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IDENTIFICATION WITH NATURE

WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT MATTERS

CHRISTIAN DIEHM

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the content and significance of the notion of “identification” as it appears in the works of theorists of deep ecology. It starts with the most frequently expressed conception of identification—termed “identification-as-belonging”—and distinguishes several different variants of it. After reviewing two criticisms of deep ecology that appear to target this notion, it is argued that there is a second, less frequently noticed type of identification that appears primarily in the work of Arne Naess—“identification-as-kinship.” Following this analysis, it is suggested that identification-as-kinship may be less vulnerable to the criticisms that are aimed at identification-as-belonging.

In numerous texts, Arne Naess claims that the term “deep ecology” is meant to refer to a particular branch of the environmental or “ecology” movement, and not to any particular branch of environmental philosophy. The deep ecology movement is ideologically pluralistic; it has, in Naess’s words, “multiple roots” instead of a single, unified conceptual foundation (1995a). Nevertheless, many of those who have taken the

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trouble to articulate the philosophical basis of their support of the deep ecology movement express remarkably similar views. Indeed, there is such a high degree of conceptual convergence on “ultimate premises” among these theorists of deep ecology that some would argue that, despite Naess’s claims to the contrary, “deep ecology” does refer to a fairly well-defined cluster of concepts, most of which were first articulated by Naess himself.¹

Without question, the two concepts most often associated with the views of deep ecology supporters are “Self-realization” and “identification.” These core components of Naess’s personal environmental philosophy, or “ecosophy,” show up repeatedly in the work of other deep ecology theorists. Thus, even though they are not to be regarded as deep ecological orthodoxy, they are *de facto* components of many deep ecological viewpoints. Moreover, following Naess, most if not all of the thinkers who utilize the concepts of Self-realization and identification regard the latter as the means to the former: identification is the path to Self-realization, the process by which one develops one’s “ecological Self.” This suggests that understanding many of the claims of deep ecology theorists—including claims about the Self and Self-realization—hinges on understanding what they mean when they speak of identification with nature. As Naess puts it, the fact that the ecological Self is realized through a process of identification “shifts the burden of clarification from the term ‘self’ to that of ‘identification’...” (1995b, 227). Yet this shift in focus does not necessarily make comprehending what deep ecology supporters are saying any easier, as identification with nature is by no means an absolutely transparent notion, even in Naess’s own work.

My primary purpose in this essay, therefore, is to study in detail the notion of identification with nature as it has been developed by theorists of deep ecology, to examine both what it is and why it is thought to matter for environmental ethics. In addition, however, I want to argue that there is more than one basic type of identification described by these thinkers, something which is not typically acknowledged in the philosophical literature. The account that I provide begins with an analysis of what I believe is the conception of identification most commonly expressed by deep ecology supporters, and an overview of several variants of this form of identification that can be distinguished. Following this, I

review two important criticisms of deep ecology that appear to target this particular notion of identification. Then, turning more specifically to Naess's texts, I contend that there is a second, and potentially very different way of understanding identification. Although this alternative version of identification is less frequently discussed by both deep ecology theorists and their commentators, it is vital to Naess's ecosophy, and arguably is the principal sense of the term as he understands it. Having explained what this sort of identification entails, I conclude by suggesting that it may be less vulnerable to some of the criticisms aimed at the more popular conception of identification.

I

In *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, Warwick Fox writes that "identification" should be taken to mean "what we ordinarily understand by that term," namely "the experience not simply of a sense of *similarity* with an entity but of a sense of *commonality*" (1995, 231). It is perhaps more instructive, however, to say that when many theorists of deep ecology speak of human identification with nature, they are referring to a particular sense of *belonging to* or *community with* the other-than-human world. Thus we might call this sense of identification "identification-as-belonging."

Underlying the notion of identification-as-belonging is the belief that highly individualistic, predominantly Western conceptions of the self and of humanity are metaphysically false and ecologically destructive. As a corrective to such conceptions, many deep ecology theorists seek to recast our understanding of our selves in terms of what Freya Mathews calls an "interconnectedness thesis," which posits that "all things are constituted by their relations to other things" (1988, 349). Indeed, in his foundational essay "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements," Naess claimed that those in the deep ecology movement reject the "man-in-environment image" and instead embrace a "relational, total-field image" in which organisms are conceived as "knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations" (1973, 95). The "relational, total-field" perspective thus views humans not as discrete entities or substances, but as beings whose identity is a product of relationships to, among other things, the non-human environment. On this model, an

essential aspect of being human is being caught up in networks of relations that include the natural world; humans, like all other entities, are inextricably enmeshed in more broad ecological or biospheric realities.

Yet interconnectedness with the natural world does not entail its recognition, or an awareness of its true extent. In fact, it is possible to have an outlook that ignores or denies this, as some deep ecology supporters believe is the case for many of us in the West. Through a process of identification, however, awareness of our being embedded in nature may be developed. Accordingly, to identify with nature is to accept our ecospheric belonging and affirm that we are more than self-contained, isolated individuals, and even more than members of a human or social community. It is to perceive the ways in which we are intimately connected to the more-than-human world, to realize that we are members of natural or ecological communities that are constitutive of who we are. To put the point into familiar language, to identify with the natural world in this way is to recognize that we are a part of nature, and that nature is a part of our selves.²

On this point the views of deep ecology theorists bear some resemblance to those of scientific ecologists. A number of the images employed by scientific ecologists—depicting natural systems as biotic communities, trophic webs, or streams of energy in which organisms are mere stopping points or perturbations of the flow—stress interdependence and the relational character of things.³ Often, though, deep ecology theorists see identification as having a more experiential foundation than any of the natural sciences provide. That is, identification with nature is thought to involve an existential affirmation that who we are cannot be described adequately without reference to the encompassing natural community. Consequently, while ecological science provides support or justification for identification with nature, it is not always regarded as its ultimate source. As Naess explains it, “[e]cological information about the intimate dependency of humanity upon decent behavior toward the natural environment offered a much needed rational and economic justification for processes of identification which many people already had more or less completed” (1985, 32).

The transformed self-understanding that identification provides is thought to be significant insofar as it is accompanied by a corresponding transformation of the self’s sphere of concern: if we expand our sense of

self, then so too our interests will expand to make reference to those with whom we are in community. “When my identity is interconnected with the identity of other beings,” writes Bill Devall, “then my experience and my existence depends on theirs. Their interests are my interests” (1988, 69). Naess expresses this point succinctly when he defines identification as a “process through which the interest or interests of another being are reacted to as our own interest or interests” (1985, 261). If we cannot be isolated from nature, if we are inescapably a part of the natural world, then neither can we isolate our interests from those of the natural world.

For this reason deep ecology supporters sometimes speak of the destruction of nature as self-destructive, and nature’s defense as self-defense. Mathews says that when we expand our sense of self we realize that when we destroy the environment, “we are destroying what is in fact our larger self” (1988, 354). Likewise, Naess claims that through the development of the ecological self “we find that the destruction of nature (and our place) threatens us in our innermost self,” and that because of this, when acting in nature’s defense we are “defending our vital interests.... We are engaged in self-defense” (1995b, 232).

Hence, whereas we might tend to think that environmentally-friendly actions involve self-sacrifice, deep ecology theorists note that with an expanded understanding of the self we may come to see that these actions involve no such sacrifice at all. Moreover, it appears that one of the consequences of identification is that benevolent acts become as natural as the inclination to care for ourselves, and therefore do not require moral exhortation to be performed. This point is stressed repeatedly by Naess, who says that through identification, acting on behalf of others requires no moralizing, “just as we don’t need morals to make us breathe” (1995b, 233). In Kantian terms, our ecological Self acts “beautifully” but not “morally”: rather than feeling morally compelled to help others because it is our duty, we help them because of the basic inclination to care for everything that is a part of our extended self.⁴ “Thus,” Naess writes, “everything that can be achieved by altruism—the *dutiful, moral* consideration of others—can be achieved, and much more, by the process of widening and deepening ourselves” (1995b, 226).

II

It is possible to distinguish different types of identification-as-belong-

ing in the writings of deep ecology theorists, the most basic distinction being between what Fox refers to as its “personal” and “transpersonal” forms.⁵ Personal identification, as the name suggests, refers to “experiences of commonality with other entities that are brought about through personal involvement with these entities” (1995, 249). We identify personally with other people, for example, when as a result of first-hand experience we come to recognize our relations to them as essential to our own identity. This in turn leads to the understanding that our interests are intertwined, such that their successes and failures are experienced as being integral to our own. As Fox puts it, when we identify personally with others we “experience these entities as part of ‘us,’ as part of our identity.” The result is that an “assault upon their integrity is an assault upon our integrity” (1995, 250).⁶

To identify personally with nature, therefore, is to develop a sense of connectedness to entities in the local natural community with which we have had personal contact. Examples of such identification abound in the philosophy and literature connected with the deep ecology movement. In *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends*, Devall writes that “the more we know a place intimately, the more we can increase our identification with it. The more we know a mountain or a watershed, for example, and feel it as our self, the more we can feel its suffering” (1988, 52). In a clear reference to his personal experiences in the forests of the northwestern United States, Devall draws the practical implication of such “intimate” identification, saying that conservation of nature is “... self defense. When I identify with primeval forests of redwood trees I want to defend them from logging because they are a part of my sense-of-place” (1988, 70). Echoing these sentiments, activist John Seed recounts a time when he was working to protect rainforests, and was suddenly “gripped with an intense, profound realization of the bonds that connect us to the Earth...” This sense of belonging was so strong that, for Seed, it issued in the realization that he “was literally part of the rainforest defending herself” (1988, 6).

As the above examples illustrate, and as Fox mentions in his discussion of personal identification, identification can take place not only in relation to “concrete” entities, such as an individual tree or animal, but also in relation to “more abstract kinds of entities,” such as a place or an entire ecosystem, entities whose component members change over time (1995, 249-50). Like Fox, Naess also believes that we can identify with

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nature both “individually” and “collectively” (1989, 181), and says that identification can extend to entities as diverse as “individuals, species, ecosystems and landscapes...” (1985, 262). These twin possibilities hold, in fact, not only for personal identification, but for all forms of identification: regardless of what sort of identification is at issue, we can identify with, and consequently feel concern for, both individual entities and the collectivities that they comprise.⁷

Returning to the initial distinction we were drawing, the difference between personal and transpersonal identification is that the latter extends our sense of community to entities with which we have not had personal contact.⁸ Fox describes two “varieties” of transpersonal identification, the most important of which he calls “cosmological identification.” This variety of transpersonal identification involves an affirmation of our belonging to natural processes that are inclusive of all things, thus providing a sense of community with all existents and not only those in our immediate locale. In Fox’s words, cosmological identification gives us a renewed understanding of “our place in the larger scheme of things,” a view of ourselves and all other existents as leaves on a “tree of life” that has “developed from a single seed of energy and that has been growing for some fifteen billion years, becoming infinitely larger and infinitely more differentiated in the process.” Hence we are lead “to identify ourselves more and more with the entire tree rather than just our leaf...” (1995, 256).

Here, as before, the upshot of this process is that as our sense of self increases, so too does our sphere of concern. Fox cites a passage from John Livingston, who writes that “...when I say that the fate of the sea turtle or the tiger or the gibbon is mine, I mean it. All that is in my universe is not merely mine; it is me. And I shall defend myself. I shall defend myself not only against overt aggression but also against gratuitous insult...” (Livingston 1981, 1134). When we have identified with nature-as-a-whole, a threat to any element of the ecospheric community is a threat to our ecological Self.

Accounts of such broad-based identification, like accounts of personal identification, are easy to come by in the texts of deep ecology supporters. Bill Devall and George Sessions describe identification as leading to a sense of self that includes “not only me, an individual human, but all humans, whales, grizzly bears, whole rain forest ecosystems,

mountains and rivers, the tiniest microbes in the soil, and so on” (Devall & Sessions, 67). Naess, too, speaks of identifying with “all life forms and with the greater units: the ecosystems and Gaia, the fabulous old planet of ours” (1995b, 235). Often, the development of such an expansive sense of self is depicted as a process proceeding from identification with our immediate surroundings, to identification with nature-at-large. Frederick Bender, for example, explains how we might realize our ecological self through a “mindfulness practice” in which we recognize our “interdependence with other living beings locally, with regional and global ecosystems, and ultimately with Earth’s ecosphere as a whole...” (2003, 424). Similarly, Naess says that “from identifying with ‘one’s nearest,’ higher level unities are created through circles of friends, local communities, tribes, compatriots, races, humanity, life, and, ultimately...unity with the supreme whole” (1985, 263).⁹

Given the importance that these thinkers attach to developing a sense of belonging to the natural world, it is not surprising that some of them see Aldo Leopold as a philosophical predecessor. Leopold is clear in his belief that any change in our environmental ethics will involve the development of an “ecological conscience” (1970, 243 ff.), which entails viewing ourselves as part of a community that includes “soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” This acknowledgment, Leopold contends, “changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (1970, 239–40). With these elements of Leopold’s thought in mind, Bender claims that Leopold’s ethic is “the outcome of a gestalt shift, whereby the dualistic ‘I,’ framed as standing outside nature looking in, is suddenly reframed as just one part of the biotic pyramid.” “The land ethic,” says Bender, “frames the biotic community (the ecosphere) as everyone’s encompassing self, or Self, since we are the ecosphere, since we belong to the ecosphere, and since we are dependent upon the ecosphere.” (2003, 370–71).

III

As our discussion to this point shows, identification-as-belonging plays a central role in the views of many deep ecology theorists. Yet this notion, as these thinkers have articulated it, has been subjected to a considerable amount of philosophical scrutiny. Let us now turn to consider two criticisms of the views of deep ecology supporters that are of partic-

ular relevance to our analyses, the first of which is aimed directly at the “interconnectedness thesis” to which identification-as-belonging is tied.

Naess’s original declaration of what he would later call “relationalism” (Naess 1989), presented as the claim that those in the deep ecology movement employ the “relational, total-field image,” has been referenced repeatedly by deep ecology supporters, some of whom have taken it to be definitive of the deep ecology perspective. Fox, for one, has stated that in his remark Naess captured the “central intuition” of deep ecology, an intuition which Fox expressed as follows:

This is the idea that there is no firm ontological divide in the field of existence. In other words, the world simply is not divided up into independently existing subjects and objects, nor is there any bifurcation in reality between the human and nonhuman realms. Rather all entities are constituted by their relationships. To the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness (1999, 157).

In response to this, commentators have argued that if deep ecological consciousness has failed when boundaries between self and others are perceived (i.e., when we have not fully identified ourselves with nature), then deep ecological thinking suffers from an inability to respect others’ difference from the self. Peter C. van Wyck, for example, takes Fox’s statement as an indication that the “sense of self that interests deep ecology involves a complete breakdown of the distinction between self and other” (1997, 41). Likewise, ecofeminist Val Plumwood believes that deep ecology theorists like Fox have embraced a version of “interconnectedness” that is better described as a kind of “indistinguishability,” an account of the self that “rejects boundaries between self and nature” (1993, 176).¹⁰

Such a version of identification with nature is problematic insofar as it suggests a difference-erasing holism that is questionable as a viable model for relationships based on respect for others. As Plumwood puts it, “respecting the other involves acknowledging the difference as well as the connection between our needs. We need to recognize not only our human continuity with the natural world but also its distinctness and independence from us and the distinctness of the needs of things in nature from ours” (1993, 178). In the absence of this recognition, the “total-field image” would remain suspect both as a metaphysics and as a ground for ethics.

A second, related critique of deep ecology theorists’ emphasis on the

expansion of the self through identification-as-belonging is that from this viewpoint the protection of nature appears to stem not from a desire to protect others who are worthy of moral concern, but from a desire to protect ourselves. Often referencing the idea that for the ecological Self the defense of nature does not involve self-sacrificing altruism but is instead a form of self-defense, critics have said that this line of thinking remains an argument from self-interest, even if for deep ecology supporters the meaning of the term “self” has changed. Eric Katz expresses the basic criticism here when he says that although “the interests of the individual from within the deep ecological perspective will not be the narrow egoistic interests of ordinary human life,” it is still the case that in this perspective nature’s preservation comes about “through our expanded notion of self-interest...” (2000, 33–34). Simply put, the charge is that identification functions to provide an ecologically enlightened conception of our selves, designed to issue in a similarly enlightened self-interest. Instead of urging for an expansion of our capacity to care for others who are genuinely other, or others who are recognized as having intrinsic value, deep ecology theorists have urged only an expansion of our self-concern, via an expanded sense of self.¹¹

As this already makes clear, there is a conceptual link between the two aforementioned critiques. If it is true, as commentators claim, that some deep ecology theorists operate on the assumption that humans are basically self-interested, it is understandable that they might seek to break down the boundaries between self and others, precisely in order to allow for self-interest to extend further than an isolated individual’s narrow concerns. However, making this assumption seems to obscure the possibility of coming at the problem from another direction: instead of trying to find a form of self-interest that can be inclusive of the good of others, it may be possible to articulate forms of concern for others that are not exclusive of the good of the self. The latter approach, which could be said to resemble the care-based perspectives adopted by some ecofeminists,¹² could retain the emphasis on relationships and interconnection that is so crucial to deep ecology theorists’ accounts of the Self, while at the same time acknowledging distinctions between self and other. As Plumwood notes, care, love, friendship, and respect provide examples of relationships in which we come to “include the flourishing of earth others *as others* among our own primary or intrinsic ends and desires. But this project

does not require any sort of identity, merger, or loss of boundaries between self and other, as some ways of treating the concept of ecological selfhood imply" (1993, 160).

IV

Although the purpose of this essay is not to enter into all of the debates about the adequacy of these charges, we would be remiss not to mention that deep ecology supporters have responded to these criticisms, often by pointing out aspects of their positions that they believe have been overlooked or misunderstood by their critics. In some of these responses, it has been noted that although many theorists of deep ecology discuss identification with nature in their ecosophies, they do not necessarily conceive of this notion in identical ways, so that a criticism of one thinker might not serve as a criticism of another.¹³ For the most part, though, it has not been noticed that there is another kind of identification, found especially (if not exclusively) in the work of Arne Naess.¹⁴ This type of identification frequently is presented in conjunction with other senses of the term, and seldom is it clearly distinguished from them. Presently, then, the task is to try to disentangle the meaning of this alternative conception of identification, and to discern how it differs from identification-as-belonging.

In the book-length interview, *Is It Painful to Think?*, Naess claims that his use of the term "identification" can be traced back to a particular experience that he had (Rothenberg 1993, 178–79), an experience that elsewhere he refers to as a "paradigm situation" of identification (Naess 1995b, 227). He was performing a laboratory experiment, looking through a microscope at some chemicals on a slide. Suddenly, a flea jumped into the chemical solution and could not escape. It struggled violently for several minutes to free itself, but to no avail. Eventually it died. "Its movements were dreadfully expressive," Naess recalls, and he remembers feeling "a painful sense of compassion and empathy." He believes, however, that his concern for the flea was not the most elementary aspect of his experience—even more fundamental than the compassion he felt, and actually what made it possible, was "identification" with the flea. His response to the flea's plight, he says, "was *not* basic, rather it was a process of identification: that 'I saw myself in the flea'" (1995b, 227).

Similar accounts of identification can be found in various places throughout Naess's eco-philosophy. In *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, he gives the example of some children killing insects with bug spray, and an adult posing to them the question, "perhaps those animals might, like you, prefer to live rather than to die?" The adult's comment, Naess thinks, might bring about an "instance of momentary identification" in which the children are able to "see and experience spontaneously and immediately the insects as themselves, not only as something different but in an important sense like themselves" (1989, 1712). In Naess's most recent book *Life's Philosophy*, he explains that through identification "we recognize something of ourselves in the other creature, or something of the other creature in ourselves" (2002, 114).¹⁵

What these passages are describing is markedly different from identification-as-belonging. Here, the term "identification" does not signify "interconnectedness" or "belonging," but rather something along the lines of "kinship." On this telling, to identify with an other is to recognize it as bearing a certain similarity to oneself, or to see it as "like" oneself in some way. Accordingly, we could refer to this sense of identification as "identification-as-kinship"; it is a form of identification that involves catching sight of commonality or continuity between ourselves and other entities.¹⁶

Naess provides a number of possible answers to the question of what, precisely, is the "commonality" or "kinship" that this form of identification recognizes. In *Life's Philosophy* he says that what identification discovers in others ranges from physical abilities and vulnerabilities that we share, to our common social activities and needs (2002, 114–15). Elsewhere he says that identification is strongest when others are suffering, presumably because witnessing others endure hardship forcefully conveys to us that their lives, no less than our own, are imbued with feeling and purpose (1985, 264). Shortly after this remark about suffering, he mentions the intense identification people felt with Antarctic penguins that were being negatively affected by the pesticide DDT. These people, Naess believes, understood that humans and penguins alike are "expressions of life" (1985, 265).¹⁷ In what is perhaps his most provocative remark on the subject, Naess suggests that to identify with others is to understand that there is in them "that part of God that lives in all that is living" (2002, 114).

As we have indicated already, Naess holds that the significance of this sort of identification is that it is prerequisite for feelings of empathy or sympathy. “It is,” he writes, “a necessary, but not sufficient condition of empathy and sympathy that one ‘sees’ or experiences something similar or identical with oneself” (1985, 262). Reiterating this point, in his narrative about the flea he says that the opposite of identification is “alienation,” and claims that “[i]f I had been alienated from the flea, not seeing intuitively anything even resembling myself, the death struggle would have left me feeling indifferent” (1995b, 227). Thus for Naess it is the awareness of continuity or kinship with others that gives us an intimation of what their situations are like, which in turn makes it possible for us to feel with them their joys and their sorrows. And, perhaps most importantly, insofar as such genuine fellow-feeling is made possible by this sort of identification, Naess contends that it too contributes to a “widened” or “expanded” sense of self.

This connection between identification-as-kinship and Self-realization is expressed frequently in Naess’s work, and it has been operative in his thinking for quite a long time. During a debate with Alfred Ayer in 1971, for example, Naess attempted to explain what he meant by the assertion that one could “identify” with an other, and claimed that if he were to say something hurtful to Ayer, he might have a “moment of identification” with him. The result of this, he said, would be a situation in which there was “‘one’ hurt, which was not yet ‘my’ experience” (Naess, Ayers & Elders 1999, 20).¹⁸ What this indicates is that with this type of identification, and the empathy that flows from it, we experience others’ well-being as intermingled with our own: we find that we are pained by their pain and uplifted by their flourishing; the “hurt” they feel, we feel as well. As a result of identification, therefore, the self comes to “include” others since the interests of others are discovered to be bound up with those of the self.

Hence identification-as-kinship, like identification-as-belonging, is thought to contribute to a revised conception of our selves. But while it is clear that Naess wishes to view identification-as-kinship in terms of the larger project of Self-realization, doing so has the potential to obstruct our view of the ways in which these two kinds of identification—and possibly even the sorts of “self” that they produce—are *not* alike. To develop the ecological Self via identification-as-belonging is, at bottom, a matter

of changing our understanding of our selves, of re-conceiving our identity in terms of interdependence or interconnection with others. It can be depicted as a process whereby our self spreads out as we come to realize more and more the vital roles that other entities play in shaping who and what we are. For this reason, it is well-described as a process of expanding the *self*, or of enlarging our sense of self. Identification-as-kinship, on the other hand, is in the first instance a matter of experiencing *others* in novel ways, or recognizing something of importance about *them*. It is only afterwards, so to speak, that there are consequences for the self; and that there are such consequences is because this form of identification allows us to relate to others on such terms as to be able to care for them deeply—so deeply, in fact, that our very self is implicated.

Another way to conceptualize the difference between these two kinds of identification is to consider the dissimilar problems that each appears to address. Early on, we noted that identification-as-belonging functions as a critique of overly atomistic or individualistic metaphysics that conceive of the self as, at best, a “skin-in” phenomenon. Identification-as-kinship, on the other hand, does not seem to have as its primary target an unduly restricted sense of self. Rather, it appears to be occupied with what could be characterized as careless or indifferent conceptions of others, a point that is illustrated in the above example of children killing insects with bug spray. In that scenario, Naess’s concern is that the children be able to discover something about other entities that they might otherwise have missed, to see other-than-human beings as similar to themselves where before they saw either something alien, or something that, prior to the moment of identification, they had given no notice at all.¹⁹ The most basic aim of this kind of identification, therefore, is not to frame others as *part* of the self, but to have us realize that others are enough *like* we are to command the same sort of concern and respect that we have for ourselves.²⁰

V

In pointing out differences between these two kinds of identification, I do not mean to suggest that they are mutually exclusive, or that they do not in any way reinforce one another. Surely a sense of kinship with other-than-human beings could foster a sense of belonging to the more-than-human natural world, just as a sense of belonging to the nat-

ural world could support and facilitate the recognition of basic commonalities between ourselves and other-than-human existents. Nevertheless, identification-as-belonging and identification-as-kinship are different processes, and with these differences in mind I would like to conclude by asking whether or not the latter can avoid some of the charges leveled at the former.

Before examining this question, however, it ought to be noted that the notion of identification-as-kinship is exposed to a particular criticism that we have not yet discussed. The problem, briefly stated, is that Naess's portrayal of identification-as-kinship appears to root moral sensitivity to others in our awareness of their likeness to ourselves, and as such it could be regarded as a type of "moral extensionism." Moral extensionist positions argue that standard criteria for moral consideration, which typically point to capacities possessed by most human beings, are basically correct, but that it is incorrect to claim that other-than-human others do not meet these criteria. Although positions of this sort can be commended for granting other-than-human continuity with humans, they are criticized by some environmental philosophers insofar as their criteria for inclusion in the moral community reflect an anthropocentric bias: they take human qualities to be definitive of moral considerability, and then demand that other-than-human entities be enough like humans to be accorded comparable moral standing.²¹ If it is true, therefore, that Naess presumes that fellow-feeling for other-than-human beings is based entirely on our perception of their similarity to ourselves, then Naess, too, could be faulted for expressing the same anthropocentric prejudice.

This is a very serious objection, the full consideration of which falls outside the scope of this essay. It is certainly the case, though, that Naess makes a number of remarks that would complicate attempts to interpret his understanding of this form of identification as just another version of moral extensionism.²² But while it has potential problems that need to be addressed, the notion of identification-as-kinship has a number of potential strengths as well. To begin with, it is not particularly vulnerable to the criticism that it views environmentally responsible action as being motivated by human self-interest. This is because, unlike identification-as-belonging, identification-as-kinship is not primarily a process of expanding the self, but one of expanding awareness of the richness and complexity of other forms of existence. Hence, on the model that identification-as-

kinship provides, care for others is not an extension of the care we have for ourselves, it is rather the result of an awareness of the significance, or value, that others themselves have. Put slightly differently, through identification-as-kinship we extend consideration to others not as we expand our sense of self to include them, but as we come to recognize them as the sort of entities that are able to elicit our most sincere, other-regarding moral sentiments.

This is not to say that Naess himself fully appreciated this aspect of identification-as-kinship. Typically, he stresses the importance of identification in the process of Self-realization, more so than its function as a means to re-configure our conceptions of others. This could be taken to indicate that, at bottom, he remained committed to thinking of identification as a way of extending the limits of our self-concern. It seems beyond question, however, that he was aware that the transformed sense of self that accompanies identification-as kinship follows from a transformed awareness of others. Thus, this sort of identification does not, as a matter of necessity, presuppose human egoism, but only the human capacity to gain insight into the situations of others and respond accordingly, our ability to feel genuine concern for entities that are other than ourselves.

A final point to note is that, since identification-as-kinship allows for other-oriented action, it does not require that the self “fuse” or “merge” with others in order to care for them, as some commentators claim is the case with deep ecology theorists’ accounts of the ecological Self.²³ With identification-as-kinship, which emphasizes empathetic and sympathetic responses to others, moral sentiment is able to extend beyond the boundaries of the self, and thus those boundaries do not have to be removed for concern to extend to others. At the same time, however, Naess does not lose sight of what, in his debate with Ayer, he called the “ontological consequences” of our relations with others (Naess, Ayer, & Elders 1999, 20). That is, his discussions show a remarkable sensitivity to the ways in which encountering others in the fullness of their being *involves* the self; the fact that through encounters of this sort we find ourselves *implicated* in the existence of others, drawn or “folded” into their lives, “intertwined” with them. In terms closer to Naess’s own, we might simply say that in such encounters we are “with” others in an ontologically meaningful way.²⁴ Naess’s analyses remind us, therefore, that experiences of the richness of what is other-than-human are transformative events, events

that both expose us to the depths of other-than-human existence, and touch us deep in the recesses of our own being.

NOTES

1. Katz, Light and Rothenberg, for example, say that “[d]espite Naess’s intention that each individual develop his or her own ecosophical total view, most advocates of deep ecology accept the fundamental ideas of Naess—identification and Self-realization—as being crucial to the meaning of deep ecology” (2000, xv).
2. As I say again later, not all deep ecology theorists conceive of “interconnectedness” in identical ways. My discussion here is intended to explain the general features of this sort of identification, the particulars of which will vary.
3. For a discussion of this point, see Callicott (1989).
4. See Naess (1989, 85; 1985, 30–32).
5. This distinction is discussed in detail in Fox (1995), chapter 8.
6. While it is possible that, in some of his examples of personal identification, Fox has in mind something like what I call below “identification-as-kinship,” I think that for him the primary sense of identification is identification-as-belonging.
7. This is the case, I believe, even for the second broad type of identification discussed in sections IV and V (see note 17 below).
8. Of course, there is a sense in which all forms of identification can be described as “transpersonal” insofar as they involve developing a sense of self that outstrips one’s narrow, individualistic ego (see Devall 1985). Here, however, I am following Fox and restricting the meaning of transpersonal identification to a type of identification that is “not primarily a function of the personal contacts or relationships of this or that particular person” (1995, 250).
9. Exemplifying the importance of truly expansive, cosmological identification, Mathews goes so far as to propose a new term to indicate the widest possible self that might be attained: beyond the “ecological” Self lies the “cosmic” self (1988, 352).
10. See also Slicer (1995), Cheney (1987) and Sylvan (1985).
11. See also Plumwood (1993), Birkeland (1993), Kheel (1993), Reed (1999) and Cheney (1987).
12. See, for example, Plumwood (1993; 2002), Warren (2000), and Donovan & Adams (1996).
13. For examples of responses to criticisms of deep ecology, see Fox (1989), Sessions (1996), Warren (1999), Naess (1999a; 1999b), Diehm (2002; 2003), Barnhill (2001), and Bender (2003).

14. One writer who has noted this other form of identification is Plumwood (1993, 180–81 and 216–17, note 8).
15. In a recent interview, Naess said, “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...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” (Naess 2004, 12).
16. We should make clear that in talking about kinship or similarity we are not talking about sheer physical resemblance. As Naess says, a “process of identification is created by the very fact of your feeling something of yourself in something else. Not that it need resemble yourself, but there is something about it that you recognize in yourself” (2002, 113–14).
17. This comment is interesting insofar as it suggests that identification-as-kinship, like identification-as-belonging, could have “personal” and “trans-personal” forms. Most people have not had personal experience with Arctic penguins, and certainly not those individuals who were at risk in the situation Naess describes, and thus the people’s responses to which Naess is referring here could not be based on personal experience.

It should also be noted that the distinction made in section II between identifying with entities “individually” and “collectively” could apply to identification-as-kinship, providing that we hold a viewpoint which allows us to find points of kinship between ourselves and collective entities. Naess himself seems to waiver on this issue. At one point he references the definition of identification as a process through which we react to others’ interests as our own, and says that the notion of “interests” could be expanded to include many entities traditionally thought not to be bearers of interests (e.g. non-living entities, species or ecosystems), thus allowing for identification with them (1999b, 201). Elsewhere, however, he explains that identification with “abstract” entities is difficult for him personally, saying that “identification requires feelings, and it is easier for me to have positive feelings for the individual living creature than for a species...that becomes too abstract” (2002, 114).

18. In this debate, as elsewhere, Naess does not distinguish between identification-as-kinship and identification-as-belonging. It is almost certain that he draws on both concepts at various times when speaking to Ayer. In the comment cited, however, it is clear that he is talking about an empathic response to Ayer, based on what I have been calling identification-as-kinship.
19. In *Life’s Philosophy* Naess expresses this same concern, entreating us “to learn about the similarities between human beings and other living creatures....” (2002, 115).

20. In "Identification as a Source of Deep Ecological Attitudes" Naess writes that identification "tells me: if *I* have a right to live, *you* have the same right" (1985, 266).
21. Many critics of moral extensionism could be cited. See for example Rodman (1995), Warren (2000, chapter 6), and Plumwood (2002, chapter 7).
22. Elsewhere (Diehm 2002; 2003) I have dealt with the question of whether or not Naess's understanding of identification over-emphasizes the similarity of self and other. While I think that a good number of his remarks do in fact suggest this, I also think that it is possible to develop a more "difference-inclusive" interpretation of Naess's thought (see Diehm 2003. In this essay I did not distinguish between identification-as-belonging and identification-as-kinship, but I believe that the discussion provided readily maps onto the issue at hand).
23. I should repeat that in these reflections my primary goal has been to explain the various ways in which identification with nature is described by theorists of deep ecology and, in particular, to distinguish between the two broad types of identification that I have called identification-as-belonging and identification-as-kinship. I have not attempted to judge the merits of the former. Hence my discussion of how identification-as-kinship might avoid some of the critiques directed at identification-as-belonging is not intended to imply that the notion of identification-as-belonging is flawed in the ways these critiques suggest that it is. Certainly, that question deserves very careful consideration. In my analysis of identification-as-kinship, I have simply tried to bring to the fore another conception of what it means to identify with nature, and attempted to ascertain the contributions this alternative conception of identification might make to the conversations sparked by deep ecology supporters.
24. All together, therefore, in his analyses of this form of identification Naess seems to recognize that we are able to desire the well-being of others *qua* other, while at the same time desiring their well being non-instrumentally as an essential component of our own flourishing. Through identification-as-kinship, the ecological Self does indeed care for other-than-human others for their own sakes, and yet does not fall into the dualistic trap of thinking that their goods are exclusive of those of the self.

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