). Næss reframed this distinction, contrasting 'ego-trips' with the recognition of humanity's relations to other living beings and ecosystems in the natural world. This insight informed his models of Gandhian nonviolence and 'deep ecology'. He argued that the psychoanalytic challenge to the centrality of the ego in psychology paralleled the need for a non-anthropocentric view of nature. The shift he advocated was not rooted on a moralising obligation or religiously loaded notions of altruism, but in a pragmatic realisation of human potential: 'The notion of a greater self should be introduced to show that if people equate self-realisation with ego trips, they seriously *underestimate* themselves. "You are much greater, deeper, generous, and capable of more dignity and joy than you think! A wealth of non-competitive joy is open to you!"' (Næss 1986: 526). According to Næss, Freud's clinical explorations of the negative effects of a coercive superego aptly illustrated that humankind was very limited in what it could love from mere duty or excessive moral exhortation. Yet, psychoanalysis, with its focus on the implications of neurosis, overlooked alternative paths of ethical development, which Næss traced back to Spinoza's notion of self-realisation. 'It seems to me', the Norwegian philosopher wrote, 'that in the future, more emphasis has to be given to the conditions under which we most naturally widen and deepen our

self' (ibid.). Finally, he differentiated self-realisation from pleasure or happiness. He argued that these terms primarily referred to feelings, the former being associated with physical sensations, the latter with psychological states. Differently, self-realisation pointed to the broader process of fulfilling one's potential, which could include happiness but was not reducible to it. Drawing on Zen Buddhism and Spinoza, Næss concluded: 'Happiness is a feeling, yes, but the act of realising a potential is always an interaction' (ibid.: 530).

Næss placed Spinoza and Freudian psychoanalysis in dialogue, drawing on both to shape his philosophical outlook. By juxtaposing Spinoza's rational analysis of affects and psychoanalytic therapy, he examined their shared focus on self-knowledge and liberation from destructive passions. Yet he also highlighted key differences, particularly Spinoza's broader and more constructive view of reason, contrasted with restrictive notions such as the Freudian superego and Cartesian rationalism. This interplay, which invites further exploration, informed Næss's formulation of concepts such as the ecological self, where self-realisation was no longer confined to individual psychology, but emerged through relational connections with the wider ecosystems of the world.

Conclusion

This paper set out to map Næss's engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis, inviting further research into this subject. Beginning with Næss's own experience of analysis with Hitschmann, the paper explored three areas, following the historical progression of Næss's inquiry into this topic: first, the parallels between his interpretation of scepticism and Ricœur's conception of psychoanalysis as a 'school of suspicion'; second, the role of psychoanalysis in Næss's broader view of science as a pluralist enterprise; and third, his reflections on the psychological 'self' through a dialogue between Freud and Spinoza. These three areas are interconnected. Næss's study of scepticism provided the essential ground for his reflections on scientific pluralism, which then evolved into a deeper philosophical inquiry into aspects of psychoanalysis, guided by Spinoza. Overall, the Norwegian philosopher was not dismissive of psychoanalysis, nor of its scientific claims. He valued it as an important tool for the 'analysis of the passions' while contrasting it with the practice of Buddhist meditation. At the same time, he implied that psychoanalytic ideas should be expanded through philosophical reflection. His engagement with concepts such as 'self-realisation' demonstrated an attempt to move beyond the boundaries of psychoanalysis. For Næss, activism and ecological awareness, particularly

through his project of 'deep ecology', were the way forward. This marked a shift from introspective exploration of the unconscious toward engagement with the ecosystems and ethical challenges of a 'more than human' world.

Bibliography

- Barnes, J. (1990). *The Tails of Scepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beckwith, C. (2015). *Greek Buddha*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Berry, J.N. (2010). *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bett, R. (2019). *How to Be a Pyrrhonist: The Practice and Significance of Pyrrhonian Scepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bion, W. (1970). *Attention and Interpretation*. London: Routledge.
- Burnyeat, M. (1983). *The Skeptical Tradition*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Dengson, A. (2008). 'Introduction', in *Ecology of Wisdom*. London: Penguin Books.
- Freud, S. (1886-1939). *The Revised Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)* (tr. J. Strachey, ed. by M. Solms). London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- _____, (1910). *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*, SE, vol. XI.
- _____, (1911-1915). *Papers on Technique*, SE, vol. XII.
- _____, (1917). 'A Difficulty of Psychoanalysis', SE, vol. XVII.
- _____, (1933). 'Letter to Siegfried Hessing', GW, Nachtragsband, 670.
- Fromm, E. (1956a). *The Art of Loving*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers.
- _____, (1956b). 'Selfishness, Self-Love, and Self-Interest', in *Self-Explorations in Personal Growth* (ed. C.E. Mustakas). New York, NY: Harper Colophon.
- Glasser, H. (2004). 'Introduction', in *The Selected Works of Arne Naess*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Hadot, P. (1995). *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hessing, S. (1977). 'Freud et Spinoza', in *Revue Philosophique*, 102, pp. 165-180.
- Naess, A. (2005). *The Selected Works of Arne Naess (SWAN)*. Eds. H. Glasser, A. Dengson. Dordrecht: Springer.
- _____, (1937-1939). *Common Sense, Knowledge, and Truth* (SWAN, vol. 8).
- _____, (1968). *Scepticism: Wonder and Joy of a Wandering Seeker* (SWAN, vol. 2).

- _____, (1972). *The Pluralist and Possibilist Aspect of the Scientific Enterprise* (SWAN, vol. 4).
- _____, (1973). 'The Place of Joy in a World of Fact' (SWAN, vol. 10).
- _____, (1978). 'Through Spinoza to Mahāyāna Buddhism, or Through Mahāyāna Buddhism to Spinoza?' (SWAN, vol. 9).
- _____, (1983). 'How My Philosophy Seemed to Develop' (SWAN, vol. 9).
- _____, (1986). 'Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World' (SWAN, vol. 10).
- Nietzsche, F. (2008 [1886]). *Beyond Good and Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____, (1889). *Twilight of the Idols*. Leipzig: C.G. Naumann.
- Nussbaum, M.C. (1994). *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Popper, K. (1962). *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Ricœur, P. (1970 [1965]). *Freud and Philosophy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Rothenberg, D. (1993). *In Conversation with Arne Naess: Is It Painful to Think?* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.