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Spontaneous Experience in the More-Than-Human World: Rediscovering Arne Næss's Eco-Phenomenology[1]

Abstract: In this paper, the author explores the concepts of "spontaneous experience" and "more-than-human world" in Arne Næss's environmental philosophy, highlighting their profound significance for an eco-phenomenological analysis of his thought. By critically interpreting Næss's philosophical reflections on spontaneous identification with the more-than-human world, the author argues that his ecological insights are grounded in an implicit eco-phenomenological theory based on *direct* and *deep* engagement, as well as on *embodied*, *lived*, and *restorative* experiences in the natural world. In doing so, the author poses questions that challenge and pave the way toward rediscovering Næss's eco-phenomenology in light of the ongoing environmental crisis.

Keywords: Arne Næss, spontaneous experience, eco-phenomenology, environmental philosophy, more-than-human world

The world as spontaneously experienced, including appropriateness and truth, cannot be denounced as less real than that of scientific theory, because we always ultimately refer to the immediate reality.

– Arne Næss, 1993

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary ecological crisis has exposed not only political, economic, and technological failures, but also a deeper disturbance in how human beings experience and understand their relation to the living world (cf. Abram 1996: 31, 181). Climate disruption, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation increasingly reveal the limits of "conceptual frameworks" that separate humanity from nature and reduce the more-than-human world to a mere reserve of resources (Næss 2021: 72–75). If ecological devastation is sustained by distorted forms of perception, value, and self-understanding, then ecological transformation must involve more than policy reform alone; it must also concern the ways human beings perceive, inhabit, and belong within the Earth (s. Brown and Toadvine 2003).

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In this context, eco-phenomenology has emerged as an important philosophical orientation. Drawing on the phenomenological traditions of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, it emphasizes *embodied*, *lived*, and *affective experience* as a basis for rethinking ecological responsibility. Rather than treating nature as an external object of "calculation" or "management", eco-phenomenology asks how the world is disclosed through *perception*, *bodily immersion*, and *relational encounter*. It thereby seeks to overcome entrenched dualisms between *subject* and *object*, *culture* and *nature*, *human* and *world* (Abram 1996: 90).

Among the thinkers relevant to this development, Arne Næss occupies a distinctive yet insufficiently examined position. Best known as the founder of Deep Ecology (e.g., Devall and Sessions 1985; Sessions 1995; Devall 2020), Næss is most often associated with environmental ethics, biocentric equality, and self-realization (s. Rothenberg 1993: 187). While these dimensions are certainly central, they do not exhaust the philosophical significance of his work. This paper argues that Næss should be understood not merely as a precursor to eco-phenomenology, but as a thinker whose philosophy contains the underdeveloped foundations of a distinct eco-phenomenological orientation.

The central thesis of this paper is that Næss's reflections on spontaneous experience, ecological selfhood, and identification with the more-than-human world disclose an implicit phenomenology grounded in *embodied participation*, *relational ontology*, and *transformative encounters* with nature. In this view, spontaneous experience is not a peripheral psychological motif within Deep Ecology, but one of its *experiential* and *philosophical* foundations (s. Næss 1973, 1986). Through direct, pre-reflective encounters with landscapes, animals, weather, and ecological place, intrinsic value is not merely inferred or morally assigned, but experientially disclosed (s. Næss 1993b: 71–75). On that note, reconsidering Næss in this light serves two aims. First, it recovers a neglected dimension of his environmental philosophy and clarifies the experiential basis of several key concepts, including *self-realiz*ation and *ecological identification*. Second, it expands the conceptual scope of eco-phenomenology itself by showing that Næss's thought offers resources for rethinking embodiment, more-than-human relationality, ecological subjectivity, and existential responses to the environmental crises.

With that in mind, the paper proceeds in four stages. It first outlines the historical background and classical roots, main topics and field of study, as well as conceptual limits and the so-called "Næssian opening". It then examines Næss's environmental philosophy in relation to phenomenological thought, with particular attention to spontaneous experience and the ecological self. The third stage

proposes a brief but systematic reinterpretation of Næss as an eco-phenomenological thinker. Finally, the paper considers how such a reinterpretation may illuminate contemporary experiences of ecological distress, including eco-anxiety and solastalgia (s. Albrecht 2019: 27 ff). Rediscovering this hidden dimension of Næss's philosophy matters not only for the history of environmental thought; it also bears on a contemporary question of increasing urgency: whether ecological responsibility can emerge not solely from abstract obligation, but from transformed ways of *experiencing* and *dwelling* within the more-than-human world.

2. THE DAWN OF ECO-PHENOMENOLOGY

Eco-phenomenology has emerged as a vital attempt to bring phenomenological insights into dialogue with ecological thought (s. Wood 2001: 78 ff). While classical phenomenology explored perception, embodiment, and world-disclosure, eco-phenomenology reorients these concerns toward the more-than-human world and the ecological conditions of lived existence. Its central question is no longer only how the world appears to consciousness, but also how human beings encounter, inhabit, and respond to a living Earth (Abram 1996: 181 ff; s. also Brown and Toadvine 2003).

In this sense, eco-phenomenology challenges modern "conceptual frameworks" that oppose humanity and nature, subject and object, culture and environment. It seeks to recover the experiential depth of ecological belonging and to show that environmental responsibility may arise not solely from moral principles or scientific knowledge, but also from transformed ways of perceiving and dwelling (e.g., Heneise *et al.* 2025).

Yet eco-phenomenology remains marked by unresolved tensions (Wood 2001: 92). It inherits anthropocentric assumptions from classical phenomenology, struggles to articulate pre-reflective and affective forms of ecological experience, and often finds it difficult to connect "local lived encounter" with the planetary ecological crisis. These tensions are not merely weaknesses; they also indicate why Arne Næss's philosophy deserves renewed attention. His reflections on spontaneous experience, identification, and ecological selfhood provide precisely the resources needed to extend eco-phenomenology beyond its current limits (e.g., Næss 2008: 81–82).

2.1. Historical Background and Classical Roots

The roots of eco-phenomenology lie in the phenomenological tradition inaugurated by Husserl and transformed by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Although none of these thinkers developed a systematic ecological philosophy, each contributed conceptual resources that later became central to eco-phenomenological reflection (Abram 1996: 31, 44).

Husserl's call to return "to the things themselves" redirected philosophy toward lived experience prior to theoretical abstraction. Yet equally significant is his notion of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), which situates meaning not in detached consciousness but in a pregiven horizon of embodied and relational existence. In this sense, Husserl (1999, 2012) already unsettles the modern image of a sovereign subject confronting a merely external world and opens the possibility of thinking experience as environmentally embedded from the start.

Heidegger (1996) radicalized this shift by describing human existence as always already being-in-the-world rather than an isolated subject confronting objects. His analyses of *dwelling* and *world* suggest that existence is grounded not in mastery or representation but in belonging, exposure, and responsiveness. These insights would prove crucial for later ecological thought, particularly insofar as they challenge the metaphysical separation of humanity and nature that has underwritten many modern attitudes toward the Earth.

Merleau-Ponty (1968, 2012) deepened these developments through his account of embodiment, arguing that perception is not detached representation but bodily participation in a shared world. Particularly significant is his later notion of the "flesh of the world", which suggests an intertwining of perceiver and perceived, self and environment. Here phenomenology moves toward a genuinely non-dualistic ontology in which *human* and *world* are internally related rather than externally opposed. In many respects, this remains one of the most important classical anticipations of eco-phenomenology.

What emerges through these trajectories is more than a sequence of conceptual influences. One can discern a gradual displacement of modern dualism itself: from consciousness toward lifeworld, from subjectivity toward being-in-the-world, and from embodiment toward ontological intertwinement. In this sense, eco-phenomenology does not arise merely as an ecological application of phenomenology,

but from tensions internal to phenomenology's own development (s. Wood 2001: 85, 88, 90). Ecological questioning intensifies possibilities already latent within the tradition.

At the same time, these classical roots remain incomplete. Even where phenomenology overcomes Cartesianism, the more-than-human world often remains a horizon of human disclosure rather than a field of ecological relationality in its own right. This limitation helps explain the emergence of eco-phenomenology as a distinct orientation: not as a break with classical phenomenology, but as an effort to radicalize its relational, embodied, and non-dualistic insights under contemporary ecological conditions (s. Abram 1996: 264). Eco-phenomenology thus does not abandon classical phenomenology, but reactivates and transforms some of its most generative possibilities in response to environmental crisis (cf. Wood 2001: 78).

However, if these classical roots clarify how eco-phenomenology became "philosophically possible", they do not yet show what defines it as a distinct field of inquiry. Once phenomenological insights are reoriented toward ecological relationality, embodiment, and more-than-human existence, new thematic questions begin to emerge. The issue is no longer only the inheritance of phenomenological concepts, but the specific problems, motifs, and domains of investigation organized around this ecological reorientation. It is at this point that eco-phenomenology appears not merely as a development within phenomenology, but as a field with its own topics, tensions, and lines of inquiry.

2.2. Main Topics and Field of Study

Eco-phenomenology, as a contemporary extension of phenomenology, is not defined by a single school or doctrine but by a constellation of interrelated concerns centered on the experiential depth of human relations with the more-than-human world (s. Brown and Toadvine 2003). What unites these concerns is the attempt to rethink ecological existence not as a problem external to lived experience, but as constitutive of it. In this sense, eco-phenomenology is less a discrete subfield than a reorientation of phenomenological inquiry around embodiment, relationality, affective attunement, and ecological dwelling.

A central point of departure is the claim that experience is always embodied and situated. Human beings do not first exist as detached observers who subsequently relate to an environment; rather, they encounter the world through a lived body already immersed in ecological contexts (s. Abram

1996: 137 ff). Drawing especially on Merleau-Ponty, eco-phenomenology emphasizes that perception is not passive reception nor mental representation, but bodily participation in a world that exceeds and sustains the perceiver. Place, atmosphere, texture, and elemental surroundings are therefore not incidental conditions of experience, but part of its very structure. To perceive is always already to be situated within an ecological field.

From this emphasis on embodiment follows a broader concern with relational ontology (Næss 1989a: 10, 28, 49–50). If lived experience is ecologically situated, then subjectivity itself cannot be understood as self-contained or autonomous. Eco-phenomenology, therefore, challenges inherited metaphysical divisions between *subject* and *object*, *human* and *nature*, proposing instead that beings emerge through webs of relation and interdependence (s. Næss 1979). In this view, ecological belonging is not an ethical supplement added to an otherwise isolated self, but something disclosed at the ontological level of experience itself.

This relational emphasis also gives eco-phenomenology its distinctive sensitivity to sensuous and affective dimensions of encounter. Ecological meaning is often disclosed not primarily through reflection but through bodily attunements, through wonder, vulnerability, awe, or quiet resonance with landscapes, weather, and living beings. Such experiences are not treated as merely subjective moods or aesthetic embellishments. Rather, they reveal the world as expressive, significant, and worthy of care (Abram 1996: 3). In this sense, eco-phenomenology often suggests that ecological responsibility arises less from abstract moral principles than from transformed ways of perceiving and feeling.

Because these dimensions frequently exceed conceptual capture, eco-phenomenology also raises questions concerning language and expression (Abram 1996: 73, 93, 137). If ecological experience includes pre-reflective, affective, and often elusive forms of disclosure, philosophical writing itself must confront the limits of purely analytic representation. This partly explains why eco-phenomenological thought often turns toward evocative description, poetic language, or narrative forms capable of preserving experiential richness without reducing it to abstraction (s. Abram 1996: 225). Such experimentation does not abandon philosophical rigor, but seeks forms of thought adequate to the phenomena under consideration (s. Næss 2008: 48–50, 52–54, 60–64).

From here, ethical and political implications follow not as external applications but as immanent consequences. If human existence is embodied, relational, and affectively entangled with the more-

than-human world, then ecological ethics can no longer be grounded solely in rules, duties, or calculations (s. Næss 1993a: 67, 71; Defrančeski 2024: 148–150). It becomes a matter of care, responsiveness, and modes of dwelling. Likewise, ecological politics is not reducible to policy alone, but concerns forms of perception and subjectivity through which environmental worlds are inhabited, valued, and defended (s. Næss 1989b: 186–187). For this reason, eco-phenomenology often intersects with broader attempts to decenter the human and rethink agency, community, and responsibility beyond anthropocentric frameworks.

Taken together, these themes suggest that eco-phenomenology addresses the ecological crisis not only as a scientific or moral problem, but as a crisis of perception, attachment, and world-relation. Its field of study, therefore, extends from embodiment and place to ethics and politics, yet these are not separate topics so much as dimensions of a single question: how the living Earth is disclosed in experience, and how such disclosure might transform ecological thought and practice.

At the same time, these very strengths generate difficulties of their own. Precisely because eco-phenomenology privileges lived experience, relationality, and embodied immediacy, questions arise concerning anthropocentrism, the limits of phenomenological description, and the challenge of addressing large-scale ecological crises. These tensions mark not the failure of eco-phenomenology, but the point at which its conceptual limits begin to appear.

2.3. Conceptual Limits and the "Næssian Opening"

Despite its promise, eco-phenomenology faces several persistent difficulties, many of which arise from the very strengths that define it. Its emphasis on lived experience, embodiment, and ecological relationality offers a compelling alternative to abstract environmental thought (Wood 2001: 78), but also raises unresolved theoretical and practical tensions. These tensions do not undermine eco-phenomenology so much as expose points where its conceptual resources remain incomplete. It is precisely here that a reconsideration of Næss's thought becomes philosophically significant.

One enduring difficulty concerns the anthropocentric inheritance of phenomenology itself. Even where phenomenological thought seeks to overcome Cartesian dualism and decenter detached subjectivity, it often remains oriented around structures of human experience. The more-than-human world may appear as relationally significant (s. Abram 1996: 8–11), but frequently as disclosed

through human perception rather than as possessing agency and meaningfulness in its own right (s. Morton 2013; Morton 2021: 14–15, 95). This leaves unresolved whether phenomenology can fully account for nonhuman alterity without subtly reinstating the human as the primary locus of meaning. Eco-phenomenology has responded to this tension through concepts of reciprocity, interdependence, and relational ontology, but the problem remains constitutive rather than incidental (Wood 2001: 92–94).

The second challenge concerns the status of pre-reflective and affective ecological experience itself. Because eco-phenomenology seeks to remain close to lived encounter, it often privileges dimensions of experience that resist conceptual capture: attunement, spontaneity, embodied resonance, or tacit forms of belonging (cf. Næss 1993b: 73). Yet the more philosophy attempts to describe such phenomena, the greater the risk of distorting what is most immediate in them. This methodological tension partly explains the turn toward "poetic" or "evocative modes" of expression within eco-phenomenological writing. At the same time, it raises enduring questions about how phenomenological rigor can be maintained without reducing ecological experience to abstraction or romanticizing immediacy.

Closely related is the problem of scale. Eco-phenomenology excels in illuminating local, embodied, and place-based encounters, but many contemporary ecological problems unfold at temporal and spatial scales resistant to direct perception (cf. Morton 2013). Climate change, biodiversity collapse, and air pollution often exceed ordinary phenomenological horizons. This creates a tension between the concreteness of lived ecological experience and the planetary dimensions of the environmental crisis. The challenge is not simply to supplement phenomenology with environmental science, but to ask whether phenomenological attunement itself can expand toward larger ecological temporalities and systemic forms of vulnerability (s. Wood 2001: 92–94).

These tensions converge in a practical question concerning action. Eco-phenomenology has often shown how ecological responsibility may emerge from transformed perception and affective attunement, but less often how such transformations translate into sustained ethical or political practice (Næss 1989b: 187). The passage from phenomenological description to ecological transformation remains uncertain. How can lived awareness become collective commitment? How can altered modes of dwelling generate resistance to destructive social and economic structures? Such questions reveal a difficulty internal to eco-phenomenology's normative ambitions.

Taken together, these challenges expose a shared fault line. Eco-phenomenology struggles, in different ways, with how to think beyond anthropocentric subjectivity, how to articulate spontaneous experience without domesticating it, how to connect local encounter with the planetary crisis, and how to move from disclosure to action. Yet these limits also mark the point where the resources of Næss's environmental philosophy begin to appear with particular force.

For Næss, ecological thought begins not from detached consciousness but from identification, ecological self-expansion, and spontaneous participation in concrete natural settings (Næss 2008: 45, 81, 192–194). In this respect, he addresses anthropocentrism not primarily by theoretical decentering, but by rethinking selfhood itself as relational and ecological. Likewise, his emphasis on spontaneous experience offers a distinctive response to the problem of pre-reflective experience, since such experiences are treated not as elusive margins of thought but as foundational disclosures of intrinsic value and belonging (Næss 1993: 73; Næss 2021: 86).

Although it has its own limits, his environmental philosophy also speaks to the problem of scale in a way often overlooked. While grounded in local and embodied encounter, Næss explicitly links experiential transformation to broader civilizational critique, ecological activism, and responses to the planetary crisis. What appears as an intimate encounter in his thought is never merely private; it opens toward larger ethical and political horizons (s. Næss 2008: 45–46). In this sense, he offers a bridge between lived ecological experience and ecological action more explicitly than many phenomenological approaches.

For this reason, Næss may be read not simply as adjacent to eco-phenomenology, but as opening possibilities internal to it that remain insufficiently developed. His work suggests a way of thinking that joins embodiment and ontology, spontaneous disclosure and ethical response, local encounter and ecological degradation. What emerges through this "Næssian opening" is not a rejection of eco-phenomenology, but a possible extension of it.

This possibility leads directly to the question pursued in the following chapter: whether Næss's environmental philosophy can itself be understood as disclosing the outlines of a distinct eco-phenomenological orientation.

3. ARNE NÆSS'S ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Arne Næss (1912–2009) stands as one of the decisive figures of twentieth-century environmental thought. Best known for formulating the concept of "Deep Ecology" (s. Devall and Sessions 1985; Sessions 1995; Glasser 2011), Næss sought to move environmental philosophy beyond reformist and technocratic responses toward a more radical reconsideration of human identity, value, and place within the Earth's web of life. Although shaped by diverse influences – from Spinoza and Gandhi to Norwegian mountain landscapes – his thought repeatedly returns to experience, relationality, immediacy, and selfhood (cf. Witoszek 1997; Witoszek and Brennan 1999; Næss 2008: 219, 230, 252, 274). For that reason, his philosophy stands in a significant yet still insufficiently examined dialogue with phenomenology.

Though Næss did not self-identify as a "phenomenologist *per se*", his work shares key thematic concerns with eco-phenomenology. Central to this intersection is Næss's idea of "spontaneous experience" – the unmediated, intuitive perception of one's embeddedness in the natural world. Or in his words:

> Spontaneous experience is not sense experience. It is experience of more or less stable things and processes of "the world we live in" (*Lebenswelt* in the terminology of philosophical phenomenology). When we see an orange we see a thing, not a patch of yellow or orange or greenish color. When meeting an animal, we meet in our spontaneous experience something enduring and self-propelled. The essential aspect of the ontology of contents is not a negation of enduring beings, but of the omnipresence of the "we" or "I" and the duplication in external and internal worlds. (SWAN 2005: 340 [vol. 8])

For Næss, ecological awareness is not primarily a matter of rational reflection or moral reasoning, but a form of direct experiential insight. As he formulated it:

> There is no physical world with specifically physical content. There is a reality, the content of which we have direct contact with only through and in our spontaneous experiences. It is a reality of infinite richness. (Næss 2021: 86)

One recognizes the intrinsic value of nonhuman life not through argument, but through identification: a lived sense that one's self is continuous with the larger living world (Næss 1993b: 71–76).

In this sense, Næss's environmental philosophy can be read as offering a kind of eco-phenomenology from the ground up. His attention to direct experience, bodily immersion, and the felt continuity between self and nature resonates with the work of phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty (1968, 2012) and Heidegger (1996). Both of these thinkers rejected the Cartesian subject-object divide and emphasized the world as a field of meaning in which humans are always already involved. Næss similarly challenges the notion of a discrete human subject standing over and against a mute, external nature. Instead, he speaks of the "ecological self" – a self that realizes its identity not in separation, but through deepening relationality with other beings, species, and systems (Næss 2008: 81–82; Næss 2021: 45).

Yet Næss's relationship to phenomenology is not one of simple adoption. He expressed scepticism toward the academic formalism and lingering anthropocentrism of much Western philosophy, including some strands of phenomenology (e.g., Næss 1993b: 73; Diehm 2004: 4–5). In his view, overly abstract systems can obscure rather than illuminate the concrete, intuitive ground of ecological understanding. That is why his environmental philosophy is marked by a methodological pragmatism: he privileges what works in fostering ecological awareness and action, rather than fidelity to any philosophical school. Still, the phenomenological implications of his work remain significant and underexplored.

Where classical phenomenology emphasized intentional consciousness and the structures of perception, Næss sought to draw attention to non-conceptual, non-anthropocentric modes of relation. These include the "affective" and "spontaneous" dimensions of experience that arise in natural settings, experiences of awe, care, belonging, or quiet resonance with the rhythms of the more-than-human world. For instance, once he stated:

> If you have small children and are with them in nature, bend all the way down to the ground, point to something, and say, "Look at this." The children might say, "There's nothing there." But you insist that they look, and say, "Oh yes there is! There is a little plant here that just started to grow in the early spring. In the wintertime there was something underground that you couldn't see that was alive." Then you tell them a bit about the life of such a little thing. But the most important thing is that you bend all the way down, so the children get the impression that this must be something very important. "Father is bending all the way down!" The children will easily grasp that there is something phenomenal about a living being – not necessarily something beautiful, but something... life. (Diehm 2004: 5)

For Næss, such experiences are not merely "aesthetic" or "psychological"; they are ontologically and ethically significant. They form the ground from which a new ecological subjectivity – and with it, a new mode of ethical responsibility – can emerge. With that in mind, he gave us this beautiful and vivid example:

> If you are sitting by a stream and you see a little animal about to fall in and you make a little movement with your finger to help it, completely spontaneously, without thinking at all, I would say that you have, for a moment, identified with it. You can see that it would be bad to get lost in the stream, that if you were a thing like that you wouldn't like it. (Diehm 2004: 6)

In this way, Næss prefigures several of the key concerns of contemporary eco-phenomenology. His insistence that ethics must arise from identification rather than from imposed norms parallels the phenomenological move toward grounding ethics in lived, embodied experience (Næss 1993a: 67, 71; Defrančeski 2024: 148–150). His critique of modern individualism and abstract rationalism anticipates the "eco-phenomenological turn" toward intersubjectivity, interbeing, and place-based ontology. At the same time, his work challenges phenomenologists to expand their frameworks to better accommodate nonhuman agency, ecological systems, and spontaneous affective life (e.g., Næss 1993b: 73; Diehm 2004: 4–5).

With all of the above in mind, this chapter serves as a bridge between two traditions: the ecologically motivated practice of Deep Ecology and the experiential analysis of phenomenology. Rather than treating these as separate trajectories, it argues that Næss's environmental philosophy moves between them by engaging, extending, and critically reworking phenomenological insights in ecological terms. What begins to emerge is the outline of an eco-phenomenology that is not merely theoretical, but practical and lived: a way of seeing, dwelling, and responding within the more-than-human world. Taken together, these reflections suggest that Næss should be read not merely alongside phenomenology, but as a thinker who transforms it ecologically from within.

3.1. From Spontaneous Experience to the More-Than-Human World

Arne Næss's environmental philosophy begins not from abstraction, but from spontaneous experience – those unfiltered, often non-verbal encounters with nature in which the boundary between self and world appears porous, even illusory. Or as Næss vividly describes it:

> Spontaneous identification is of course most obvious when we react to the pain of persons we love. We do not observe that pain and by reflecting on it decide that it is bad. What goes on is difficult to describe; it is a task of philosophical phenomenology to try to do the job. Here it may be sufficient to give some examples of the process of identification, or "seeing oneself in others." A complete report on the death struggle of an insect as some of us experience such an event must include the positive and negative values that are attached to the event as firmly as the duration, the movements, and the colors involved. (Næss 1993b: 73)

Following the previous line of argumentation, this section argues that such experiences form the experiential basis of ecological selfhood and more-than-human belonging. For Næss, these moments are not peripheral to ecological awareness; they constitute one of its existential foundations. From childhood experiences in the Norwegian mountains to meditative solitude in remote landscapes (s. Witoszek 1997), Næss repeatedly emphasized the formative role of direct contact with the more-than-human world in shaping ecological identity and values.

This emphasis on spontaneous experience reveals a subtle but powerful phenomenological orientation in Næss's thinking. Rather than starting with concepts, systems, or even ethical imperatives, he begins with what might be described as "pre-reflective immersion in nature", a kind of "being with" that precedes conscious analysis or evaluative judgment (Næss 2021: 21–24). In such experiences, one no longer observes nature from a distance, but experiences oneself as part of a wider web of life, affectively and perceptually entangled with animals, rocks, rivers, and weather (Næss 2008: 45, 48–52, 54–60, 64).

Næss often described these moments as "identification" with the nonhuman world – not in the sense of imagining oneself as another being, but in the deeper sense of recognizing continuity between oneself and the world (Næss 1993b: 73 ff). This identification is not chosen or constructed through reason; it arises spontaneously when habitual distinctions between subject and object give way to a felt sense of belonging. In his own words, we care for what we identify with (Næss 2021: 26). This formula captures the experiential core of his ethics. Thus, environmental concern emerges not as an obligation, but as an expression of a broader ecological selfhood.

What Næss articulates here is strikingly close to the phenomenological concept of intentionality, but extended beyond the human sphere. In classical phenomenology, intentionality refers to the directedness of consciousness: we are always conscious of something, and this "something" is always given within a meaningful world. For Næss, however, spontaneous experience implies not just

intentional relation but ecological embeddedness, a relational ontology in which *self* and *world* co-constitute one another through lived encounter.

Importantly, Næss resists interpreting such experiences as merely "sentimental". He insists that they have ontological and ethical weight (s. Næss 1993b: 73; Diehm 2004: 6). When we sit silently in the presence of a tree, or watch snow falling across a mountain ridge, what is at stake is not just a subjective feeling but a transformation in how the self is structured and extended. This experiential shift underlies his conception of the ecological self, a wider identity that includes, rather than excludes, the more-than-human world. For Næss, realizing this "self" is both an existential and an ethical task.

There is also a political dimension to spontaneous experience in Næss's work. He believed that efforts toward environmental change would remain shallow or unstable unless rooted in a transformed perception of our relationship with the world (Næss 1989b: 186, 188–189). Spontaneous experience is thus not an escape from the political, but its affective and experiential grounding. It provides the affective motivation and perceptual clarity that can sustain long-term ecological commitments, including resistance to destructive economic or technological systems.

Yet Næss's appeal to spontaneity does not romanticize "raw" nature or naïve immediacy. He was aware that cultural, psychological, and linguistic structures mediate all experience. Still, he held that certain moments – often in solitude or deep attention/meditation – can bring us into contact with layers of experience that resist instrumentalization (s. Næss 2002). These moments disclose the intrinsic value of nonhuman life, not through argument but through presence.

In other words, Næss's idea of spontaneous experience points toward a lived eco-phenomenology: one grounded in the unthematized, affective, and bodily dimensions of being-with-nature. Although limited in its own right (e.g., Bookchin *et. al.* 1993), his environmental philosophy suggests that ecological transformation requires not only new concepts, but new ways of perceiving, dwelling, and feeling, a radical re-attunement to the vibrancy and meaningfulness of the more-than-human world. Such experiences are not secondary illustrations of ecological awareness. For Næss, they are among its primary conditions of possibility.

3.2. Næss's Deep Ecological Critique of "Classical Phenomenology"

While Næss's environmental philosophy exhibits clear phenomenological affinities, it also offers a subtle critique of classical phenomenology. On that note, Næss once said:

> There is a tremendous complexity in philosophical phenomenology. Phenomenologists have so many, and such difficult, concepts, that I wouldn't recommend to many people that they read phenomenology. British or Scottish philosophers (like David Hume and John Locke) insisted that philosophers do not need a special language, that they could use an everyday language. The Germans are just the opposite, introducing tremendously complex vocabulary – the French as well. When what we are driving at are the kinds of things I was just talking about, difficult phenomenological terminology is a sign that we are going in the wrong direction. If you use words to describe experiences in nature, as long as you are really deep in your experiences those words should be very simple. (Diehm 2004: 4–5)

This is precisely the reason why this section argues that Næss radicalizes phenomenology by challenging its residual anthropocentrism and abstraction. While Næss does not engage directly or systematically with figures like Husserl, Heidegger, or Merleau-Ponty, his environmental philosophy represents an alternative trajectory: one that prioritizes ecological interconnectedness, experiential immediacy, and the practical cultivation of identification with the more-than-human world over epistemological or ontological system-building.

At the heart of Næss's critique is his concern that much of Western philosophy, including phenomenology, remains trapped in a human-centered perspective, even when it claims to overcome the subject-object distinction. For instance, Næss once pointed out:

> The subject-object distinction needs to be overcome. We do not have a duty always to ask where the subject and object are. We shouldn't be harassed into conceding this distinction. But I must say that phenomenology, as a very important branch of philosophy, is overwhelmed by a vast number of concepts that are introduced which I think hide an extremely simple core. You get published but you don't easily get to the extremely simple core that we've been talking about. I think that Heidegger is profound, but his position is so complicated that you cannot go out to people and say, "Read Heidegger." I try to write in a much simpler way. I think that the really important things can – must – be said in a way that can be understood by quite a lot of people. (Diehm 2004: 4)

Classical phenomenology, with its focus on the structures of human consciousness and intentionality, often begins from the standpoint of the subject and seeks to describe the world as it appears to human

experience. While this methodological orientation allows phenomenology to recover the richness and thickness of lived experience, it risks re-inscribing the human as the sole locus of meaning, leaving the more-than-human world meaningful only in relation to human perception.

Næss's environmental philosophy rejects this asymmetry. In his view, the natural world is not merely a horizon of appearance for human experience, nor simply a correlate of our intentional acts. Rather, it possesses its own intrinsic value, rhythms, and modes of being that are not reducible to human consciousness. Trees, rivers, and wolves are not "objects of experience" but participants in a shared, co-evolving reality (s. Næss 1979; Næss 2021: 21–24). Næss's insistence on the intrinsic value of all beings – regardless of their utility or perceptibility – stands in sharp contrast to phenomenological methods that, even at their most ecologically sensitive, risk reducing the nonhuman to an aspect of human life-worlds (s. Næss 1979).

Furthermore, Næss critiques phenomenological abstraction as a potential obstacle to ecological insight. He was deeply committed to what he called "concrete experience", not only in nature, but in the bodily, spontaneous, and affective dimensions of encounter (s. Næss 1985; Næss 1989b: 186). He warned against the "conceptual prison" of philosophical language, which, in his view, too often distances us from our embeddedness in the world. Philosophical discourse, he argued, must remain close to life; otherwise, it loses its grounding in experience and becomes a form of detachment rather than engagement (cf. Næss 2021: 1–10). In this sense, Næss's orientation is pragmatic and experiential, aimed at fostering awareness and action rather than developing a closed theoretical system.

Importantly, this critique is not "anti-philosophical" in any sense. Rather, it reflects a re-orientation of philosophy toward life, toward practices of self-realization, relationality, and ecological wisdom. For Næss, any philosophy that fails to promote these ends is, at best, incomplete. The goal of philosophy is not only to describe experience but to deepen it, to guide us toward more meaningful, compassionate, and sustainable ways of being in the world (s. Næss 2002). In this regard, Næss's environmental philosophy can be seen as offering a corrective or supplement to classical phenomenology: *it extends the scope of experiential analysis beyond the human sphere, and re-situates philosophy within the broader ecological community*.

One of the most salient implications of this critique is the call for a non-anthropocentric phenomenology, one that does not begin with the subject but with the field of relations that sustains

both human and nonhuman life (s. Næss 1979). Næss's emphasis on identification, rather than observation, suggests a radical shift in perspective: *from the "knowing subject" standing over and against the world, to a "participatory self" that is already of the world*. This participatory orientation, though not articulated in traditional phenomenological vocabulary, resonates with and also challenges phenomenology to evolve: *to become more ecologically attuned, more porous, more responsive to the voices of the more-than-human*.

While Næss's environmental philosophy shares important ground with phenomenological traditions, it also moves decisively beyond their limits, pushing toward a more embodied, relational, and ecocentric approach to experience. His deep ecological critique offers both a philosophical provocation and an ethical imperative*: to rethink not only how we "know" the world, but how we "live" within it*.

However, these critiques should not be read as placing Næss outside phenomenology altogether. Rather, they prepare the possibility of a transformed and ecologically radicalized phenomenology. If Næss exposes the limits of classical phenomenology, he also offers conceptual resources for rethinking it from within. His critique, therefore, does not reject phenomenology; it prepares the possibility of its ecological transformation.

3.3. Toward Næss's Eco-phenomenology?

Although Næss often expressed a critical view of phenomenology (e.g., SWAN 2005: 300 [vol. 10]), while also explicitly suggesting that aspects of his own philosophy could be linked to phenomenological thought (cf. SWAN 2005: 235 [vol. 8]), this section argues that his thought can be reconstructed as an original, though unsystematized, form of eco-phenomenology. To ground this thesis, it first needs to be considered what Næss had to say about his own theory in light of the classical phenomenological tradition. For instance, once he stated:

> I appreciate philosophers strongly inspired by Kant who spontaneously answer all major "refutations" or "doubts" with fresh and interesting counterattacks. Or consider the reaction of a young Heideggerian when confronted with one of the most atrocious sentences of the Heidegger idiom: he laughed heartily and offered a still more atrocious one, adding that "Heidegger does not admire his own style, he regrets that he does not find any better." So we are invited to find out what he means and to do a better job of

> expressing it. Or consider the variety within the phenomenological trend started by Edmund Husserl. The trend, I hope, will continue. My own "gestalt ontology" belongs here. (SWAN 2005: 235 [vol. 10])

This claim is further backed up in his article "The World of Concrete Contents", where he argued the following:

> The attempt to formulate an ontology along the suggested lines seems to be closely related to phenomenology of a Heideggerian rather than Cartesian kind. It serves the endeavor to change the conception of the humanity-nature relationship. (SWAN 2005: 449 [vol. 10])

These remarks matter because they complicate the view that Næss merely criticized phenomenology from the outside. They instead suggest a selective appropriation and ecological transformation of phenomenological motifs already internal to his thought. The same is true for the following example:

> We do not favor the term *life community* because of the abstractness of its relations. We follow ways of thinking conceptualized in phenomenological philosophy. It is presumed that there are conscious relationships between members of a mixed community and an occasional awareness of one another even when there is no physical nearness. This concept of mixed community does not compete with concepts within biology. Plant ecology and animal ecology embrace the collection of species populations in a given space and treat them collectively in the field of community ecology. (SWAN 2005: 304 [vol. 10])

While Arne Næss did not formally develop a system of eco-phenomenology, his environmental philosophy opens a clear path toward one. His emphasis on relationality, spontaneity, and ecological identification offers a framework in which phenomenological insights can be reinterpreted and expanded to encompass the more-than-human world. In this final section, we ask: can Næss's thought be understood as a form of eco-phenomenology and, if so, what kind of phenomenology does it imply?

To begin with, Næss reconfigures some of the core concerns of phenomenology, such as perception, embodiment, and subjectivity, by embedding them in a biocentric rather than anthropocentric context. His notion of the "ecological self" transforms the traditional phenomenological subject (Næss 2008: 81–82; Næss 2021: 45). Rather than being a singular, bounded consciousness that experiences the world from a particular standpoint, Næss's "self" is relational and extended, emerging through identification with wider ecological wholes. This shift

has significant implications: *it suggests that selfhood is not a given but a process, one that unfolds through participation in a living, dynamic ecosystem.*

Moreover, his emphasis on spontaneous experience as the foundation of ecological insight resonates with the phenomenological concern for "pre-reflective experience" (Næss 1993: 73; Næss 2021: 86). Næss invites us to dwell in moments of quiet attention, direct perception, and bodily attunement, those modes of encounter that are prior to, and often more revealing than, conceptual analysis. These experiences, far from being peripheral, are understood as epistemically and ethically generative. They allow the world to show itself as a field of value and meaning, not one imposed from above, but disclosed from within.

If phenomenology aims to return "to the things themselves" (*zu den Sachen selbst*), Næss might be said to return to the Earth itself: to rocks, forests, rivers, and even "irrelevant experiences" such as seeing deer tracks in the snow. His phenomenology is grounded not in transcendental structures, but in concrete engagements: *hiking in the mountains, listening to birdsong, sitting silently beneath a tree*. These are not just poetic scenes; they are philosophical acts, through which a deeper ontological participation reveals itself. In this sense, Næss offers a pragmatic eco-phenomenology, one that is less concerned with method than with transformation.

At the same time, Næss challenges eco-phenomenology to be more than an academic discipline. He understood that intellectual reflection must be coupled with a deepening of the self, a process of self-realization that involves both psychological maturation and ecological expansion (s. Næss 1979). The ecological self, in his vision, is not just a theoretical construct but a lived practice: *it is cultivated through time, experience, humility, and sustained contact with the natural world* (Næss 2008: 81–82; Næss 2021: 45). Eco-phenomenology, from this perspective, becomes a way of life rather than a theory, a discipline of presence and participation.

Næss also implicitly broadens the scope of phenomenological analysis to include nonhuman forms of subjectivity. While traditional phenomenology has largely focused on human intentionality, Næss's relational ontology invites us to consider that other beings – animals, plants, ecosystems – may also be bearers of perspective or "loci of meaning" (Næss 1979, Næss 1993b: 71–75). Such a shift would require phenomenology to move beyond its anthropological roots and evolve into a truly ecological phenomenology, capable of recognizing the expressive, communicative dimensions of the more-than-human world.

Thus, while Næss never used the term "eco-phenomenology," his philosophy can plausibly be read as one of its most original, undeveloped forms. What emerges is not an ecological application of phenomenology (cf. Wood 2001: 78–80, 92–94), but a reconfiguration of phenomenology through ecological life. Rather than adapting classical phenomenology to ecological concerns, Næss suggests that a genuinely ecological philosophy must emerge from nature itself, from the spontaneity and depth of our "lived relation" to the world. In this way, his work serves not only as a resource for eco-phenomenology but also as a challenge: *to root philosophical reflection in life, and to let the Earth speak within thoughts*.

This prompted several authors to interpret his environmental philosophy in light of the "classical phenomenological theory" (e.g., Valera 2018). However, due to his peculiar analysis of "spontaneous experience" – which in his thought has a central role when it comes to recognizing intrinsic value in the more-than-human world – we argue that his environmental philosophy reflects strong theoretical foundations of an eco-phenomenological theory, even though Næss did not refer to his philosophy in that particular typology (cf. SWAN 2005: 300 [vol. 10]). Moreover, we strongly believe that adopting an eco-phenomenological interpretation of Næss's environmental philosophy could provide solid theoretical footholds for tackling some of his most prominent critics (e.g., Bookchin 1993).

If the previous chapter has shown that Næss's thought contains latent eco-phenomenological foundations, the next step is to test its contemporary philosophical force. This requires moving from textual reconstruction to systematic application.

4. UNEARTHING ARNE NÆSS'S ECO-PHENOMENOLOGY

The previous chapters argued that Næss's philosophy contains underdeveloped eco-phenomenological foundations. The task now is to clarify their contemporary significance. This chapter, therefore, reinterprets Næss through three guiding questions that concern ecological selfhood, embodied perception, and the existential consequences of ecological crisis.

While Næss articulated key concepts such as spontaneous experience, identification, and ecological self-realization, he did not systematically elaborate on their phenomenological implications. By reconstructing these implications in dialogue with contemporary eco-phenomenology, environmental

psychology, and philosophy of perception, we may better grasp both the originality of his thought and its present relevance.

4.1. How Does Spontaneous Experience Disclose Ecological Selfhood and Relational Belonging within the More-Than-Human World?

In Næss's environmental philosophy, spontaneous experience in natural settings plays a constitutive role in the formation of ecological selfhood. Such experiences are not merely pleasant psychological episodes; they disclose forms of belonging, continuity, and interdependence that challenge narrowly anthropocentric understandings of identity.

1. *Direct engagement*: Spontaneous experience involves direct, unmediated engagement with nature, allowing individuals to perceive and interact with the more-than-human world immediately and authentically. This fosters a sense of belonging and identity that transcends the purely human sphere (Næss 1973: 95–98). Næss refers to this as the "ecological self" (Næss 1989b: 189). Such experiences underscore the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of all living beings.

2. *Embodied experience*: These encounters engage all the senses and the entire body, grounding the individual physically in the natural world. This embodied interaction deepens the connection between the self and the environment, reinforcing the idea that humans are part of a larger ecological system (e.g., Næss 2021: 21 ff). Spontaneous experience reinforces these insights by making the interconnectedness of life tangible and immediate, rather than abstract or theoretical.

3. *Emotional and cognitive impact*: The emotional responses elicited by spontaneous experiences, such as awe, wonder, and tranquility, contribute to a profound appreciation and respect for nature. These emotions can lead to cognitive shifts where individuals begin to see themselves as integral components of the ecological web (e.g., Næss 1979). This recognition of the intrinsic value of all life forms fosters a more ecocentric perspective, aligning with Næss's deep ecology principles (cf. Næss 2021: 1–10).

Taken together, these dimensions suggest that spontaneous experience functions as a phenomenological threshold of ecological transformation. It allows the self to be encountered less as

an isolated ego and more as a relational node within a wider community of life. For Næss, ecological responsibility emerges most deeply where such transformed self-understanding takes root.

4.2. How Does Embodied Perception in Lived Encounters with Nature Foster Ecological Awareness and Aesthetic Meaning?

Although Næss did not formulate this question explicitly, it follows directly from the experiential logic of his philosophy. If spontaneous experience is central to ecological awareness, then embodied perception must be one of the primary ways such awareness is disclosed.

1. *Deep sensory perception and natural beauty*: Sensory perception allows individuals to engage deeply with their environment. The sounds of a forest, the sight of a mountain range, the smell of the ocean – these sensory experiences immerse individuals in the natural world, making them more aware of its presence and intricacies. Sensory perception enhances aesthetic appreciation by allowing individuals to experience the beauty of nature first-hand. The colors of a sunset, the patterns of waves, the textures of leaves – all these sensory details contribute to a rich aesthetic experience (cf. SWAN 2005: 551–553 [vol. 10], Næss 1989a: 6–7, 79–80, 163, 195).

2. *Deep awareness of interconnectedness*: By engaging multiple senses, individuals can better understand the complex interdependencies within ecosystems. For example, hearing the rustling of leaves, feeling the cool breeze, and seeing the interplay of light and shadow in a forest can reveal the dynamic interactions between plants, animals, and atmospheric conditions. Being physically present in a landscape provides a multi-sensory experience that goes beyond visual beauty to include the sounds, smells, and tactile sensations of the environment, leading to a fuller, more integrated aesthetic appreciation (cf. SWAN 2005: 551–553 [vol. 10], Næss 1979).

3. *Phenomenological presence and psychophysical immersion*: Næss's eco-phenomenological approach emphasizes being present in the moment. Sensory experiences in nature anchor individuals in the present, fostering a deeper awareness of their surroundings and a more profound connection to the natural world (cf. Næss 1985). Embodied experiences involve the whole body, providing a sense of physical immersion in the environment. For example, hiking up a mountain, swimming in the ocean, or walking through a forest engages the body in a way that creates a strong, visceral connection to the landscape.

Phenomenologically understood, these experiences involve receptivity rather than domination: *an openness in which the more-than-human world appears as meaningful in its own right*. Their significance is simultaneously aesthetic and ethical. Nature is not first neutral and then assigned value; value is encountered within the experience itself. This need not imply a romantic appeal to pure immediacy, since embodied ecological perception is always historically situated, culturally mediated, and interpretively shaped. In this respect, Næss's "ecological self" can be read not as a metaphor, but as a genuine existential possibility.

4.3. How Might an Eco-Phenomenological Reinterpretation of Næss Respond to the Existential Consequences of the Ecological Crisis?

The contemporary ecological crisis is increasingly experienced not only as environmental destruction, but as psychological and existential disturbance. Terms such as *eco-anxiety* and *solastalgia* refer to forms of fear, grief, dislocation, and loss tied to environmental degradation (s. Albrecht 2019: 27). In this context, Næss's philosophy may be re-read as offering resources for ecological resilience as well as ecological critique.

1. *Lived and restorative experiences*: Focusing on lived experiences and direct interactions with nature can ground individuals in their immediate environment, helping to counteract the overwhelming and abstract fears associated with the global environmental crises (s. Næss 2021: 21–24). Emphasizing the embodied nature of human experience encourages individuals to engage physically with their surroundings, promoting a sense of agency and empowerment. Furthermore, engaging with natural environments through direct sensory and embodied experiences can be restorative (cf. SWAN 2005: 551–553 [vol. 10]). Activities like forest bathing, hiking, and gardening provide a respite from stress and help alleviate feelings of anxiety and depression.

2. *Reconnection with the natural world*: Næss's concept of the "ecological self" emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans and nature. By fostering a sense of belonging to the natural world, individuals can combat feelings of isolation and insignificance that often accompany eco-anxiety and solastalgia (cf. Albrecht 2019: 27). Additionally, cultivating an aesthetic appreciation for the beauty and wonder of nature can inspire joy and gratitude, counterbalancing the negativity associated with environmental degradation (Næss 2008: 123–126, 131–132).

3. *Eco-phenomenological reflection*: Encouraging eco-phenomenological reflection on the human-nature relationships can help individuals develop a more resilient and adaptive worldview, better equipped to handle the existential and mental challenges posed by environmental degradation (cf. Næss 2002).

What becomes visible here is a broader philosophical point: *the ecological crisis damages not only ecosystems, but structures of meaning, belonging, and selfhood; and if this is so, then responses limited to policy or technology remain incomplete*. Næss's eco-phenomenological legacy suggests that ecological healing must also involve renewed practices of perception, participation, and dwelling within the more-than-human world.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has argued that Arne Næss should be understood not simply as a precursor to eco-phenomenology, but as a thinker whose philosophy contains the underdeveloped foundations of a distinct eco-phenomenological orientation. Reconsidered through the concepts of spontaneous experience, ecological selfhood, and more-than-human relationality, his work reveals dimensions that exceed its usual reception within environmental ethics alone. What emerges is not merely a reinterpretation of Deep Ecology, but a broader philosophical claim: *that ecological transformation begins at the level of lived experience, in altered ways of perceiving, inhabiting, and participating in the world*.

The first guiding question concerned whether spontaneous experience can disclose ecological selfhood and interconnectedness with the more-than-human world. The analysis suggested that, for Næss, such experiences are not secondary psychological states but primary sites in which relational selfhood is encountered. Ecological identification arises less from abstract moral extension than from experiential participation in a world where the boundaries between *self* and *environment* are transformed. The second question addressed the role of embodied perception in shaping ecological awareness. Here, the argument has been that ecological meaning is not merely cognitively constructed or ethically projected, but phenomenologically disclosed through lived encounters with landscapes, organisms, and elemental processes. In this respect, Næss's thought contributes to an understanding of ecological awareness grounded less in detached reflection than in attentiveness, receptivity, and

embodied presence. The third question concerned whether eco-phenomenology can respond to the existential consequences of ecological degradation. The discussion of eco-anxiety and solastalgia suggested that Næss remains relevant precisely because his philosophy links the ecological crisis with disturbances in subjectivity and world-relation. If environmental devastation is also experienced existentially, then ecological healing cannot be conceived solely in political or technological terms, but must also involve renewed forms of dwelling, meaning, and participation. Taken together, these arguments support a broader claim: *Næss's environmental philosophy does not merely anticipate eco-phenomenology, but expands its conceptual possibilities*. His reflections on "spontaneous experience" suggest that ecological ethics is inseparable from phenomenologies of selfhood, perception, and world-disclosure. Re-reading Næss in this way, therefore, illuminates not only a neglected dimension of his work, but also broadens the horizon of eco-phenomenology itself.

At a time when the ecological crisis increasingly appears not only as an environmental breakdown but also as a crisis of how human beings inhabit the Earth, these insights carry particular significance. In that regard, Næss's enduring contribution lies in showing that ecological responsibility begins not merely in ethical obligation or political programme, but in transformed modes of *attending to* and *dwelling* within the *more-than-human world*.

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