CHAPTER FOURTEEN

REASON AND FEELING IN HANS JONAS’S EXISTENTIAL BIOLOGY, ARNE NAESS’S DEEP ECOLOGY, AND SPINOZA’S ETHICS

Martin D. Yaffe

People put their effort into saying what sort of thing the soul is, while they determine nothing further about the body that receives it, just as though, in the manner of the Pythagorean myths, any random soul were to be clothed in any random body. For while each body seems to have its own proper look and form, they talk as if one were to say that carpentry is transmigrated into flutes; but the art has to use tools and the soul has to use the body.¹

I

My task is to elucidate Hans Jonas’s existential biology² as it bears on contemporary environmental ethics and to compare it in passing with Arne Naess’s “Deep Ecology.”³ This daunting task becomes somewhat manageable, or at least more neatly focused, in that both Jonas and Naess find corroboration for their views in Benedict Spinoza’s Ethics Demonstrated in a Geometrical Order (1677).⁴ As is well known, a hallmark

of Spinoza’s *Ethics* is its claim to provide a—or the—clear and distinct account of God and/or nature.

I begin with a few remarks about the philosophical merits and pitfalls of environmental ethics, with a view to Jonas’s (and Naess’s) work. Pursuant to these remarks, I examine how Jonas and Naess each appeal to Spinoza for support. Both see in Spinoza something of what each first came to see independently of Spinoza. For that reason, I limit myself, by and large, to looking at Spinoza as mapped onto terrain staked out beforehand by each of them, respectively. Eventually, I conclude by pointing out the pervasive difficulty that Jonas, as well as Naess, shares with Spinoza—namely, the problematic relation between “reason” and “feeling” (the terms I mention in my title).

II

Environmental ethics is, by its own lights, an “applied” discipline. It “applies” philosophy to the pressing ecological tasks of the day. It underwrites ecologists’ front-line work—the biological preservation of species whose habitats are threatened by the environmentally deleterious side-effects of modern technology—by clarifying, justifying and encouraging that work before the public, especially the thoughtful public. Environmental ethics is the philosophical handmaid of scientific ecology.

Employing philosophy in the service of scientific ecology, however, is something like employing it in the service of revealed theology. It risks downsizing philosophical inquiry into mere apologetics. The philosopher’s role is in danger of shrinking into that of erudite publicist, sophisticated talking head, technically articulate ideologue, or well-briefed advocate intent on formulating an academically passable case for this or that environmental policy. Such practices may be useful for what they are. But Jonas, for one, would call their practitioners (if that is all they are) “camp follower[s]” rather than philosophers properly speaking. They are not independent explorers, open to the
