

Deepness of Questions and the Deep Ecology Movement

Historical Perspective

Whatever the weaknesses we are all aware of, the term *deep* is going to remain central in the terminological structure of the deep ecology movement.¹ Is the deep ecology terminological structure complicated? It is nothing compared to what we have to get accustomed to if we participate in social and political debates. Here, I focus on only one approach in trying to make the term *deep* more precise in the relevant sense (thus eliminating interpretations that lead away from what is intended). The approach taken here is concerned with premise-conclusion chains.² This approach is concerned with the *deepness of premises* used in debates over efforts to overcome the ecological crisis.

There are other approaches—for example, the “deepness and broadness of attitude” approach. Let us say that the owner of a rock garden may treasure every life-form in the garden for its own sake, but this attitude is limited only to the garden. The attitude is not deep enough for this person to generalize it beyond the confines of the garden. Further, the shortcomings of society may be seen and felt by this person, and result in unrest and frustration, but the attitude is not intense enough to make the owner of the garden “problematize” all aspects of society. Whereas the premise-conclusion approach, if carried out systematically, requires some educa-

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tion (but not knowledge) in logic, the “deepness of attitude” approach leads to social psychology and social science in general. However, only a small group of a movement’s theorists can afford to spend much time on systematization.

Conservatism may be said to be the social movement that tries to conserve what is best in what already exists. Such short expressions of what a social movement “is” may have some value in some contexts, but generally a social movement requires fairly complex characterizations. Attempts to shorten them into one sentence, which is then treated as a so-called definition or criterion, are rarely successful—or the sentence gets to be too long and complicated. Definition may have a place in dictionaries, but rarely elsewhere.

In my paper “The deep ecology movement: Some philosophical aspects” (1986; see chapter 5 in this volume), the contrast between the deep and the shallow ecological movements is characterized in about two hundred words. One difference is said to be decisive: it “concerns a willingness to question and to appreciate the importance of questioning every economic and political policy in public.” The questioning is “deep” and “public.” Because I used the word *questioning*, not the Germanic *problematizing*, the misinterpretation arose that I found intellectual playful questioning of the kind encountered in graduate philosophy seminars sufficient. On the other hand, *problematizing* is a profound “existential” undertaking.

When one compares the two movements, however, the relatively deeper questioning in the sense of “problematizing” (*Problematizierung*) of the deep ecology movement is quite manifest. It is my *hypothesis* that any systematic contemporary philosophy will, if it takes a stand on the ecological crisis, support the deep ecology movement. Supporters of the deep ecology movement, therefore, have no systematic philosophy to oppose. The modern ecological predicament is the result of thoughtlessness rather than thought. In one sense we may say: if there is deep questioning, then this is compatible with Ecosophy T, or some other ecosophy articulating the perspectives of the deep ecology movement. “Deepness,” however, must include not just systematic philosophical deepness, but also the “deepness” of proposed social changes.

Persistent “Whys” and “Hows”

Let us inspect the chain of questions in the following dialogue:

1. A: Turn on the gas!
2. B: Why?
3. A: Because we are going to boil the potatoes.
4. B: Why?
5. A: Because we ought to have dinner soon.
6. B: Why?
7. A: Because we should keep fit.
8. B: Why?
9. A: Because we should do what makes us feel happy.
10. B: Why?
11. A: Because happiness is what we ultimately desire.
12. B: Why?
13. A: “Happiness” means satisfaction of all biological and social needs.
14. B: Why?

At step 13 the pure why-chain turns from normative to descriptive. This may lead us into discussing the etymology of the term *happiness* and other unphilosophical specialties. The “whys” at 10 and 12 are within the traditions of philosophy and more profound, I would say, than at 8 or even at 14. Furthermore I would say, perhaps arbitrarily, that the “why” at 8 is more profound, or leads (or may more easily lead) into deeper water, than the “why” at 6. It is convenient to use two words here, *deep* and *profound*, letting *deep* refer to the premise-conclusion relations and letting *profound* refer to nearness to philosophical and religious matters. The latter term I leave unanalyzed.

At the start of introductory philosophy courses, my habit of persis-

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tently asking why, whatever the answers to my questions (for example, “What time is it?”), makes the students bemused, bewildered, frustrated, or angry in a remarkably fruitful way for the whole course. In less than ten minutes, they are ready for anything.

Among other things, they realize that deep questions seem to be only “millimeters” away from the trivial, conventional, or silly. Some become unhappily bewildered because they feel that I am making fun of them, or that their sanity is being tested.

The unhappily bewildered remind me of the research on “tolerance of ambiguity” in the 1930s and 1940s motivated by the astonishing popularity of fascist and National Socialist ideas. One working hypothesis held that intolerance for the ambiguity of a situation correlated highly with indicators of acceptance of fascist ideas: that there should always be rules for correctness. The only test for saneness is correctness: to be *comme il faut*. Certain questions could (should) be asked, others could not. Idle wondering is dangerous, therefore “keep straight at any cost.” The fuhrer establishes the rules, thereby avoiding *embarrassing* bewilderment.

Suppose the above dialogue, at an early stage, went descriptive, and explanatory:

1. A: Turn on the gas!

2. B: Why?

3b. A: Because if you do not turn on the gas the water will not boil.

4b. B: Why?

5b. A: Because cold water needs heat from the gas in order to reach boiling temperature.

6b. B: Why?

7b. A: Boiling requires that water molecules attain higher velocities and these must be transferred from the hot flame of the gas.

8b. B: Why?

9b. A: Because, ultimately, quantum mechanical and thermodynamical laws prescribe certain conditions to be fulfilled.

10b. B: Why?

11b. A: We have no good reason to think that heating might be done otherwise than in conformity with physical and chemical laws or theories accepted today.

12b. B: Why?

Again, we have landed in philosophy. Why-strings in science inevitably lead us beyond science. Sequences of “how?” show similar traits. Sooner or later we arrive at fields of inquiry typical of philosophy.

1. A: Turn on the gas!

2c. B: How?

3c. A: Put your fingers here and turn to the left.

4c. B: How?

5c. A: Activate certain muscles of your underarm . . . !

6c. B: How?

7c. A: By deciding to do so.

8c. B: How?

9c. A: Pull yourself together!

10c. B: How?

11c. A: Use your free will!

It seems that we can lead a dialogue out of philosophy even when continuing our whys and hows, but not without certain kinds of diversionary steps or sidetracking maneuvers:

12c. B: How?

13c. A: By a careful study of the philosophy of personal development.

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It might be possible to keep the dialogue within the borders of techniques of study a couple of steps farther, but roughly the conclusion holds that persistent questioning leads to deeper questions.

The importance of this conclusion is limited because whereas question number n may lead deeper, question $n+1$ may lead back to trivialities as exemplified by 12c. We must consider, too, which concepts of “depth” are intended? “Deep mathematical theorems” are one thing; “deep grammatical structure” is something else. Is philosophy invariably deep? Deep waters can be distinguished from murky ones, but how are deep questions and answers distinguished from murky ones? Let us say the dialogue takes this turn:

x . There is something rather than nothing.

$x+1$. Why?

$x+2$

Some of us will characterize the Heideggerian literature at step $x+2$ as murky rather than deep, or at least as both murky and deep.

In a critical situation, a complex proposal A (concerning how to act) may be said to be based on a set of premises, some of them explicitly formulated in A , the others playing the role of unarticulated “presuppositions” (Collingwood 1948). Suppose a proposal B is based upon the same set of premises except one, an unarticulated presupposition P . B questions (problematizes) P , does not find it tenable, and rejects proposal A . In this critical situation, B may be said to *question more deeply* than A , and the deeper question may be said to be “Why P ?”

The above is meant just to touch upon the difficult questions we face when trying to formulate fairly simple (but useful) analyses (precizations) of “deep questions,” “deeper questioning,” and similar expressions.

These questions do not, in my view, undermine the usefulness and appropriateness of the designation “deep ecology movement,” but they do justify the remarks made by Warwick Fox, David Rothenberg, and others, that what deep ecology theorists write is often sketchy, tentative, and preliminary (using my words rather than theirs). Theoreticians for the peace movement, and especially the Marxist-inspired social justice movements, have produced much heavier thought together with highly elaborated doc-

trines. Unfortunately, the widening of the ecological crisis seems to give us more than enough time to gain in profoundness.

Comparing argumentation patterns within the shallow and deep movements, I find that although supporters of the deep ecological movement (as characterized in certain texts) ask deeper questions, they are rarely zetetics—questioning everything. On the contrary, like Rachel Carson, they tend to have firm convictions at a deep level. This is also true of people in the other two great movements—the peace and social justice movements.

Inspecting my examples of why- and how-strings, some might wonder: are they not also suited for introducing concepts of “*p* being sillier than *q*”? This question reminds us of the concept of *relevance*. When questions of what to do (or not to do) in a given situation are relevant, why- and how-strings sooner or later become irrelevant. They get sillier from the point of view of action. For example, if we start a string of questions and answers concerning why and how we eat, eating becomes more and more relevant as the hours pass. Action (in this case, eating) cuts the Gordian knot but leaves all questions open, and leaves all answers invoked to account for decision and action questionable.

For example, the main reaction of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the chemical industry to Rachel Carson’s accusations in *Silent Spring* (1962) was “Wildly exaggerated!” If this factual and normative premise is accepted, then the questions raised by her are clearly irrelevant, and some of them are even silly. From 1963 to 1989 there have been vast differences of opinion concerning the gravity of the ecological situation. One may roughly distinguish an extreme optimism, a moderate optimism, a moderate pessimism, and a black pessimism (the “doomsday prophets”). The supporters of the deep ecology movement consider the ecological crisis to be grave, and this may be seen by some as pessimism. Tremendous efforts will be necessary, and the transition to wide ecological sustainability will be painful for most people. The supporters of the shallow movement tend toward optimism. Some do not even acknowledge that there is anything like a crisis but support vigorous action to investigate the ozone layer situation, to restore forests with genetically altered trees that grow faster and are more resistant to pollutants, and other kinds of repair jobs. Some of these efforts are admirable and indispensable today from the deep ecology standpoint.

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The tendency to refrain from discussion of deep questions in the shallow movement has, as its main cause, the perceived irrelevance of such discussion: why bother? The supporters of the shallow movement believe that responsible ecological policies will be implemented in due course because of the clearly manageable magnitude of the implied problems.

When the use of pesticides was increasing by a very large percentage each year, only a few people were alarmed, and they soon found that strong forces were allied against the use of restraint. Even when the short-range undesirable consequences of pesticide use became clear, nothing decisive was done to change the situation.

Few people persistently asked why or how. Those who did, however, were deeply concerned about the ecological consequences. The answers to these questions relate not only to chemistry and biology; they involve increasingly more and more spheres of human affairs—economic, technological, social, cultural—and ultimately, philosophical and religious levels. That is, those who went deeper both *questioned more deeply* (in the sense of deeper premises) and *suggested deeper changes socially* (in a wide sense).

The percentage increase of the sheer volume of impact, and the increase of pernicious impact (of special chemicals, especially on vulnerable regional changes), could not, and cannot, be precisely measured. There is always room for differences in degrees of optimism and pessimism. The effects of DDT were uncertain; the causes and effects of acid rain are still uncertain; climatic changes (ice age or warming of the planet, or both, or none?) are uncertain. Some point out that population growth correlates with the growth of wealth if proper technology is available—look at the history of Holland! With high income and education, population stabilizes. The implication is that there is no cause for alarm.

With moderate degrees of optimism the why- and how-strings need not be long. Science and technology seem to furnish answers; also they do not touch fundamental social conditions, nor fundamental attitudes and value priorities.

The difference between the deep and the shallow ecological movements may be looked at from a special point of view, namely, what is questioned and how deep the questioning goes, although *defining* the movements in terms of deepness of questioning is misleading. The English term *questioning* is not as forceful as the Germanic and French equivalents: *prob-*

lematizieren, Problematizierung, problematique, etc. In European philosophy and politics during the late 1960s, these terms were important—the whole industrial society was questioned: *problematiziert*. The movement to protect nature was *politiziert* in the sense that it had to face the economic and political forces that mobilized against major protection efforts. Without political changes there would be no shift to ecologically sane policies. In the United States, terms like *vested interests* and *hidden persuaders* were used but did not gain much influence in questions of environmentalism. The profound *Problematizierung* of the sociologist C. Wright Mills (1967) came too early.

Looking at the relevant literature and public debates, my conclusion is (and has long been) that what characterizes the deep movement (in relation to the shallow) is not so much the *answers* that are given to “deep questions” but rather *that* “deep questions” are raised and taken seriously. Argumentation patterns within the shallow movement rarely touch the deeper questions: we do not find the complete social and philosophical *Problematizierung*. However, if supporters of the shallow movement are invited to answer the deeper questions, it is my experience that they often accept the points of view of the deep ecology movement. (A pilot study³ in which influential people were invited to answer these kinds of questions confirms my impressions. More studies of this kind would be highly desirable.)

From this I conclude that the view is untenable that one is confronted, in the ecological crisis, with politicians and other influential people who invariably hold a different philosophy of life and a different view about humanity’s place in the cosmic scheme, and who deliberately work against the realization of a green society (which implies respect for the richness and diversity of life on Earth). They often say, “Yes, sure. Every living being has intrinsic value, but what is your politically realistic proposal for solving the unemployment problem? Some forests may have to go.”

The last few years have seen a lively interest among religious leaders in denouncing the arrogance toward, and ruthless exploitation of, the planet. Christian leaders proclaim the intrinsic value of all beings because they are the creation of God, and speak about human sinful behavior toward God’s creation. There is a central point, however, that this “new green wave” on the philosophical and religious level has not taken sufficiently seriously: *the necessity of a substantial change in economic, social, and ideological structures*. If

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the first five points of the deep ecology platform are accepted, such changes are seen as necessary by most supporters of the deep ecology movement (cf. especially point 6).

Should we now say, then, that deeper questioning is no longer what fundamentally makes deep ecology argumentation patterns different from those of the shallow movement? The term *fundamentally* is too strong. I think *most clearly* is better.

I introduced the concept of pure why-strings to illustrate the simple concept of “deeper question,” which was adapted to one of the many usages of the term *deep*. There is, however, another usage relevant to the choice of the designation “deep ecology movement”: that of *deepness of change*. Whereas the shallow movement suggests increases in environmental budgets, forcing polluters to pay for their pollution, and many other changes in social policies, these proposed changes are not “deep.” Green political party programs usually imply changes on the same deep level as those implied by the deep ecology movement.

As an example, let us consider the philosophical norm of universalizability as applied to ecological policies. Because all major ecological problems are global as well as local, one society degrading the Earth to a much greater extent per capita than other societies cannot be tolerated as long as the global volume of interference is clearly excessive. Norms of justice derivable from the Eight Points may convince people that ethically justifiable levels of interference in ecosystems require much deeper social changes than are now widely anticipated. Societies must adopt policies that can be universalized without reducing the richness and diversity of life on Earth.

It is of considerable importance that the deep ecology movement has so far faced no serious philosophically based criticism. Sooner or later that will occur, but of course it has to be legitimate criticism, not a caricature of the movement.

Jeremy Bentham was both a philosopher and a social reformer who was not afraid to derive very special particular norms from general principles; for example, which color would be best for ballot boxes. For every British custom and legal procedure he asked “Why so?” If a procedure did not satisfy his pleasure principle, it was to be abandoned. That is, he questioned (problematized) every procedure in the light of his total view, his special form of utilitarianism. Even if his way of doing this (through his “special”

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why-strings) was fictitious to some degree (like the *q.e.d.*'s of Spinoza's "proofs"), his reform movement was highly successful.

The ecological crisis requires an analogous scrutiny of "everything" in the light of broad, global long-range ecological sustainability. Here, why- and how-strings must mercilessly confront procedures with basic principles on the philosophical and religious levels.