AN IMPROBABLE CASE OF PHILOSOPHY: ARNE NAESS BETWEEN
EMPIRICISM, EXISTENTIALISM AND METAPHYSICS.¹

On January 12, 2009 Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess passed away at the age of 96. He was still actively involved in putting together the edition of the Selected Writings of Arne Naess (SWAN). He wrote an introduction to the writings which is printed at the beginning of each volume together with the extensive introduction by the editor Harold Glasser. At first sight this seems strangely repetitive and superfluous but on closer scrutiny it certainly makes sense. In view of the large breadth of philosophical themes that are presented in the volumes it is quite likely that the readers interested in the writings will come from different areas. A number of these writings make high demands on the reader who is expected to be relatively versed in logical analysis and in the work and thought of Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Gandhi, Husserl, Carnap or even Sextus Empiricus. The reader who is interested in one of these heterogenous fields is encouraged by both introductory texts to reflect on a specific theme against the backdrop of the philosophers’ entire oeuvre – and that’s a good thing.

In the present review I will trace several lines leading through Naess’ work which reflect the continuity of and differences to logical empiricism – on the basis of writings that have appeared in volumes I and VIII. In the following Thomas Seiler will review volume X which brings together Arne Naess’ writings on “ecosophy”. First, I will briefly describe the SWAN. The selection made by the editors gives the reader an impression of the diversity of philosophical themes that Naess was interested in: communication theory, empirical semantics and behaviorist epistemology (vols. I, VII, VIII), scepticism, scientific and cultural pluralism (vols. II, III, IV, IX), normative systems theory and the idea of what Naess called „total views” (vols. III, IV). There is an important amount of Gandhi und Spinoza scholarship (vols. V, VI), and last but not least ecology (vol. X).

The editors decided not to include writings that are relatively well known and still available. This refers primarily to writings on ecology. Naess coined the terms “deep ecology” and “shallow ecology” and made them the focus of his environmentalist ethics. Since the 1970s he was a prominent activist of the ecology move-

¹ Thanks to Camilla Nielsen for translating parts of the text and revising the English of the whole essay.
ment. His thoughts and writings are widely read in the community of ecologists. In this edition the writings on ecological themes are thus limited to volume X. The collection does not include a number of writings that would be interesting from the perspective of 20th century history of philosophy – most notably Naess’ dissertation “Knowledge and Scientific Behavior”, completed in 1936 and submitted to the University of Oslo. This work is informed by the critical exploration of the ideas of logical empiricism. Naess had become familiar with these ideas during his sojourn in Vienna (1934 to 1935) when he attended the discussions at the Schlick Circle.

In volume VIII we find an article (published for the first time in 1993) in which Naess reports on his experiences at the Schlick seminar: “Logical Empiricism and the Uniqueness of the Schlick Seminar: A Personal Experience With Consequences.” In this text Naess underlines how deeply influenced he was by the group (SWAN VII, 261). Naess saw his life-long interest in communication theory and the great attention he gave to the broad spectrum of logically possible linguistic “formulations“ (SWAN VIII, 263, 280) as the direct legacy of the Vienna Circle. In addition to touching personal reminiscences the text also includes several central points on which Naess criticized logical empiricism - in particular the metaphysics-criticism in Carnap’s famous Heidegger critique which Naess saw as being too restrictive (SWAN VIII, 268.) He appealed for taking philosophical texts seriously also when they are written in strange language. Moreover his reflections on the interpretation of philosophical texts also had certain commonalities with the those that Richard von Mises expressed in his Kleines Lehrbuch des Positivismus (published for the first time in 1939). But let’s hear what Naess himself said:

When I interpret a philosophical text, my point of view is that of a lawyer interpreting a will. Grammatical failures, strange uses of words, misspellings do not count when one tries to find out exactly what the author of the will wanted to convey in his will. If he calls his wine cellar the library, that is okay, if it can be established that this was the habitual way of talking in his family. Similarly, if a philosopher has strange ways of expressing certain opinions, one of the tasks of the historian is to try out re-formulations better suited to present his or her opinions. On the other hand, we may look upon the text as a musical or mathematical score and see which interpretation might be most interesting given certain purposes. The later texts of Heidegger, for example, have been freely interpreted by some environmentalists and found very useful. The logical empiricists, however, were too attracted to the exploration of one definite model of language, namely calculi with sets of formation and transformation rules, to be interested in the more empirical investigations of philosophical texts as presenting ordinary ways of talking. The ordinary ways are full of metaphors, pictures, unscientific phrases – as are those of philosophers through the ages. (SWAN VIII, p. 268)

This paragraph aptly expresses the tension that can be found throughout Naess’ philosophical thought. Against Carnap’s “calculus model of language” Naess ad-