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Why Spirit Matters

Towards an Anthropocene Ecology of the Earth with
Steffens, Næss, and Vetlesen

In the emerging science I wanted to listen to the spiritual moments that gradually proceeded and was seeking a comprehensive understanding.

Henrik Steffens¹

Entering the Anthropocene, the geological era marked by accelerating anthropogenic climate change, some of the basic coordinates of modern science and philosophy have been jeopardised.² First, the modern dualism of spirit and matter.³ Second, the separation of human history from natural history that was constitutive of modern science in the late 18th century. The separation of two cultures, natural science and the humanities, has been rendered problematic by the human impact on geology, meteorology, and the ecosystems.⁴ When humans trigger unexpected changes in rocks and sediments, in oceans and glaciers, in weather and climate, it is time to reconsider how theoretical, even spiritual, dimensions of human life, and social life, influence its material basis, and vice versa.

This was one of the key insights leading to the proclamation of a new geological era called the Anthropocene, a term coined by the Dutch meteorologist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen in 2000.⁵ Vigorous debates on the Anthropocene in the first decades of the 21st

1 “I den fremskridende Videnskab vilde jeg lytte til de aandelige Momenter der efterhvert traadte frem og søgte en fælles Forstaaelse (...). Den Overbevisning er voxet med hele mit Liv: at den sandselige Natur er noget Oversandseligt, Aandigt, der er i Begreb med sin Udvikling.” Steffens 1967. Translation by MTM.

2 For an introduction to the Anthropocene, cf. Renn & Scherer 2017 and Zalasiewicz, et al. 2019. See also Mjaaland, Hylland Eriksen & Hessen 2024, 7–30.

3 See e.g. Vetlesen 2019, 217–260.

4 Cf. Chakrabarty 2021, 155–181.

5 Cf. Crutzen & Stoermer 2000; Crutzen & Steffen 2003.

century throw new light on some of the early pioneers of science and philosophy in the early 19th century who rejected the split between science and philosophy, such as the Norwegian geologist, philosopher, theologian, and poet Henrik Steffens (1773–1845). Steffens was acknowledged as an important mineralogist and one of the pioneers of Scandinavian and German natural science in the early 19th century. However, it was his original formulation of a nature philosophy (*Naturphilosophie*) that made him famous.⁶ His book on the inner natural history of the Earth (1801), clearly inspired by Schelling, remained a defining work for his entire career as a scientist. The emergence of the Anthropocene is a good opportunity to reconsider one of his most basic convictions: That the physical world, including rocks, minerals and sediments, are involved in a *spiritual* life, and that the spirit, conversely, is deeply rooted in matter, in the Earth.

Steffens was influenced not only by Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) but also by Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677), and I will discuss key elements of Spinozism in his thought. The influence from Spinoza is also explicitly emphasized in the Deep Ecology of Arne Næss (1912–2009), one of the founding figures of ecological philosophy in the 20th century. I will analyse key aspects of the philosophy of nature in Steffens and Næss, focusing on spirit and matter, ontology and epistemology, with consequences for their moral and political philosophy. Interestingly, we can follow this trajectory up to contemporary environmental philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen, who discusses ethical responsabilization in the light of ontology and epistemology in two of his recent books.⁷

My topics of inquiry are the following: First, how does Steffens understand the ecology of matter and spirit, nature and God, and how does his geological materialism shape his *Naturphilosophie*? Second, how is the relation between matter and spirit, nature and God conceptualized in the deep ecology of Arne Næss? And finally, how could this trajectory in Norwegian philosophy inspire critical and cosmological reflections on spirit and matter in the Anthropocene?⁸

6 Steffens 1801.

7 Cf. Vetlesen 2015 and Vetlesen 2019.

8 To the discussion concerning the Anthropocene as geological epoch or event, cf. Gibbard et al. 2022.

First, I will present Steffens' somewhat original approach to geology and philosophy, before I delve deeper into his studies in chemistry and mineralogy. I will then proceed to his materialism, with its original approach to the deep interdependence of matter and spirit. I will then suggest a possible trajectory of Norwegian ecological philosophy running from Steffens to Næss, with Spinoza as a common point of reference, before I finally discuss to what extent Steffens represents a valuable resource in the Anthropocene, given that the relations between spirit and matter, human and natural history, are once more discussed as controversial issues in ontology, ethics, and cosmology.

Introduction

It was “nature itself,” and the scientific study of stones and minerals, that lead Henrik Steffens in the direction of philosophy, as he points out in his memoirs.⁹ His scientific approach, he argues, is based on observations and experiment alone. From Abraham Gottlob Werner in Freiberg he learned to observe stones and cliffs, and classify various minerals. He also learned about stratigraphy, admittedly based on Werner's conviction of *Neptunism*, a theory suggesting that all geological formations originally emerged from the sea, not from volcanic and eruptive changes in the Earth's crust (*Plutonism*).¹⁰ From the early strands of modern chemistry, he learned to analyse the substances and their compounds. In a period when the human and the natural sciences were parting ways, he saw this *empirical* foundation of his thought as a strength.

Whereas Steffens understands himself as a natural scientist, at the forefront of modern science, he describes his contemporary Friedrich Schelling as proceeding “from philosophy to nature”. This is not a diminution of the German Idealist, but an effort at clarifying the differences: Although deeply concerned with philosophical and theological ideas throughout his career, and engaged in historical and literary questions, Steffens remains a *natural scientist* in his own understanding. He published not only a popular bestseller on the

9 Steffens 1967, 17.

10 Werner 1787. Cf. also Guntau 2009.

inner natural history of the Earth,¹¹ but also a “complete” handbook in mineralogy (i.e. “*Oryktognosie*”) for experts and practitioners in the mining industry, subsequently in four massive volumes from 1811 to 1824.¹²

However, Steffens’ ambition as a scientist is not only to describe and systematize facts but also to develop a *philosophical* natural science. Somewhat surprisingly, he wants to demonstrate how the spiritual understanding of nature and consciousness proceeds from material evolution rather than the other way around.¹³ Thus the title of my essay: Why spirit *matters*. A more detailed inquiry may also reverse the title and ask why – or how – matter *spirits*. In Steffens, these processes of matter and spirit coincide, and his synthesis of spiritual philosophy (*Geistesphilosophie*) and material science describes a *double transmission* of thoughts. As polyglot and aspiring Romantic genius, Steffens became a pioneer bringing the groundbreaking ideas of modern chemistry and mineralogy to Scandinavia. At the same time, as natural philosopher, he conveyed the ideas of Romanticism and German Idealism to Denmark and Norway, most famously through his lectures on natural philosophy in 1802–04. For decades they unfold their impact on Scandinavian writers and thinkers, e.g. the Norwegian poet Henrik Wergeland who dedicates his awe-inspiring opus *Mennesket, Skabelsen og Messias* (Man, Creation and the Messiah) to Henrik Steffens, whom he addressed as “Norway’s bay leaf that blew away” (*Norges bortblæste laurbærblad*).

Given these ideational and geographical transmissions in the thought of Steffens, I will now focus on the *transformations* that carry his signature in the early years, of natural scientific thought on the one hand, and Romantic philosophy of nature on the other, with emphasis on texts and lectures from the period 1801–06 and one early article from 1794.

11 Steffens 1801.

12 Steffens 1811–1824.

13 Steffens 1806.

Steffens as Scientist: Chemistry and Mineralogy

Two principles are essential to Steffens' understanding of natural history and the evolution of organic as well as inorganic compounds: oxidation and retardation. These principles are based on the revolution of chemistry in the 18th century, introduced by the French pioneer Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier. Lavoisier discovered the role of oxygen in combustion and transformed chemistry from a set of mystical and unstructured ('alchemist') theories towards a scientific and systematic discipline, based on experiments. He suggested the elementary principles for the periodical system. According to Ole Bostrup, a Danish historian of science, it was Henrik Steffens who introduced these principles of modern chemistry to Denmark and Norway as early as 1794, at the age of 20.¹⁴ Since he was able to read French and English, he had an advantage compared to other scientists at the time, depending on German sources. His science teacher in Copenhagen, Gottfried Becker, was inspired by Lavoisier, but it was Steffens who published the first article on this topic in a new journal called *Physisk, oekonomisk og medicochirurgisk Bibliothek for Danmark og Norge*.

The article discusses the theories of Lavoisier and argues that they are superior to Aristotelian physics and the so-called phlogiston theory. It is the application of Lavoisier's understanding of calcification within geology and natural history that has caught Steffens' interest.¹⁵ As he later points out, he first studied the minerals in a somewhat instinctive and "completely empirical" manner.¹⁶ They reminded him of the distant mountains in his Fatherland, Norway, and he therefore enjoyed studying fossils in their various forms. However, his friends were astonished, as he writes,

[...] when they saw how the lively adolescent, easily moved by his imagination, could dedicate himself with his entire soul to a subject that appeared to them so empty, so dry, so completely dominated by the dumb existence of pure matter, and foreign to any spiritual significance whatsoever.¹⁷

14 Pedersen 2017, 19–21.

15 Steffens 1794. Reference and description of the article found in Pedersen 2017.

16 Steffens 1967, 14.

17 Ibid.

It is there, however, in the study of the “dark abyss” of the mountains and mineral masses that Steffens senses the deepest mystery of existence.

After leading a geological expedition to Norway, tragically ending with a shipwreck outside Hamburg, Steffens moved to Kiel in 1796 to give lectures and write a dissertation in natural science before he proceeded to Jena in 1797, where he read Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, quickly convinced or rather *converted* to the new understanding of nature within German Idealism and Romanticism. As he then moved on to Freiberg in 1800, he got the chance to study at the *mining academy* under the auspices of Abraham Gottlob Werner, the leading geologist in continental Europe throughout the 18th century.¹⁸ Werner emphasized practical skills and participation in the mining activities, even for the academically oriented students. Hence, Steffens learned to distinguish and categorize minerals in a rigorous system that took much of his time and energy over the next 25 years. In his *Vollständiges Handbuch der Oryktognosie* (4 vols. 1811–24), the description of each mineral is minute and follows according to a carefully elaborated system.

While studying minerals in Freiberg, Steffens finds time to write his original and seminal book on the natural history of the earth.¹⁹ He applies the principles of emerging modern science that he learned in Copenhagen, Kiel, and Freiberg to understand nature, not only as a physical and chemical reality, but in its *interiority*. The very idea of distinguishing between *interior* and *exterior* nature, is key to understanding Steffens’ approach. Since the end of the 18th century, such claims have become increasingly controversial within physics, chemistry, and geology: Can we assume such interiority in the first place? Is not nature mere externality? The latter seems to be an axiomatic presupposition for the disciplines of natural science emerging in the early 19th century and for so-called naturalism as philosophical position. Disconnecting the exterior from the interior, and thus rejecting the role of intentions and actions, indeed of *teleology* in nature, becomes a methodological and theoretical axiom for modern physics and chemistry, for biology and geology.

18 Pedersen 1995.

19 The book is dedicated to *Herrn Geheimderath v. Göthe*, i.e. the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whom Steffens had met several times in Weimar. Cf. Steffens 1801, I.

Here we see Steffens' first *transformative* transmission at work: He does not accept the axiomatic exteriorization of nature. Significantly, though, he does not simply begin with the spirit, as the speculative philosophers, including both Schelling and Hegel, tended to do in the era of German Idealism. Instead, he sets out from a description of processes in nature, as he has learned to know them descriptively in modern chemistry and mineralogy. He then elaborates further on possible *understandings* of these processes in order to demonstrate the *interiority* of nature. The direction of the inferences from descriptive natural science towards an assumed interiority in the natural history of the earth is original and important.

As a mineralogist, he focuses on the process formative for limestones, composite sediments, etc. As mentioned, he is not satisfied with external materiality. He looks at the processes taking place out there as an indication of *spirit*. The spirit is already there, he assumes, within the stones, whether that spirit is perceivable to humans or not. Similarly, there is, or must be, he argues, a spiritual understanding of the entire nature, and of the natural history of the earth. Spirit and matter are thereby not understood as separate entities or substances (such as *res extensa* and *res cogitans*) in the sense of Descartes, and not even distinct spheres of existence. It would presumably be more adequate to describe it as a material foundation of spirit and a spiritual interiority of things, but I will come back to these parts of Steffens' cosmology that become essential for his original contribution to the emerging science of geology.

As a natural scientist, Steffens observes that there are stones. Moreover, as a philosopher, he takes for granted that there is spirit, even *within* stones. This is the first token of a transformative transmission in Steffens' thought: A transformation of geology and chemistry that remains emblematic for his long, acclaimed and often controversial career as a natural scientist.

Material Philosophy of the Spirit

I will now proceed to the second transmission: Steffens instantly rose to stratospheric fame in Norway and Denmark for bringing Romantic philosophy of nature to the Scandinavian area with his

lectures on *Introduction to Philosophy* 1802–04, given at Elers' Kollegium.²⁰ The young and clever students, some of whom later became leading figures in Golden Age Denmark, were deeply impressed by the thoughts and charisma of Steffens, and came to see him as the Romantic Genius incarnate. Steffens had read and befriended some of the key figures in German Romanticism and Idealism such as Schelling and Goethe and presented their thoughts with great enthusiasm within his own philosophical and scientific framework. I will also mention Baruch Spinoza, an important source of inspiration. As Henrik Steffens points out in his memoirs, Spinoza inspired him to discover the deeper *unity of existence*. He thereby emphasizes the Spinozian unity of spirit and matter, emerging from Godself as the origin of all things.²¹ That Spinoza occasionally was accused of pantheism, since he apparently identifies God with nature (*Deus sive natura*), does not seem to represent a problem for Steffens. On the contrary, he simply accepts the unity of substance presupposed as axiomatic in Spinoza. According to Spinoza's Euclidian system of thought in the *Ethics*, all aspects of nature thus mirror the divine intention.²²

Whereas Spinoza convinced him and provided the basis for his philosophical orientation, Steffens describes his reading of Schelling's *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* (1797) as a turning point in his life, an event that "lifted up his entire existence and gave it a new resilience".²³ He nevertheless draws a distinction between Schelling's methodology and his own. Whereas Schelling remains a philosopher who subsumes natural phenomena under the process of a "productive" spirit, Steffens takes the opposite approach, studying and describing the concrete things of nature (stones, plants, animals) according to their physical and chemical hallmarks. He is searching for an understanding of these things that allows for a subsumption of each part within a "spiritual assimilation process" silently emerging from the objects themselves.

Friedrich Schelling is critical of the emerging natural sciences. He argues that these sciences with their mechanistic understanding of

20 Cf. Paul 1995.

21 Cf. Steffens 1801, 17; Steffens 1840-1844 Vol. 8, 386–388.

22 Cf. Spinoza 1677, 85–109.

23 Steffens 1967, 17.

laws in nature – as defined in physics, geology and chemistry – tend to objectify everything, even humans, and thus they obstruct the possibility of understanding the *organic* development of life in nature. His own notion of nature can never be completely objectified, Schelling argues, since natural processes are themselves expressions of subjectivity; nature *inhibits* itself. The difference between subject and object is thus dynamic, according to Schelling, both in the nature that we *observe* and the nature that we *are*, as humans.²⁴ Whereas Steffens is upset, excited, and convinced by the basic ideas in Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, he does not merely reproduce or copy it. In Schelling's system he sees a framework for doing natural science – real and descriptive natural science – with a twist.

The important question troubling Steffens is *the inner dynamic of the Earth*, which he sees as an ongoing natural process in lime stones, minerals, plants, creatures, and humans. They are endless processes in nature, independent of whether these processes are recognised by humans or not. And so is God, as the source behind it all. Reading Steffens on this topic feels a bit like an early apology for *process philosophy*, later to be elaborated carefully by Alfred North Whitehead in the 20th century.²⁵

Steffens' work on the inner natural history of the Earth oscillates between detailed passages on chemical substances and amorphous alloys on the one hand and more eloquent theories about the totality and interiority of nature on the other. The identification of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, and nitrogen in all organic (and many non-organic) processes was extremely significant for chemists, geologists, and biologists at the time, but Steffens also underscores a philosophical point: In its various forms, nature develops according to the same processes, and they can be described *empirically*. According to Steffens' *inner history*, these mutually attracting opposites can be described by the law of magnetism.

Magnetism keeps the Earth stable ("on a specific *line*"), Steffens claims, whereas the eruptive forces create volcanos and all sorts of life along equator, and thus as far away from the straight magnetic line as possible. The *invisible* power of natural productivity so often referred to by Steffens is connected to magnetism: Impressed by the

24 Cf. Bowie 1993.

25 Cf. Whitehead 1929.

recent invention of the battery by Volta (in 1800, the year before), he assumes a connection between various metals, basic substances, and life forms that ultimately will provide a universal explanation of how the world is continually developing and changing.²⁶ Again, Steffens demonstrates his knowledge of contemporary scientific discoveries, but he combines all sorts of knowledge in a somewhat idiosyncratic manner into a grand synthesis. As soon as he leaves the descriptive approach and speculates more freely about the origin of the Earth, he arrives at questions concerning its 'coherence' and 'density'. Turning to Schelling, he discusses whether the very same dynamic between coherence and density could be the origin of the entire universe.²⁷

However, the assertive style and speculative thoughts belong to Schelling's domain, and Steffens refers to these procedures as *deduction*. In contrast, his own approach is described as a *reduction*; he seeks to draw every process down to its basic dynamic of forces and substances. He argues that the two approaches – deduction and reduction – are complementary, but Schelling would have to learn from Steffens and other scientists in order to remain credible when he speaks of nature. Steffens, on the other hand, admits that natural science has its limitations and needs philosophy as soon as it proceeds beyond the empirical realm. In the last part of the book, Steffens follows Schelling in doing so, but not without hesitation. At several points, he admits that he is now beyond the scope of a natural scientist.

How Matter Spirits

How, then, does Steffens translate 'spirit,' one of the key terms in Romanticism and German Idealism? He presents spirit as humanity's attempt to *transfer* these natural processes into a reflective realm of thought, which, admittedly, constantly requires feedback from nature to give it meaning, to remain in harmony with its (inner) nature. Even this is a *transformative transference*, though. Humans reflect *on behalf of* nature, so to speak. Yet more precisely, it is

26 Steffens 1801, 194–6.

27 Steffens 1801, 207.

the *self-transcendence* of nature that takes place *in* humans, as the second most perfect expression of freedom in nature.²⁸ The inner nature lives by external processes, by natural processes, but is gradually evolving towards a higher level of coherence, and thus a higher level of freedom, which means an organism that has the principle of organization *within itself*.

It seems clear that, in Henrik Steffens' understanding of interiority, spirit is hopelessly lost without its grounding in nature, in matter. Moreover, given its pervasive presence, it is not merely a human or divine presence, but a dimension of all things, comparable to the thesis of panpsychism, to be discussed below. With Steffens' emphasis on natural and material things, in particular stones and minerals, we can observe an emerging materialism, with several parallels to contemporary "new" materialism.²⁹ Matter becomes the *bearer* of spirit, of a dimension that transcends what we are capable of observing through detached description and measurements. As I read Steffens, this ambivalence *within* all matter should underpin our understanding of spirit, of the mind, of intelligence in general. It can also *materialize* our understanding of human nature: First and foremost, human nature is an interplay of minerals and sediments in combination with organic material and *organic processes*. Secondly, it is *animalistic*, with instincts and needs, and finally, it is *spiritual* in the form of morality and intelligence. This is the reason why *spirit matters* and *matter spirits* in the thought of Henrik Steffens

Ultimately, this becomes the basis for a materialist description of love: That which binds together. This is where the treatise points towards the Creator himself, the infinite creating and organizing principle of nature, who cannot be demonstrated within nature, only presupposed.³⁰ On an ontological and cosmological level, this ethics of love is grounded in the unity of nature, where the entire Earth in the external, physical sense, is mirrored by the interiority of divine presence. With Spinoza we could, depending on the perspective chosen, speak of *Deus sive natura* in the *Naturphilosophie* of Henrik Steffens. The natural force of magnetism and pure coherence will

28 A topic later to be elaborated more carefully by Schelling in the *Freiheitsschrift* (SW III, 429–512).

29 Cf. e.g. Latour 2017 and Morton 2016. For a critique, cf. Boyson & Rasmussen 2023.

30 Steffens 1801, 316–317.

ultimately also be the origin of love and the unifying force within the inner natural history of the earth.

Deep Ecology: Naturphilosophie in the 20th Century

Although he moved away from Norway at young age, Henrik Steffens continued to identify as Norwegian throughout his career and arguably remained the most influential Norwegian philosopher in the 19th century. The competition would admittedly be much harder if compared to German philosophers (Hegel, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Fichte, Marx etc.) or even his Danish contemporaries (e.g. Kierkegaard). Still, Steffens' influence went far beyond his main disciplines, geology and philosophy. He was read by poets, theologians, natural scientists, historians, politicians, and law scholars – and wrote books or articles within all these fields. Whereas his theories in geology and chemistry were soon to be considered redundant, his philosophy of nature has once more become philosophically and historically relevant due to the ecological crisis that was discovered in the second half of the 20th century. Interestingly, another Norwegian philosopher then makes *the philosophy of nature* into a key topic of inquiry: Arne Næss. He was arguably the most influential Norwegian philosopher in the 20th century.

After a long academic career as analytic philosopher and member of the Vienna Circle, Arne Næss left his position as professor at the University of Oslo in 1970 in order to dedicate his life and writings to nature and ecology. He famously joined the first major demonstration for the protection of nature (*Mardøla-aksjonen*) in 1971 and published his first book on philosophy and ecology in 1971 – with an important revision in the edition from 1974.³¹ He coined the term deep ecology and developed an 'ecosophy' (or eco-philosophy) as an effort at rethinking the human relationship to nature and the inherent value of human and nonhuman life on Earth. The purpose of deep ecology is not merely to discuss the value of nature and the environment as conditions for life, but something like a Copernican revolution of philosophical inquiry, proceeding from the anthropocentric and logocentric philosophy of modernity to an

31 See Næss 1971; 1974.

eco- or biocentric understanding of the interconnectedness of all living creatures. Even nonorganic conditions for life are included in this philosophy of nature, and it is clearly inspired by Næss' reading of Spinoza at young age (he even described himself as a Spinozist upon arrival in Vienna in 1934). Næss published articles and books on Spinoza and Gandhi, figures he saw as inspirations for rethinking philosophy with emphasis on nature, values, and ecological ethics.

In a defence of deep ecology, he argues that his own approach is inspired by Spinoza, not because Spinoza was an ecological thinker but because his holistic metaphysics also became the basis for an ethics of mutual respect and acknowledgment of the value of nature.³² Even when Spinoza speaks of reverence and love of God, this is not a God who is separate from nature, Næss argues. On the contrary, this is a God who is present everywhere in nature, and in the interconnectedness of all things, to the extent that he may speak of God and nature as equals, *Deus sive natura*. Hence, he argues that the *intellectualis amor Dei* is not about intellectual love as opposed to physical entities, but that the love of God becomes manifest through the love of nature in its "particulars," and "all of them more or less animated."³³

Næss is convinced that Spinoza has a different understanding of philosophy and society than Hobbes, who insisted on the distinction between politics and religion. Since Spinoza perceives the world as united in God, he is also appreciating the entire nature as participating in God's nature: "Just as *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* are ultimately one, *Deus infinitus* and *Deus modificatus* are one."³⁴ Næss thus transfers the contrasting positions of the two 17th century philosophers Hobbes and Spinoza into philosophical debates in the late 20th century. Hobbes represents the kind of political philosophy, theology, and perception of nature that Næss rejects and sometimes labels 'shallow' ecology. The shallowness of shallow ecology is characterized by an instrumental understanding of power represented by the sovereign's exercise of violence and control towards the people, and consequently also towards the "things" of nature, the land, etc. This emphasis on divine *transcendence* so typical of early modern

32 Cf. Næss 1999.

33 Næss 1999, 92.

34 Næss 1999, 99.

philosophy and natural science is also perceived as a representation of the metaphysics, ethics, and politics Næss rejects.

Spinoza, on the other hand, is perceived by Næss as an *immanent* thinker, identifying the sacred in “nature itself” rather than some place or divinity beyond nature. Hence, he perceives Spinoza’s original thought as a philosophical framework appropriate for developing a deep ecology. There is support for this reading of Spinoza in the first book on God, P18, where he argues that *God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things*:

Everything that is, is in God, and must be conceived through God (by P15), and so (by P16C1) God is the cause of [NS: all] things, which are in him. That is the first [thing to be proven]. And then outside God there can be no substance (by P14), that is (by D3), thing which is in itself outside God. That was the second. God, therefore, is the immanent, not the transitive cause of all things, q.e.d.³⁵

Admittedly, Næss does not claim that Spinoza *was* a deep ecologist *avant la lettre* or something like a “patron philosopher” for the modern ecological movement. Still, he sees several key factors in his systematic and yet somewhat idiosyncratic thought (written over a long period of time, as Næss points out) that are useful for a contemporary understanding of philosophy – in short, for the *Copernican turn* towards a relational ontology of living beings advocated by the late Næss. What are the reasons for this conversion towards nature and ecology in Næss’ philosophy, inspired by Spinoza’s holistic and material metaphysics?

First, there is the key insight of deep ecology, that all life flourishing on earth, human as well as nonhuman, has an *intrinsic* value.³⁶ This is a basic principle and turning point in the thought of Næss, since he previously was convinced that nature as such was ‘dead’ and that *value* was ascribed to it by humans, as long as only humans could be considered moral agents. With his rereading of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, this changes fundamentally. He now argues that value is already there, inscribed in nature and acknowledged by God as the ultimate and infinite source of everything there is. If God is considered *separate* from nature (as in the thought of Hobbes and modern

35 Spinoza 1677, 100.

36 See Næss and Sessions 1999.

natural science), then the question of value becomes contingent and dependent on human judgement. In Næss' diagnosis of modern science, this is one of the major reasons for the *instrumental* perception of nature as 'externality' and the subsequent exploitation of nature. This is not necessarily an "immoral" attitude, he points out, it suffices to say that it "lacks generosity, fortitude, and love".³⁷ At the same time, this self-degradation of man, so to speak, *decreases* his level of "self-preservation, freedom, and joyfulness".³⁸ In the words of classical Greek philosophy, we could call it a loss of wisdom, of goodness, beauty, and *eudaimonia*. In the words of Kant, similarly, a self-inflicted lack of maturity, autonomy, and true enlightenment. In the words of Christian and Jewish thought, we may speak of a loss of original freedom, of joy, and of sacred belonging.

Second, Næss assumes that if the reader accepts the Spinozian critique of false philosophy, he or she will also acquire the criteria for judging the contemporary policy towards nature. According to Næss, it acts out of ignorance rather than knowledge and succumbs to passive affects rather than genuine action. These passive affects include numerous vices such as despair, cowardice, hatred, envy, cruelty, pride, luxury, etc. In general, he sees the moderns as Hobbesian abusers rather than Spinozist lovers of nature. Thereby, Næss urges his readers as well as adversaries to rediscover, recognise, and appreciate nature for its own sake. Rather than rotting in the dark 'cave', they ought to come ought to rediscover their interconnectivity with all things, and the closeness of "each to all" as indicated by Spinoza's "physics".³⁹

Thus, we arrive at the third point significant to Næss, viz., to unveil the modern (or possibly Platonic) illusion of acquiring truth through abstraction and spiritual insight. In contrast, he sees Spinoza as a thinker who insists on spirit as embedded in matter, perceived through the senses of the concretely existing body. The spiritual belongs to matter just like the individual needs to be integrated in its natural surroundings, as part of "the totality of being."⁴⁰

37 Næss 1999, 99.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

Fourth, and as a consequence of this diagnosis, Næss sees Spinoza's political thought as embedded in his philosophy of nature – thus not pointing towards a liberation *from* nature by pure force (that would be the Hobbesian position) but as a liberation *in* and *for* nature, and thus realizing the potential of individual freedom as a recognition of being related and prospering within these relations: “Spinoza's philosophy is one of emancipation from slavery, not a philosophy of becoming civilized, nor one of becoming morally less guilty.”⁴¹ Civilization, according to Næss, represents the true bondage of modern human beings, whereas a return to its original belonging, being embedded in nature, becomes a liberation, a rediscovery of the true sense of *being human*.

Finally, and this is the point from where I set out, this represents a rediscovery of the divine, of God's presence within things, within nature, as its inherent sacredness, its intrinsic value and true spirituality.⁴² Here, spirit matters because matter is intrinsically spiritual. And the deepest expression of this freedom, the embeddedness in nature, is called love.

Conspicuously, I have not found any quotations from or references to Steffens in Næss' works, but there is clearly an indirect connection via Spinoza. Both Næss and Steffens have critical remarks to Spinoza when it comes to his understanding of substances, of God, etc., but they have rediscovered nature through his work and applied the Spinozian system within their own context, constructively and critically. There are numerous differences between Steffens and Næss, based on the context and purpose of their philosophical endeavours, e.g. Steffens' self-understanding as a scientist. His arguments are based on the theories of chemistry and geology available at the time, and yet framed as a *history* of the earth.⁴³ Arne Næss is not a natural scientist but his Spinozism is by no means anti-scientific. On the contrary, he elaborates a philosophical framework to

41 Næss 1999, 97.

42 Claire Carlisle has argued that Spinoza is not a pantheist, that is, a proponent of the identity of God and nature, but rather a representative of pantheism, i.e., the conviction that all things are in God and God is present in all things (thus all things remain interconnected in God), yet there is still a difference and a surplus in God without which the divine would lose its significance for philosophy. Cf. the main argument in Carlisle 2023.

43 Cf. also Jordheim's article in this volume, pp. 39–59.

understand scientific knowledge in the light of ecology and relational ontology. Hence, despite the differences, I see a deep affinity between the two most influential Norwegian philosophers in the 19th and the 20th century. This is also important for a reconsideration of Steffens' materialism in the Anthropocene.

Steffens, Næss and New Materialism

In *Cosmologies of the Anthropocene* (2019), Arne Johan Vetlesen argues that the dichotomy of Cartesian epistemology is problematic, in particular due to its misconception of matter. He argues in favour of panpsychism, not merely as a metaphysical position but as a redefinition of our interaction with nature. According to Vetlesen, we need to learn from indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies inspired by animist, native American or Sami worldviews in order to respond adequately to the environmental crisis of the Anthropocene.⁴⁴ Vetlesen is thus in accordance with a key element in Steffens' *Naturphilosophie* and the deep ecology of Arne Næss. However, he also engages critically with the new materialism of philosophers such as Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, Rosi Braidotti, and Donna Haraway. Vetlesen's critique is illuminating for a reconsideration of Steffens' materialism in the Anthropocene.

What characterizes this *new* materialism as opposed to older versions? For Rosi Braidotti, the new emphasis on matter represents an effort at overcoming poststructuralism, which focused on text, writing, and the production of meaning.⁴⁵ Rather than endless discussions on self and other, matter and spirit, human and non-human, she argues in favour of a Spinozian notion of understanding reality from different perspectives. Material and bodily conditions for reality thereby play a key role. Braidotti argues in favour of a posthumanism deconstructing modern dichotomies between culture and nature etc. The latter is also important to Donna Haraway, who advocates a *situated* perception of the world, where we perceive humans as dependent on other creatures, making reality in relation

44 Cf. Vetlesen 2019, 208–229.

45 Cf. Braidotti 2002.

with other creatures (sym-poiesis) rather than independently (auto-poiesis).⁴⁶

Even for Timothy Morton and Bruno Latour, posthumanism becomes a way of undermining the dichotomy of nature and culture, human and non-human, matter and spirit. The modern understanding of the human as autonomous, independent, and sovereign is thus deconstructed, but they have been criticized for underestimating the responsibility of humans for loss of biodiversity, destruction of nature, and the climate crisis. Hence, rather than pointing towards a way out of the Anthropocene, they are accused of adapting to the structures of politics and capital that have *triggered* the crisis.⁴⁷ Vetlesen discusses this position, in particular Latour's arguments, in *Cosmologies* and accuses the new materialists of metaphysical speculation rather than giving a concrete and relevant response to the need for social and political re-orientation in the Anthropocene. Vetlesen himself could perhaps be suspected of nostalgia and romanticism when returning to indigenous epistemologies, but his goal is rather the opposite: In order to respond adequately to the modern degradation of nature, and of matter, we need to *responsibilize* human beings in their relation to other species, to landscapes and ecosystems. As a moral and political philosopher, Vetlesen emphasizes moral realism and critique of Capitalism for the sake of planetary justice. His cosmology, ontology and epistemology are formatted accordingly, in opposition to the exploitation of nature within the techno-scientific regime of globalization.

Whereas Tim Morton advocates Dark Ecology and Donna Haraway describes her method as speculative fabulation, feminism, and science fiction, Vetlesen is firmly based in the realism of continental philosophy. His theory is science-based, even when critical of scientism, and he avoids speculation in favour of concrete experience and phenomenology. Although emphasizing ethics over ontology, he nevertheless sees the need for a new metaphysical framework. What we see, and how we perceive it, is formed by the epistemology that has formed us. Hence, if that epistemology is destructive and neglects nature, it needs to be reformulated. Although Arne Næss is hardly mentioned in his three volumes on environmental

46 Haraway 2016.

47 Cf. Boysen and Rasmussen 2023.

philosophy, I see a clear affinity to Næss' critical and normative agenda, viz. to identify the illusions that make humans exploit nature and trigger the climate crisis.⁴⁸ In *Cosmologies*, Vetlesen presents alternative frameworks for epistemology, ontology, and ethics that politically may liberate us from climate denial and denial of nature. In accordance with Næss, he sees the hyper-technological algorithm-based Capitalism as a threat to humanity as well as to the planet. Modern human beings are imprisoned by this technological *Gestell*. A return to its original belonging in and with nature, would therefore imply a rediscovery and liberation of more authentic ways of *being human*.

Suggesting a deeper continuity in the philosophy of nature from Steffens via Næss to Vetlesen does not imply that there are no significant differences. However, I would not hesitate to identify a key tenor in Norwegian philosophy here, insisting on a bodily and *material* foundation of spirit in a non-dualist ontology. This ontology is relational and points towards an ethics of care for nature, both human and non-human. Moreover, it is compatible with a Spinozian intuition of love as the concrete expression of ethics, in relation to stones and matter, to animals, to humans, and to the divine. According to all three philosophers, the appeal to values should be embedded in nature, acknowledging its intrinsic meaning prior to human projections. The process of responsabilization thus runs parallel to a process of liberation from illusions and the dominance of self-interest. Thereby, spirit is not opposed to matter, or to nature for that sake; it represents a sacred presence within the material world, and within nature – as Spinoza would express it: *Deus sive natura*. Within this strand of nature philosophy, uncovering spirit in nature could be seen as a path towards political and spiritual liberation. Today, this key tenor in Steffens' philosophy matters more than ever, due to the ongoing 'event' of the Anthropocene.

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48 There is an interesting discussion of Næss' eco-philosophy in Vetlesen 2017.

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