New Left, New Age, New Paradigm?
Roy Bhaskar’s From East to West

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We are too apt to forget the frailty of both our science and our philosophy. There can be no certainty that they will survive and flourish; or, if they do, that they will benefit mankind. Civilisation is, like man himself, perhaps nothing more than a temporary rupture in the normal order of things. It is thus also part of the job of the philosopher to show the limits of science. And, in this broader sense, to seek to ensure that the Owl of Minerva takes flight before the final falling of the dusk.—Roy Bhaskar, 1975: 10.

The drive to transcendence in the sense of “the sublating synthesis that overcomes dualism” (48)—or the taking of “the middle path” between two extremes that is recommended, as the path of virtue, by Buddha and “most Greeks” (88)—has been evident in all Roy Bhaskar’s powerful work (Hartwig & Sharp, 1999). Indeed, Bhaskar now describes his life-task as “to reconcile and re-synthesise the opposites” (148).

From East to West [FEW] (Bhaskar, 2000a)1 accordingly attempts to initiate “a new synthesis” of East and West, New Age and New Left—ultimately of religion and science. Its author has a personal background in all four terms of the synthesis: roughly, East (as well as West) by parentage, West by domicile, New Left by reason, New Age by heart.2 This may partly account for the fact that, of all Bhaskar’s books, FEW is by far the most personal; it can be heard as a cry of pain (Ollman, 2000), and of joy, an expression of release from suffering, of recuperation of the future. It is also his most difficult book, presupposing not only deep understanding of his previous work but also more than passing familiarity with other elements of the synthesis; but holding out promise of rich insights for those who persevere. Bhaskar emerges from it, more than ever, as the philosopher of alienation (now viewed ultimately as self-separation from God), whose system describes the overcoming of diremption in the polyadic process whereby the absolute comes to self-realisation in and through the relative world of human and other being. He thereby aspires “to produce for everyone now a total philosophy for the whole of their (i.e. everyone’s) being” (74).
Far more than the usual, I do not claim to have “fully understood” this book. For that reason, among others, I do not attempt, in what follows, a rounded assessment, focussing instead on delineating possible problem areas in relation to the earlier system and for critical realism as an emancipatory/transformative movement. This is my dharma.

UNDERSTANDING FROM EAST TO WEST

The main argument is deceptively simple. It falls into three parts, corresponding to the three-part schema of the Schillerian dialectic of Judaeo-Christian, neo-Platonic and Marxist provenance: an original state of non-alienation and oneness (“the world of enchantment, in which man is at home and one with nature” (Bhaskar, 1986: 97)), followed by a fall (38, n. 23) into sin or class society, then redemption or “re-enchantment” via the “immanentisation of heaven on earth” (16)—so that, as in Bhaskar’s book, so in the human drama, “[t]here is completion (wholeness) at the beginning and at the end” (74).

It is important to note, however, that in Bhaskar’s hands, the Schillerian schema has been diffracted to allow for a possible infinity of such dramas in other worlds throughout a limitless “tensed, divergent and emergent processual multi-componential, multi-perspectival pluriverse” (1993: 83, n. 4). Bhaskar regards “straightforward dialectics of a Schillerian type, presupposing a unitary origin prior to the moment of diremption and self-alienation” (1993: 402, emphasis added), as transcendently refuted by the phenomenon of primary polyadization, i.e. the process whereby the human infant arrives at a complex, differentiated consciousness of self and world (Roberts, 2001). Thus for Bhaskar ontogeny (qua primary polyadization in particular) recapitulates phylogeny, recapitulates cosmogony, and “every genuine human transformative act is in heterocosmic affinity with God’s creation of the universe” (55).

The Bhaskarian version of the Schillerian schema still falls into three parts, however. First, a thesis about human nature. Human beings as such are free, for though denizens of the mode of relative or dependent (ephemeral) being, they are essentially God, or absolute being. The unbounded source and loving boundary of all being, God is both the absolute ground of pure dispositionality or causal power (spirit, God-stuff), hence the fount of all possibilities, and the ultimate but ingredient categorial structure or alethic truth of the pluriverse. The “inner nature” or soul of the human being is concretely singularised spirit (“the God within”), while in their “outer nature” they partake of Totality (“the God without”) (40f.).

Both notions come together in the concept of the human’s essential Self or dharma: “man’s intrinsic nature or dharma is to realise God both . . . within and without” (44), i.e. both in their inner lives and in outer love and solidarity with all other humans and beings. This means that they are both essentially one or united as a species and with the rest of the pluriverse; essentially creative;
oriented to being, not having or “attachment”; enlightened, not ignorant; disposed to engage in “spontaneous right action”; and, above all, free.

The essential Self is moreover dynamic and expanding, not fixed. It manifests itself as an inner urge or developmental tendency to realise itself—a powerful “tendency e*” which eventually must realise itself through embodiment over a succession of lives (37, n. 22; 45). This occurs in two dimensions or orientations: “as an inner dialectic of self→Self-realisation, in the individual Self or soul; and as an outer dialectic, oriented to universal Self-realisation, of self→Self (Totality)-realisation”, in which the old Vedic formula “I am the Totality” comes to be seen to be true, together with its converse (44). Both dialectics—constituting “life as a dialectical learning process” in the manner of the Hegelian phenomenology—are powered by absence in the guise of incompleteness, which absence then “resolves” in the guise of our creativity, which is ultimately that of “the dynamic being of the most pure non-being” (129) itself.

Secondly, human beings are however everywhere actually unfree, or enslaved. Their essential nature, inner and outer, has been overlain and occluded by self-made “heteronomous orders of determination” (151). These are basically emergent layers of objectified and lived ideological illusion (maya), the compounded and compounding result of past category mistakes (avidya), resulting from the exercise of free will (37). The two most momentous of these mistakes are, first, the absenting of ontology. This results above all from the “epistemic fallacy”, and is enshrined in the doctrine of actualism. Second, and more fundamental, the absenting of the concept of absence itself, and therefore of God and the true nature of humans and their “social-natural Totality” (33). This finds expression in the doctrine of “ontological monovalence”, which gives a purely positive (instead of polyvalent) account of being and has dominated Western philosophy from the time of Parmenides (7).

Humanity’s alienation is thus ultimately underpinned by error, which is, therefore, evil; i.e., evil is error and its cumulative consequences. These constitute a distinct mode of false (illusory) relative being, which Bhaskar refers to variously as society’s “irrealist categorial structure”, “the web of illusion or maya”, “structural sin”, and, above all, the “demi-real” (“irrealist” in character . . . , [and] demi-real in truth value i.e. false), but real in causal aeficacy (6, n. 5)). This web of illusion is a Kafkaesque “anti-nomic dilemmatic interlocking . . . ensemble, from which, once entered, there is scant chance of escape” (9). For the demi-real deludes us both into believing that we already are completely free, and into forgetting that we are essentially free (ix). Evil is thus “an emergent power in its own right” (89), and its existence qualifies the fundamental harmoniousness of the stratified and differentiated pluriversal whole.

Evil is, however, “entirely parasitic” upon alethic reality (the true and the good), existing only as “a dislocation of good, a warp” (88), in virtue of lack of Self- and God-realisation. Here Bhaskar draws on the “golden nugget” in the Hegelian system—the “dialectics of co-presence”—which include “the co-presence of
modes of absolute, relative and demi-real being” (55). Society’s erroneous and internally contradictory categorial structure is thereby seen to be dependent on “a real deeper realist one” which it, on the one hand, functions to occlude, and, on the other, presupposes and tacitly acknowledges. It is therefore autosubversive and ultimately transitory.

Therefore, thirdly, to regain his natural creativity, enlightenment, spontaneously right action and freedom, all man has to do is shad these illusions, let go of karma (the presence of the past), thereby literally “en-lightening” himself (134). “To change the world, man only has to realize himself” (152).

This will, however, require many dialectics (or techniques) of de-alienation or “disemergence”, which fall into two basic kinds (first prescribed by Krishna). First, “vertical” dialectics of “inaction” (self→Self-realisation). These comprise dialectics of access to Self/God (via prayer and meditation); of purification or shedding of structural sin; of embodiment, to infuse the spiritual results of ontological access and shedding into the totality of our being; and of “witnessing-in-activity”. Second, “horizontal” dialectics of action (self→Self (Totality)-realisation). A more Western emphasis, crucially comprising the dialectic of desire to freedom as elaborated in Dialectic: the Pulse of Freedom (Bhaskar, 1993), this is a dialectic of Self-determination. Its drive is towards a society in which “the free development of each is a condition of the free development of all” (4), which entails the abolition of “generalised master-slave-type relations” in their entirety.

To change the world, man only has to realize himself

The dialectic of desire to freedom is specific to demi-reality. “[D]esire as such is caused by avidya or ignorance of the true nature of man” (149), and it is intrinsically repetitive (a “bad infinite”), hence unsatisfiable, such that (after ignorance) “the desire for desire [is] the cause of all suffering” (18). Desire is the normatively positive form of “attachment” (whose negative form is fear or aversion (24, n. 4; 65)). It leads, among other things, to mechanistic materialism and the hegemony of instrumental rationality over higher forms of reason and insight.

What desire (begotten by ignorance and alienation) has done, however, it must (as a form of absence) help undo. The twin motors of the dialectic of desire to freedom—“the chief mechanism of ... social liberation”—are, firstly, desire to absent constraints on essential human flourishing, and, secondly, “the inexorable logic of dialectical universalisability”, entailing “commitment to end the suffering of all dialectically similar [i.e. human] beings” (149, emphasis added). The logic of universalisability must now, in FEW, be “further generalised” to a commitment “to end the suffering of all beings as such, in virtue of their dialectical unity as beings, i.e. to truly universal eudaimonia”. Moreover, powerfully assisted by the dialectics of inaction, the dialectic of desire to freedom must eventually issue in a state of freedom from desire:

In a eudaimonistic society there would still be intentionality, but not desire or craving as such, with its self-undermining and repetitive character; intentionality would manifest itself in the free realisation of aims, goals and projects. (149)
Bhaskar’s vision of freedom is thus no merely “negative freedom from constraints on... desires, but the positive account of freedom as self-government by reason or Mind (Nous) which is associated with rationalism and idealism” (Daly, 2000: 13). Together, the dialectics of freedom (of action and inaction) accomplish the stabilisation of the absolute in the relative, replacing the empirical ego with the transcendental Self in Self-consciousness—in other words, with the unity of theory and practice in practice, or absolute reason. Ultimately they lead, in co-operation with “Godliness everywhere”, to universal Self-realisation of all beings in unity (or cosmic) consciousness and “unity existence”, as “the created world becomes... the material embodiment of God” (44). In unity existence, or “universal eudaimonia”, the process of disemergence from ideological and social structures of illusion and constraint has been completed, and “concretely singularised Self-centered subjects flourish in selfless solidarity with each and all” (4).

The ultimate driving force of these dialectics is unconditional love of our essential Selves and those of every other being and God—“conditional love just is (or implies) attachment” (24, n. 4)—, and love is the essence of liberated humanity. “The goal of life is not to escape from the world [the path of the recluse] but to be in it [the middle way] without attachment or aversion [the path of the householder]” in unconditional love, alienation of self from Self overcome (89, emphasis added). The goal of life, in other words, is to realise our divinity, and alethic truth is an (endlessly recapitulated) dynamic circle (129). In their sequence of rebirths and redeaths, our souls are “essentially on a journey to the concrete universal” (92). In the course of their odyssey, they come to appreciate that “Hegel was very wise to see that ‘I’ indexes both someone unique, someone in particular and everyone and anyone at all” (102), and at the end of it they “return, in self-consciousness,... after the experience of... the relative (including demi-real) realm of being, to [their] basic sel[ves] as spirit” (132). Figure 1 depicts the basic schema.

Figure 1. The diffracted or polyadic Schillerian dialectic

Today humanity stands on a precipice. “Dominant Western accounts of society and knowledge, and more especially the demi-real... categorial structures which inform them, threaten the survival of... the planet” (45). Eudaimonia is thus “a condition of planetary survival” (18). Western civilisation is in decline, and Western thought, with its characteristic emphases on “action and presence”, is in crisis. This has, however, mercifully produced four progressive turns in thought.
over the last few centuries: reflexive (self-referential); processual (red); ontological (realist); and holistic (green). Together with an input from East, with its characteristic emphases on “absence and inaction”, these have made the new philosophical synthesis—“the philosophy of universal self-realisation”—possible. But the Owl of Minerva, as ever, is taking flight only at dusk, and this time it could well be “the final falling of the dusk”, though eudaimonia is “dimly prefigured” in the present and we are entering “the Age of Aquarius” (of purification and shedding).

However, because our souls are immortal and develop, progressing in a dialectical learning process at the level both of the individual and of the species, universal Self- and God-realisation must inevitably win out sooner or later—if not on planet earth, then somewhere else in the pluriverse (45). The whole thrust of the book, as Hostettler and Norrie (2000) have suggested, is to overcome the gap between the historically real and the ethically ideal, the immanent and the transcendent, by establishing an objective ethics in which the ideal is “necessarily possible”.

NEW LEFT, NEW AGE, NEW PARADIGM?

I take it that by “New Left” (also referred to as “radical libertarian Western thought”), Bhaskar basically means that tradition as apprehended in his own system of dialectical critical realism (DCR), culminating in Dialectic (1993) and Plato Etc. (1994). By the mid-nineties, he had taken that system, apart from considerable possible fleshing out within it, about as far as it could be taken by philosophical argument in the absence of “a realist theory of God” (Straathof, 2000). He had become, on his own account, “as radical and revolutionary as it is possible to get in Western philosophical terms, until materialism is transcended” (17, 148).

What he basically does in the new book is suffuse the DCR ontology (New Left, West) with multiple dimensions of spirituality derived from New Age and East (the great world religions, in particular Vedic Hinduism and Buddhism)—with God as the ultimate dimension. If, as a rule of thumb, you substitute “spirit” or “pure dispositionality” for “causal power” in the old system, and view spirit as also constituting the “ultimate categorial structure” of the world, you will not go far wrong in understanding the new. Like his Vedic and Theosophical forebears, Bhaskar “see[s] consciousness everywhere” in varying degrees (91; 43, n. 31 & 32)—like being generally, he tells us, consciousness “is a continuum and [in demi-reality] we normally experience only its most gross or elementary aspects. In our first, most essential reality we are immortal and at one with God”, who is also consciousness (as well as beyond it) (76).

However, you will need to bear in mind that the old ontology has been explicitly “expanded” along a number of dimensions. (I emphasize “explicitly” because,
with the benefit of retrospective illumination, it is easy to see that much of the apparently new was previously implicit. At the level of the cosmic, the ontology has been expanded to encompass the notion of “an infinite and unbounded extension (plurality) of universes” (50); at the level of the physical, to encompass “non-physical planes of being [with] . . . subtler than physical energies” (142, n. 1)—the “astral” world of discarnate souls and so on; and at the level of the social cube, especially plane (d) (individual agency), to include powers of access to, and causal impact by, spheres of existence transcending the physical. In the dialectics of Self-realisation, we thus necessarily “re-enchant the world”, leaving behind the “crude materialism” of Western thought, and the unhappy consciousness of irrealism “that its time was past and its place somewhere else—in Athens, in Plato’s day” (Bhaskar 1994: 181).

Bhaskar dubs the resulting system “transcendental dialectical critical realism” (TDCR), with the otherwise redundant “transcendental” signifying “further transcendental radicalisation” (ix, emphasis added). How does it stand in relation to (DCR)? Bhaskar refers to TDCR for the most part as a development of (or within) DCR, albeit “a very radical one” (ix), but at one point (8) allows that it may be viewed as a development beyond DCR (“which however presupposes it”). Now, Bhaskar is very explicit that “[n]othing in this book involves the rejection of any existing (dialectical) critical realist position (ix). So we have to interpret “development beyond” as “preservative sublation (or transcendence) of” DCR, whereas “development of” refers to the mere extension or elaboration of DCR; the former, but not the latter, could allow the importation of premises (providing they were not incompatible with the old). Bhaskar also claims that TDCR is both a) “only one possible development” of DCR (ix, emphasis added) and b) a necessary development of it (21). Again, the apparent contradiction is readily resolvable in theory by the consideration that, in keeping with the whole open ontology, there are a number of possible developments of DCR, but that, once entrained, the developmental logic of TDCR is necessary.

While Bhaskar’s claim is thus that TDCR is developmentally consistent with DCR, it has seemed to some New Left critical realists, especially on a first reading, inconsistent on a range of counts. Before settling into that conclusion, it is worth pondering what is meant by “developmental consistency” and recalling Bhaskar’s critique, in Dialectic, of analytical reason (the ultimate source, in philosophy, of “structural sin”). At the outset of Dialectic, Bhaskar likens developmental consistency to the life-cycle development of natural organisms—an acorn growing into an oak, or a tadpole into a frog. Later, when considering the process of freedom in human society, he elaborates in an eloquent and instructive passage:

The point about developmental, directional or dialectical consistency is that no general formula for it can be given. It is necessarily intrinsic to the process concerned. Science seeks to resolve analytical inconsistencies but their very resolution depends upon the suspension of the axiom of
(analytical) consistency; and an open totality will always convey the possibility of such inconsistencies. Think of it like this: at the end of the day, the cherry must blossom. (Once this book is finished, it must hang together.) But the cherry will perish. (Other books will be written.) This is existential contradiction expressed in the form of the finitude of any concrete singular. To be developmentally consistent is to know when to be inconsistent, when to grow, when to mature, when to apply a dialectical comment on dialectical comments, when to stop and when to wait until the agents concerned have made up their own minds into what their freedom consists. Dialectical processual consistency recognizes the authenticity of every concretely singular agent’s own narrative or story no less than the rights of her being. (170)

It might be thought that, because the last sentence or so has to do with the historical process of freedom, it has little bearing on the developmental consistency of a philosophical system. However, the two are supposed to come together, ultimately, in the Bhaskarian system; like Hegel’s, it attempts to grasp the historical process in thought, and develops in relation to its Umwelt, deploying to that end “a new, genuinely multi-dimensional and dynamic logic” (Bhaskar, 1993: 63) heralded by Marx. We will be able to get a fuller purchase on the developmental consistency of TDCR to the extent that we can see it in historical retrospect. Meanwhile, we had better take on board that the demonstration of analytical inconsistencies with DCR won’t show that TDCR is dialectically or developmentally inconsistent, or even necessarily flawed. (Analytical logic “is only, but is, a vital moment in the process of thought” (ibid.: 191)). As in the case of the struggle for freedom, the assessment is ultimately a matter of practical wisdom—in the course of the struggle, “at the end of the day”.

Sticking with the tadpole—still, unfortunately, a good metaphor for (D)CR at the present stage of history—the question is, Does it grow into a frog, or something quite other? Or rather, since we do not know in advance precisely what the metaphorical tadpole will become—we only have some “pointers”—in-a-process-in-an-Umwelt—, does it grow into something that is consistent with its “field of potential” (Bhaskar 1975: 180)? Viewed in this light, it will be seen that there can be no readily demonstrable “fact of the matter” of TDCR’s developmental consistency. To the non-religious the tadpole will have sprouted wings and feathers and soared into “the misty heights” (indeed into other worlds)—but is this developmentally inconsistent, and at what stage of the developmental process did it occur? Bhaskar has doubtless always agreed with William Blake (1997 [1790]: 183), whose thought has deep affinities with his own, that “[n]o bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings”. My own necessarily provisional view, from the perspective of religious agnosticism and New Left, is that there is prima facie evidence for inconsistency in a number of areas, such that we are dealing with neither frog nor (f)owl, so to speak; further, that it is a “historical task” of critical realists to recuperate and develop the less speculative regions of Bhaskar’s philosophy and its more historically materialist vistas concerning matters terrestrial (cf. Hostettler and Norrie, 2000).
However, if Bhaskar’s new, explicitly religious, premises are granted, viz., that God exists and has the attributes ascribed by Bhaskar, it is perhaps equally valid to view TDCR as a preservative sublation of DCR, within which erstwhile positions which might seem to contradict the new are retained as “negative presences” (cf. Bhaskar, 1993: 30–33). A fundamental trajectory of Bhaskar’s thought arguably always has been to use the extraordinary achievements of science to show just how limited, though precious, science—understood non-positivistically—really is, thus paving the way for a synthesis of Enlightenment and Romance,10 science and religion, in which a religious worldview overreaches and embraces an emancipatory scientific outlook (cf. Daly, 2000).

Should we grant Bhaskar his religious premises? The position adopted here is that, as Porpora (2000) has urged, given that there is epistemological stalemate concerning God’s existence, it is rational to trust either one’s experience of God, or one’s lack of such experience. This view seems implicit in Bhaskar’s own approach. Though he now regards God as “a necessary part . . . of the shape of being” (21), he wisely makes no explicit attempt to prove, in the sense of deduce, the reality of God (though he does attempt a deduction of reincarnation and the immortality of the soul). He simply states that “[t]he proof of God’s existence is experiential and practical” (43), and, with the aid of clairvoyance,11 presents an archaeology of the development of this position in a “novella” (FEW, Part II) that recounts the dialectical progression of the Bhaskarian soul across fifteen Lives on its journey to enlightenment. Clearly, on this showing, those who lack the requisite experience cannot rationally accept God’s existence, and must at the very least remain agnostic. (Of course, they still have to assess whether the new premises are compatible with (D)CR). However, Bhaskar naturally hopes to persuade the non-religious to his position. While he cannot give them experience of God, he can and does offer practical evidence, together with an argument that knowledge itself is ultimately “a question of practical wisdom or phronesis”, and an ascending/descending dialectic of the divine (cf. Bhaskar, 1993: 17).

This whole question of whether, or to what extent, TDCR is a new system rather than a developing one, partly explains the third term in my title: “New Paradigm”. But another reason why it is there is that New Age nowadays sees itself as transmuting into, or articulating, a New Paradigm. Interestingly, the articulation is often in pretty Bhaskarian (that is, Bhaskarian New Left) terms. However, that could just as well be put the other way around: Bhaskar’s New Left articulations are partly in New Age/New Paradigm terms.

For undoubtedly both Bhaskarian New Left and New Age are articulating developments elsewhere, particularly in the life sciences and green movement, and in quantum physics (influences they both acknowledge), but above all, I think, in the spheres of capitalist production and consumption—the “globalisation” of capital and the “spiritualization” of its circuits (including material production itself), the commodification of culture and the culturalization of the commodity, and the “reflexivization” and “mediatization” of social life. (A new Bhaskarian
metaphor, derived from New Age, reflects more than a little of this when it makes the whole pluriverse a four dimensional computer screen in which we can move our consciousnesses around like a “cursor” (54)).

Thus both New Left and New Age stress, among other things, first (1M in DCR terms), the openness and plurality of the world, and the primacy of the possible over the actual. Second (2E), the crucial role of (non-logical) creativity, intuition or transcendence in the movement, within science, from one logical frame of reference to another, which is then generalized to human activity as such (4D). Third (3L), the relationality, connectivity, and processuality of the world—together with the holistic and “quantised” conception of causality necessary to apprehend them in thought. Fourth (3L, 4D), our alienation from the greater whole of which we are a part, and our potential to overcome it. At a more practical level, there seems to be broad agreement that the most pressing problems besetting the species are poverty/social inequality, and ecological crisis, and that these cannot be solved within the framework of the greed and growth logic of capitalism.12

From the point of view of New Left, and with some necessary qualification—so I shall suggest—to the second, these can only be regarded as positive, progressive developments within New Age; indeed, Bhaskar himself has sourced them to considerable extent, within his system, to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition. In terms of the prospects for synthesis, this is just as well, for New Left has traditionally regarded New Age as at bottom a vulgar, and socially and politically regressive, ideology in Bhaskar’s own sense of that term (exemplified in his account of maya), the counterpart in the religious sphere of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism; indeed, nowadays the two come together in “post-secular” postmodernism and (only superficially paradoxically) in the “pre-modernist” values celebrated by New Age.13

On this view, simplifying, New Age is, in the first place, heavily commodified or marketised. That is, it accepts in practice both the ends of the market (the drive to greater material prosperity or, in TDCR terms, to “attachment”) and the market as means, supplying a mystical or occultist content/product. It is thus a user-pays religion for the middle classes, whose practitioners are often in effect fast-buck charlatans who offer a veritable supermarket of spiritual wares to the (often) distressed and gullible for an (often) hefty fee, even as they denounce “materialism”.14 For the occultist “draws the ultimate conclusion from the fetish-character of commodities” as “menacingly objectified labour assails him on all sides from demonically grimacing objects” and “the social quality” that animates them is “split off and misremembered as being-in-itself” (Adorno, 1974: 239). Secondly, and relatedly, it is profoundly individualist, idealist and voluntarist in its approach to understanding and changing the world, downplaying structure and narcissistically deifying the self of consumer capitalism. Finally, it is anti-Enlightenment and anti-science, at the limit a New Paganism which accords primacy to mysticism and the occult, constituting its own demi-real zone of
obscurantism and “semi-erudition”, informed by “the metaphysics of dunces” (ibid.: 241). Anthony Powell (1951f.), in his great novel registering the shift to the full marketisation of power relations in English society, persuasively suggests that the fetishisation of the occult is the other side of the coin of the fetishisation of naked power under the rule of the market. To the extent that science is necessary for emancipation, New Age is therefore anti-emancipatory.

While there is certainly some overlap (notably, New Paradigm, while critical of the market in theory, is marketised in practice), this account is clearly at odds on most counts with New Age as New Paradigm. Let it be said, then, that from a New Left perspective there are currently both progressive and regressive strands within New Age, which are perhaps best viewed as dialectical counterparts. TDCR, as I have indicated, is fundamentally at one with the progressive strand. Implicit in what I have said, though, is that it perhaps also either shares, or lends credence to, key aspects of the regressive strand. Certainly, no distinction is drawn, in FEW, between the two strands, and occultist notions and practices are invariably mentioned approvingly, never with disapprobation. These include “esoteric wisdom and occult sciences and arcane arts, . . . especially numerology and astrology” (76); crystals; magic; and soothsaying. While some derive from Eastern religions, their random proliferation in the narrative section of the book, signalling “the re-enchantment of the world”, is a hallmark of commercialised New Age abacadabra. To that extent TDCR is arguably an unhappy consciousness, torn between science and the demi-real, introjecting the ideology of the masters and projecting a solution into another world, its chakras all at sea.

I turn now to a quite general canvassing of other problem areas and possible inconsistencies within TDCR.

UNHAPPY, OR DIALECTICALLY ENLIGHTENED, CONSCIOUSNESS?—OTHER ISSUES

The first relates to whether TDCR is only one of a number of possible developments of DCR. As we have seen, in FEW this is the position adopted in theory. In practice, however, TDCR is sometimes treated as the only possible development, in particular in that people who do not accept the new ontology in toto are said to destratify, deprocessualise and detotalise reality. Thus to be sceptical about God, transcendence, reincarnation, or the astral world is to be alienated or split (8, 10, et passim). This certainly follows on (DCR premises—as restated in FEW, these include “constellational realism (realism about everything)”, such that “[t]o exclude anything [from being] is to alienate it, dualistically split being and so initiate a chain of avidya-tina formation” (34)—but only if the beings invoked have been established as real.
Prior to *FEW*, Bhaskar took the view that “philosophy does not exist apart from the sciences and other social practices (and arguably vice versa)”. He established his philosophical ontology, indicating “the general categorial form” of the world, via “a dialectic of philosophy and science” (1993: 107–8), in which the fundamental role of philosophy was to “underlabour” for the sciences. The (D)CR system of concepts was vertically connected to the Real by a two-way process. First, via transcendental deduction from the (historically changing) nature of scientific and other human activity, in which the premises are empirical and the mode of reasoning fundamental to science itself. Second, via feedback into the system from the theoretical and substantive sciences. “[I]n the long run philosophy must be consistent with the findings of science” (1986: 13).

Bhaskar’s realism, that is to say, was also a materialism in pretty much the sense in which Raymond Williams defines “any serious materialism”—“as rest[ing] on a rejection of presumptive hypotheses of non-material . . . prime causes, and defin[ing] its own categories in terms of demonstrable physical investigations” (Williams, 1980: 103). Indeed, Bhaskar regarded all four forms of materialism subscribed to by Marx—ontological, epistemological, practical, and historical (“geo-historical” in Bhaskarese)—as “heuristically acceptable” (1994: 101).

In *FEW*, however, Bhaskar sometimes engages in ontological speculation which arguably can never in principle come into contradiction with the findings of science, and which appears to owe little or nothing to a philosophy/science dialectic. In this respect, and in its ontological idealism, it seems a departure from, rather than development of, the previous system, and will do little to convince critical realist atheists or agnostics who are also “serious materialists”—even where they acknowledge a spiritual dimension to social life and a sense of totality, for they will see these as grounded in developing society-in-nature. Indeed, in an important recent book relating critical realist to Marxist social theory, Creaven (2000) has argued that the philosophical ontology of the previous system—critical realism (“depth realism”)—is in fact a form of ontological materialism.

While there is no denying Bhaskar’s previous espousal of ontological materialism, it would seem mistaken to equate such a position with ontological realism, as though the former exhausted the latter. Further, I would suggest that there is no necessary incompatibility between Bhaskar’s new-found ontological idealism, on the one hand, and, on the other, (1) epistemological materialism (asserting “the existential intransitivity and transfactual efficacy . . . of the objects of scientific thought” i.e. transcendental realism); (2) practical materialism (asserting “the constitutive role of human transformative agency in the production, reproduction and transformation of social forms”); and (3) historical materialism (engaged in “a research programme nucleated by the core idea of the causal primacy of men’s and women’s mode of production and reproduction of their natural (physical) being” in the development of their four-planar-species-being. (These definitions are from Bhaskar, 1994: 101).
In his 1994 (101), Bhaskar defines ontological materialism (ibid) as the doctrine which “asserts the unilateral dependence of social upon biological (and thence physical) being and the emergence of the former from the latter”. Here “physical” carries the connotation of exclusive materiality—at bottom reality is “matter”. Ontological idealism (of the emergentist or stratified kind advocated in FEW) in my view goes along with the same definition but holds that the “physical” is ultimately “ideal”. Thus we have emergentist materialist realism and emergentist idealist realism. As Bhaskar has always insisted, epistemological or transcendental realism does not and cannot adjudicate between the two. Nor can science adjudicate—either would seem to be heuristically acceptable from a scientific point of view, even if it could “reach” ultimate reality and determine whether it is “material” or “ideal”, science could never know that it had “arrived” (Bhaskar, 1975: 182). For these reasons, on fundamental ontological issues, it seems best that critical realists speak of the “real” rather than the “ideal” or the “material”, especially since realists of whatever ilk are committed to non-dualism.

Of course, Bhaskar hopes to persuade the non-religious to his own view concerning the ultimate nature of the real. The essence of his (fledgling) synthesis of science and religion is an attempt to show that science is centrally concerned with God in both its transitive and intransitive dimensions, in that God is both ontologically immanent (the God within) and transcendent (not exhausted by human and other beings) (the God without). In the dialectic of scientific discovery, humans transcend their existing level of knowledge by deploying their divine creativity to delve deeper into the ontologically transcendent, thereby participating in the process whereby “[t]he God inside and outside are ultimately to be unified” (41).

The groundwork for such a view had been laid in the earlier (D)CR system of concepts, in which “the four levels of causality—1M transfactuality, 2E spatio-temporal process, 3L holistic causality and 4D intentional agency” are seen to be thoroughly “permeat[ed] ... with negativity” (1993: 304). When an immanent/transcendent creator is now, in FEW, explicitly brought into the picture, the case for synthesis is ipso facto virtually complete. Scientists, like other people, are essentially God, their creativity is God’s creativity and their object of study is (ultimately) God; “the basic structure of both man and the world . . . is God” (ix). To that extent, one could say that science is essentially religious. But one could then equally say that religion is essentially scientific. That is, if one accepts the reality of God, there is no reason why the argument for “the possibility of naturalism” (Bhaskar, 1979) should not be regarded as embracing theology.

The object of both science and theology is then ontologically immanent and transcendent. The logic of discovery is fundamentally the same—from manifest phenomena to provision of a causal account. And the epistemological dialectic of both—indeed, the learning process of human life in general—is driven by absence which is then repaired by absence qua human creativity (which is “a
form of (normatively positive) absence, of becoming *ex nihilo*) (57). While their procedures will reflect differences in their subject matter, that is a condition of any science. A key “limit” to naturalism will of course be theology’s inability to ground the reality of the mechanisms it postulates by systematic experimentation, whether directly or indirectly, but the same goes for many other widely accepted ways of knowing. Likewise, in some of its moments theology (or theological metaphysics—as when Bhaskar elaborates the various possible orders of transcendent being (49–50)), will be purely speculative, but then the same holds, I understand, for some reaches of pure mathematics. Providing one doesn’t have to believe that they apprehend the Real, there can be no more objection to Bhaskar’s elaborations than to the elaboration of a theme in music.

So far, so good. Though it does not follow from DCR—additional premises are required—the synthesis does not seem incompatible with it. However, there are several sticking points for the wary.

The first concerns the crucial, complex dialectical argument against the doctrine of ontological monovalence in *Dialectic* (38–49). Bhaskar’s conclusion is that “[w]ithin the world as we know it, non-being is at least on a par with being. Outwith” it the negative has ontological primacy” (*ibid.*: 47). In elaborating the supporting argument, Bhaskar himself has seemed to some to slip into a version of the epistemic fallacy, confusing logical possibility (in the transitive) with real possibility (in the intransitive) dimension. This is probably mistaken, for the argument is at every stage transcendental or dialectical, a form of argument whose rationale is precisely to snap “the umbilical cord uniquely tying thoughts to things in traditional philosophy” (Bhaskar, 1986: 4). The steps in the argument, simplifying, are as follows. 1) We can refer to (referentially detach) absences (e.g. Pierre’s from the café), therefore they are real. 2) It is transcendentally impossible that the positive could dominate the negative ontologically or that there could be “a totally positive material object world”. First, the identification of positive existents is impossible without absenting, even if only of doubt. Second, absence is intrinsic to change (causality) and spatial differentiation. Third, in a packed world without voids there could be no change. On these three arguments negativity is “constitutively essential to positivity”, a condition of its possibility. Fourth, however, the converse does not follow, for, “employing a strategy of ‘dialectical detachment’ from our initial premises—positive existence”, it is easy to see, not only that there could have been a purely negative world, i.e. just nothing, a total void, but that if (as monovalent cosmological speculation has it) “there was a unique beginning to everything it could only be from nothing by an act of radical autogenesis”.18 3) Conclusion—as above. Unless dialectical or transcendent argument as such is in question, it would seem to follow.

Closely bound up with the question of absence is the issue of “creation *ex nihilo*”—the notion that we mimic God’s creation “in every genuine act”. (And, indeed, not just we humans: “everything has, contains, to some degree, a Buddha nature . . . [which] is a real (causally aef{icacious present) absence . . . It is a void,
vanishing point, moment of peace... a dynamic force... always the centre of a hive of activity, of creation *ex nihilo*” (124)).

On the face of it, human creation *ex nihilo* is in some tension with Bhaskar’s earlier delineation of the “transformational model of social activity”, including scientific activity—“the social production of knowledge by means of knowledge”. According to this model, “man never creates, but only changes, his knowledge” (or social forms) (1975: 148). Bhaskar is doubtless aware of the tension, commenting that

[...of course the ground for the creative discovery [in science] must be prepared. Thus it is typically from a [epistemically] transcendent cause on to an [ontologically] immanent ground, but creativity is essential to all human agency. Every human act is not only a transformation of what pre-existed it but also *de novo*, a novelty, a new beginning. In this sense it mirrors and mimics the creation. (49)]

Hostettler and Norrie (2000: 6) have argued that this confuses *de novo* creation (which is consistent with “material emergence”) with *ex nihilo* creation (which is not). If such a view is accepted, Bhaskar’s celebration of creativity and transcendence looks compromisingly indebted to the celebration and eternisation of creativity and the new within consumer capitalism (where *de novo* is likewise often mistaken for literally *ex nihilo* creation), and in New Age. A number of considerations tell against it.

In *Dialectic* (1993: 47), Hostettler and Norrie cautiously suggest, Bhaskar had rejected the concept of creation *ex nihilo*. However, the concept as such is nowhere explicitly deployed in that work. What *Dialectic* does explicitly reject (47n.), citing Lucretius and Hobbes, is that something could come from just nothing or begin from itself, and with the benefit of hindsight it would seem that Bhaskar is already in 1993 accepting that the creator or absolute, “the source of everything”, has always existed, such that nothing has indeed ever come from just nothing or from itself.19 This gets tricky, because in *FEW* Bhaskar explicitly states that, ontologically, God’s “creation must be *ex nihilo* . . . from *absence*, from . . . unboundedness” otherwise the absolute would be bounded “by something outside itself” (42). While unbounded, however, the absolute must also contain, bond, bound, so that we have the concept of “an open *absent totality*”—empty or a void *qua* absence, but “full and beyond emptiness and fullness (plenitude)” *qua* totality.20 As ingredient in relative being, moreover, plenitudinous absence itself necessarily has “a negative and positive *duality*”21 (3; cf. 5, 10, 55), both in terms of process and product (outcome), and normatively. Thus, as outcome, “emergence” is the “positive dual or correlative” of absence (10), and disemergence its negative dual. Considered normatively, however, disemergence (for example of structural sin) may be the positive dual and emergence the negative. (Elsewhere Bhaskar explains that “*duality*” is not to be confused with “*dualism*”. Whereas absolute being is characterized by *identity*, relative being is characterized by *union*, and demi-reality by *alienation*. Duality pertains to relative being, dualism to demi-reality (24, n. 4)).
I would suggest, therefore, that the concept of human “creation ex nihilo”, deployed in FEW, cannot with hermeneutic adequacy be taken to mean that we make something from just nothing; rather, that absence is centrally involved in processes of change and emergence. In bringing about something new, we both draw on absence qua pure dispositionality (that which absents and is also epistemologically transcendent), and transform its emergent forms (that which pre-existed the new or was ontologically immanent). At the end of the day, rightly or wrongly, for Bhaskar to cause just is the power to absent or change an existing state of affairs, to make a difference, and that power just is the source of all being (42, 53). That is to say, the holistic flux of being, for Bhaskar, as for Buddha, is the primal reality (129). It is important to appreciate, what the rejection of dualism entails, that there are not two kinds of stuff—“matter” and “idea” (or “positivity” and “negativity”). Rather, the material world is an aspect of the endless creative process of unfolding of the absolute, which is also ideal. In the “novella” section of FEW, the Bhaskarian philosophy is repeatedly referred to as a “monism”, albeit one that is of course “stratified” (86–8, 107).

In regard to the moment of conceptual emergence within the transitive (epistemic) process of science, Bhaskar’s argument seems to be that, because the sublating concept “can be neither induced nor deduced from the existing field of data”, therefore it “emerges ‘out of the blue’ . . . from nowhere, ex nihilo” (48–9). It is not clear to me, however, that our means of arriving at some notion of the unknown from the known are restricted to logic. Bhaskar obviously agrees, because he invokes a faculty of intuition (which presumably encompasses the psychic, clairvoyant, “third eye”, and other paranormal powers he appeals to)—and indeed, locates it in the “right brain” (17). While he argues the importance of “synthesising” this with the intellect (located in the “left brain”), it seems in considerable tension with his earlier (1986: 8–9) position on the philosophy of science, which rejected as anthropomorphic and therefore “irrealist (non-transcendental realist)” its “persistent romantic strain, nurturing an intuitional realism, incubating real objects identified wholly or partially in terms of human intuition, sensibility or affect”. Moreover, he sees intuition as giving us, under the right conditions in other contexts (prayer or meditation, listening to music, going for a walk), a direct line to God, such that, in moments of transcendental intuition, we achieve “superconsciousness”, overcoming alterity and heteronomy themselves, momentarily prefiguring our permanent consciousness of subject-object identity when we achieve liberation (moksha) from the cycle of reincarnation (46–47).

Without denying that a feeling of abolition of otherness is a common occurrence in moments of bliss, there must be some question whether Bhaskar does not here elevate intuition above reason, and may not fairly be charged with—not cognitive—but intuitional triumphalism (there is nothing that we may not accomplish with our expanding godlike powers). For myself, I find attempts to show that there is a cognitive dimension to our emotions, intuitions, etc., a far more promising approach to this whole issue (cf. Archer, 2000; Collier, 1999),
and am inclined to believe that the means whereby a path-breaking scientist (or artist) got across “the gap between thoughts” can always in principle be unpacked in retrospect by our quite normal (as distinct from paranormal) powers.

There must also be some question whether this does not lead in the direction of foundationalism—not of course epistemological, which is Bhaskar’s bête noire, but what might be called ontological foundationalism (cf. Hostettler and Norrie, 2000). In superconsciousness, or “transcendental identity consciousness”, we achieve a “point of retreat, or rather vantage point, free from all contradictions and splits, which [amounts] to union with the principle and source of all union”; and it is the driving impulse of the Bhaskarian soul, from Life Ten onwards, to firmly embed this vantage point “in his own relative being and at the same time [render it] universally accessible to all other beings” (134, emphasis added). Elsewhere, Bhaskar tries to forestall the objection of foundationalism by suggesting that such a vantage point is not a starting point, but an end point (93). This is indeed the case, on religious premises, in terms both of the final outcome of the Schillerian process and of moments of transcendence—we are conscious of the ultimate identity of that which is constellationally non-identical: the God within and the God without (46). However, the point may seem sophistic to those who have not had a religious experience, the bringing of foundationalism in (literally) by the back door. While it might be conceded, as Bhaskar maintains, that epistemology is constellationally contained within ontology, this does not annul the distinction, which the concept of vantage point threatens to collapse.

The other side of this same coin, however, is that emergentist ontological materialism seems to be put at risk: the ontological vantage point is all along within ourselves in the form of a beginningless and endless soul (qua spirit). It is not just that the new position is ontologically idealist, where it was previously materialist (at any rate “heuristically”). Rather, the difficulty is that it threatens both emergence (Collier, 2001) and transcendental realism: insofar as we are our souls, it would seem that the natural world could never have existed without us, such that we could be emergent from it; insofar as we are not our souls—that is, if souls are human fictions—Bhaskar is committing the “anthropic fallacy” which, together with its projection of “a new transcendental” (God or social rules), he had earlier deemed constitutive of “the irrealist ensemble” itself (Bhaskar, 1993: 233 et passim). Since the soul constellation ally contains the mind (Bhaskar, 2000b), and, qua a set of dispositions, both enters and departs bodies, this looks like mind/body dualism to boot, radically at odds with the (D)CR doctrine of “synchronic emergent powers materialism” (SEPM) (Bhaskar, 1979); while, according to SEPM, mind is not synchronically reducible to matter, diachronically it is an emergent power of it and cannot exist without a material substrate.

However, I believe there is a way of reconciling the new position with transcendental realism and emergence (but not, of course, with the “materialism” of SEPM), hence with non-dualism, and that hermeneutical adequacy in the
context of Bhaskar’s previous writings demands that we take it. The three fundamental TDCR categories, pertaining respectively to the zones of absolute, relative and demi-real being, are (1) spirit, or pure dispositionality and ultimate categorial structure; (2) soul, or the essential Self and (as its historical and social inflection) dharma; and (3) the empirical self/person, subject to the historical and social determinations of karma. (1) constellationally embraces and is ingredient in all things whatsoever, but does not exhaust them, providing only their “highest-order conditions of possibility” (41). (2) is (1) manifesting itself in (emergent) relative being, not just at the level of individual persons (or other beings) but in people-in-society-in-nature-in-the-pluriverse (all developing and expanding). This is spirit as “concretely singularised” (inner and outer). As regards people, it is our human nature, the essence of (3) our empirical selves, which is both transhistorical and translocal (we are one species) and historically and locally mediated and changing, constituted in and through our relations with other humans and beings.

Now, if we construe (1) in pre-TDCR terms as “causal power”, “potential”, “energy”, or “possibility”, rather than “spirit”, critical realists of whatever ilk can certainly accept that it is ingredient in (2) and (3) without saturating them, i.e. without their being synchronically reducible to it. Further, that the “ultimate” source of the pulse to human freedom, truth and morality must lie there too (as possibility), such that the “ideal” is indeed “necessarily possible” in some, at least inchoate, sense. In other words, Bhaskar’s idealism is stratified or emergentist, as FEW repeatedly insists (e.g. 86–88). It is true that Bhaskar’s frequent assertion that people are God seems to preclude such an interpretation. However, this may be viewed as “a manner of speaking”, for it is also frequently stated that people are “Godlike” or “essentially God”. I take this to mean that human (like other) being is an emergent form of God, who however has been absented, except as “a trace, condition and . . . potentiality”, from our consciousness and lives (41). How such forgetting is possible is a problem to which I return below.

If this is so, the oft heard view that the installation of an immortal soul within the subject issues in a radically de-historicised and de-socialised conception of human nature seems mistaken: the essential Self does not come from outside history, it is ingredient in it, and is profoundly mediated socially. As Bhaskar emphasizes, “[w]hat is normally understood by the self is an illicit abstraction from a much deeper and broader (and developing) totality” (62). We should note, however, that the new conception seems to displace the argument for the conceptualization of social structure as internally related social practices in the original formulation of the “transformational model of social activity”, which hinged on the view that social practices are the only possible source of the required continuant (1979: 52); in those days, Bhaskar was working from a position that denied “an afterlife” and asserted the “finitude of human existence” (1994: 141n.).

The essential Self is now made the foundation of Bhaskar’s ethical and political theory, where it issues in the doctrine of “dharma” or “spontaneous right
action”: the best, most proper action will be that flowing directly or intuitively from (a state of oneness with) our dharma—i.e. action which transcends alienation from our true natures; and in the doctrine of “non-judgementalism” (judgemental rationalism) which, instead of being “prescriptively and abstractly universalising”, acknowledges “the objectively grounded but specific and possibly unique rationality and morality flowing from . . . that dharma” (22–23).

This has been interpreted by some on the Bhaskar List24 as endorsing unlimited, completely self-defined individual freedom, but this seems mistaken. As already noted, Bhaskar’s conception both grounds our common humanity (as well as individual uniqueness) and is located within limits set by the evolving socio-political order. Powered by the “pulse of freedom”—which is (the developmental tendency of) our essential Selves-in-geo-history)—socio-political evolution has a “rational directionality” towards a participatory democracy which will certainly criticize and restrain activity that contravenes the principle of “the free development of each as a condition of the free development of all” (Hartwig, 2000).

The main problem with such a conception might appear to be, rather, that it sidelines the problem of evil, but this too seems questionable. Bhaskar’s fundamental ethical position may be encapsulated in three theses. First, every being has a conatus “to fulfi l itself and express its true nature, that is, to flourish and realise its full potential, ceteribus paribus” (37), and this, together with the conditions that promote it, is good. Second, privation of being (constraint on being, false being) is therefore evil. Third, the good has “ontological priority” over evil (Collier, 1999; Bhaskar, 2000b).

The primacy of the good, so construed, arguably finds support in the modern scientific account of the process of biological evolution, including hominisation. If we focus on a) intra-specific relations, there is widespread agreement that good (in the form of co-operation, reciprocity, etc.) does and must on the whole prevail over evil (in the form of aggression, etc.) within the communities of a successful species. However, b) inter-specific relations are on the whole amoral, i.e. the good reduces to a question of power (the eagle tears out the heart of the lamb, etc.)—a fact which Nietzschean nihilism has exploited to the full. Indeed, on the Nietzschean account, inter-specific relations provide the model for the future of intra-specific ones (Bull, 2000). Now the Bhaskarian position need not be viewed as the mere antinomial converse of this. It seems to be, rather, that the ontological primacy of the good is a condition of possibility for c) the overall process of biological evolution to occur at all. Notwithstanding constraint on being (indeed, partly in virtue of it), being becomes, loves and flourishes (cf. Brereton, 2000).

This of course provides no automatic guarantee of eudaimonia, let alone “unity existence”; rather, in refuting the Nietzschean account, it gives grounds for hope, thereby helping to motivate the dialectics of freedom.25 At the end of the day, Bhaskar (1994: 215) makes a call for “concrete utopianism, not pessimism, of the intellect”, optimism of the will.
It can be argued, however, that, while it is better in general to understand than to judge, the doctrine of non-judgementalism, conjoined to that of reincarnation, issues in a new (doubtless unintended) note of political quiescence which cuts across the “rational directionality” generated by the dialectics of freedom. Avoid judgementalism, Bhaskar tells us. “We have all been rich and poor, male and female, oppressor and oppressed, and so on” (102). Only if reincarnation is true; if it is not, Bhaskar’s unhappy consciousness makes unhappy consciousnesses of us all, in particular of the oppressed. For “we only get just what we choose, or rather what we get is just an aspect of what we do” (60). While Bhaskar had already in Dialectic (243) portrayed the dialectic of freedom as “radically extend[ing], generaliz[ing] and deepen[ing] the dialectics of mutual forgiveness in Hegel (which includes forgiveness about the persistence of master-slave relations”, the karmic notion that we deserve what we get seems altogether new, and incompatible with the prior emphasis on our “thrownness” into a world not of our own making and dominated by the past.

True, Bhaskar claims to solve in FEW “the world-historical problem of agency”, which in Plato Etc. he had tellingly defined as referring to the dislocated prima[cy] of structural conditioning over agents’ lives, to the massive presence of the past and the outside, to the bewitchment of our intelligence by the ideological intersect, to the fact that we cannot access the resources for emancipation, and to the existence of an actualist blanket suffocating hope. (107)

Previously, the dialectic of desire to freedom provided the main motor for the absenting of such constraints. As we have seen, FEW adds the dialectics of inaction, incorporating the notion of “shedding” or “letting go” (hence of “disemergence”) of structural constraints. It also reminds us that it is people who make history and that they themselves must change if slavery and structural sin are to be transcended, going so far as to say that “[a]ll change begins with self-change” (106). However, this need not, in my view, be taken as a denial that there are structural preconditions for social change to occur. Bhaskar speaks of “[a]cceptance of the present situation as ‘thus-formed’” as “a necessary condition” for changing it (102). Paranoia and fear, he seems to be saying, are the great destroyers. If only we (or the great majority of people) could overcome them and start acting as fully human, in love and trust, we could slough off structural sin like a snake sheds its skin. This is surely right—if only most of us did it. Nor, arguably, in the context of the dialectics of freedom and the social processes they embrace, is it a mere pious wish or pipedream. The real pipedream, Bhaskar with good reason maintains, is the illusion that things can go on as they are (Bhaskar, 2000c: 17).

It must be questioned, however, whether FEW does not play down the non-ideological dimension of the “material conditions” for change to occur. As a social ontologist, in particular, Bhaskar stands on the shoulders of Marx. As already noted, he once entertained the historical materialist primacy thesis, but...
has now evidently abandoned this position, having made a “reassessment of the role of ideas and intentional states in...geo-history” (68; cf. 25, n. 6). This does not amount to a (dialectical) contradiction within his system, however, for he has always held that the materialist primacy thesis cannot be demonstrated philosophically, only that material production is necessary to social life (Bhaskar, 1979: 53).

The non-ideological dimension of social life now disappears almost entirely in some formulations. For example, as for any ideologist of the free market, it is apparently the idea alone that forms the machine, not the labour (“[i]n thought ... forms the machine” (125)). Money is a “form of God-consciousness”, albeit the “lowest” one (140). And one “can change [the world] just by observing it” (125). Once upon a time social reality, though concept-dependent, was not exhausted by concepts; now it is, at least in some formulations: “[u]nderstanding and accepting each moment as in itself perfect makes it perfect” (not only that, but this is “a precondition for making the next moment even more perfect”, so that perfection itself is split) (100, emphasis added). Social structure, as highlighted in FEW, is, as we have seen, at bottom exclusively ideal: it is the irrealist categorial structure. And while the dialectic of freedom does embrace the more palpable (but little mentioned) realities of class, gender and state power, when it comes to the nitty gritty, the predominant social structures of maya must now, it seems, be analysed—in a way that would delight any methodological individualist—as “ingrained...dispositions” within the mind/soul of the individual agent (52).

In short, in the approach to understanding and changing social reality, idealism, voluntarism, and individualism, once eschewed, now seem to be espoused. However, the issues here, as elsewhere, are by no means entirely clear-cut. As suggested above, with the benefit of hindsight and systematic hermeneutics, much of the new may well be found to be incipient in the old. Further, while the historical materialism of the mature Marx might be at issue in FEW, “the humanist Marxist position, centering on an essentialist human ontology of alienation and de-alienation”, is decidedly not (Daly, 2000: 13). There seems little doubt, moreover, that Bhaskar intends that the reader “supply” the details of the social structural dialectics of the earlier system, such that one might be tempted to regard the emphasis on ideology and ideas in FEW as a valid (and therefore reversible) perspectival switch.

When all is said, however, there seems no going past Bhaskar’s own (repeated) announcement of a “reassessment of the role of ideas...in...geo-history”. This is explicitly said to be made possible by “a re-evaluation of the old dispute between idealism and materialism” (68–69). The passage strongly suggests that it is no mere perspectival shift Bhaskar intends, rather a sublation of materialism, historical as well as ontological, which is only partially preservative. (Bhaskar remains, in my view, an epistemological and a practical materialist.) Quite possibly Bhaskar regards this transformative negation as at least in part inscribed in the tendential directionality of capitalist demi-reality itself, whereby a
rising organic composition of nature threatens to tear the world itself apart with ecological contradictions. But a rising organic composition of ideas, dependent ultimately upon a rising organic composition of the transcendent (that is of creativity . . . ), makes possible the idea of a new organisation of the social world in keeping with . . . universal self-realisation and harmony. (69)

Nowhere is this inversion more evident, however, than in relation to the primordial problem of evil and suffering. Why, and how, did we fall into demi-reality? The “first act of referential detachment” (presumably symbolising the emergence of human consciousness and praxis) got us into relative being, detaching us from identity with absolute being, and constituting the dimensions of transitvity and intransitivity (24, n. 4). We then at some “primal” stage, using our Godly free will, started to forget (absent) the absolute, hence to make category mistakes, thereby setting off a dialectical chain of avidya leading to generalised ensnarement in structural sin and master-slave-type relations. (Structural sin is “free will objectified collectively and structurally” (51)). Why did we become afraid and start making mistakes, alienating ourselves from God? Bhaskar’s answer is that it is a transcendentally necessary condition of possibility for us “to become self-consciously aware of the true nature of ourselves” (150).26

This does not explain, however, how it was possible for emergent forms of God to forget who they are. This is the aporia in any theological or idealist account of the problem of evil. Science, however, given the openness and stratification of the world, and the reality of free will, can nowadays, within its changing limits, and notwithstanding its “cosmic incapacity” (Bhaskar, 1975: 182), give a perfectly adequate account of the origin of evil in theories of biological evolution and of the rise of hierarchical societies—an account which FEW, albeit attempting to initiate a synthesis of science and religion, contrives not to mention. Outwith the limits of science, it would seem, no-one has the answers.

Finally, it must be asked whether Bhaskar does not commit the performative contradiction of shutting his system down (for which he had previously criticised Hegel). While “totalities in general are and must be open”, and only the thought of totality must be (tautologically) complete (1993: 26), and while after our round of incarnations we return as spirit to the “open absent totality” which is God, Bhaskar’s conception of the good society on earth bears more than a passing resemblance to the Hegelian “end of history”. Certainly, with the transition to eudaimonia, the whole TDCR show will go on expanding in important senses on planet earth, but, as in Hegel’s “demi-actual”, nothing fundamentally new will occur, the future will be constellationally englobed within the present, there will be “glaceating repose” (1993: 73), desirelessness, nirvana.

There is, however, one crucial difference between the two cases. Bhaskar locates his closure in a future in which de-alienation has been achieved and master-slave-type relations abolished or left behind, whereas Hegel is located in an alienated present embracing major forms of social contradiction. It is the resolution of contradictions in thought alone, in the absence of their re-
solution in social reality as a whole, that provides the basis of the Bhaskarian critique.

It may well be, of course, that freedom from desire is necessary for the species to survive, so that closure as such (or its approximation) is not after all the issue. But in that case Bhaskar seems vulnerable to the criticism that he locates the need for closure predominantly in philosophical mistakes, rather than in a complex realist analysis of the historical transitions and social relations which have inaugurated and propelled the “bad infinite” of desire; and the ultimate source of closure in the undoing of those mistakes via self-change. If the dialectics of freedom do issue in freedom from desire, it will be fundamentally, not because the species gets into Self- and God-realisation (though these might powerfully assist), but because the desire for desire runs into absolute ecological constraints which necessitate that people act to change the social relations propelling it.

CONCLUSION

From a non-religious perspective, when Bhaskar (1993) penned his compelling account of the fate of the beautiful soul of Hegel and Jesus, he could be said to have written the script of his own future trajectory. At the limit, the whole Bhaskarian system can be seen as an unhappy consciousness, split between the this-worldly realism of Bhaskar Mark I and the other-worldly irrealism of Bhaskar Mark II, who has introjected the ideology of the masters and projected and eternised it in a fantasy world (cf. Hostettler and Norrie, 2000).

On such a view, the synthesis TDCR offers is clearly somewhat at the expense of science and New Left. It could also be considered at the expense of several of the great world religions. Žižek has recently argued (2000: 1, et passim) that Marxism and Christianity should stand together against the “massive onslaught of obscurantism” represented by New Age spiritualism and religious fundamentalism. He sees both Marxism and Christianity, together with Buddhism, as authentically revolutionary traditions, announcing a suspension of social hierarchy, which New Age, ultimately tribalist and fascistic in its implications, actually reinforces—as of course arguably do some of the other traditions Bhaskar draws on, in particular Hindu cosmology, whose vision of cosmic balance of hierarchically ordered principles, applied to society, explicitly endorses the caste system.

If one grants the religious premises, on the other hand, I have suggested that TDCR is analytically incompatible with (D)CR in a number of areas, especially in its ontological and historical idealism, its intuitional triumphalism and its embracement of ideological aspects of New Age and Karma. My provisional view is that its idealism is probably not dialectically incompatible, except in relation to SEPM, but that the other features are. Time and phronesis will tell.

Clearly, TDCR has the potential to problematise much of the (D)CR canon, and in particular the social ontology critical realists have found invaluable and
which Bhaskar revindicated, notwithstanding that God had “given ontological arguments a bad press” (1993: 107). Ironically, Bhaskar’s own latest book will in all probability help ensure that God continues to do so, and that (T)(D)CR continues to be dismissed in many quarters (mistakenly) as “pre-Critical”.27 Equally, however, it will assist in a keener critical realist (re-)evaluation of the works that preceded it. The most urgent task of the Young (or Left) Bhaskarians is plain: identify, and trace through the consequences of, the conceptual slippages and imported assumptions that have led away from New Left realism and historical materialism towards New Age (Etc.) ontological and historical idealism, and reclaim—and reconstruct—your inheritance.

This will entail, however, embracing an emergentist ontological realism that is neither materialist nor idealist in a dogmatic way, and accepting that there is perhaps a meta-sense in which the dialectic of philosophy and science, theory and practice, is having the last word even in the Bhaskarian turn to religion. Bhaskar has always held that “as new [philosophical] premises (forms of social practice) arise, new modes of philosophical reflection become possible (and necessary)” (1986: 13–14, emphasis added). Bhaskar’s fundamental message is that, if we are to survive and flourish as a species in the changed conditions of the new century, we will have to move on, via “the unity of theory and practice in practice”, to a new outlook and a new life—come both to see ourselves, and to act, as part of the cosmic whole. To that extent, all critical realists can agree that the new orientation expresses the alethic truth of our situation, and that TDCR is the culmination of an extraordinarily powerful attempt to overturn the philosophical props of the world of generalised master-slave-type relations, as enshrined in the Western dogmas of actualism and ontological monovalence, from Parmenides to Rorty, and to forge a worldview fitting for an ecologically sustainable post-slave order.

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**NOTES**

1 Unless otherwise indicated, page numbers in brackets refer to this work.

2 Bhaskar had a “theosophical upbringing” (148). The theosophical movement had its origins in Western Europe during the seventeenth century crisis and has since been associated with several “New Ages”. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it received major infusions from “East”.

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Readers who are familiar with *Dialectic: the Pulse of Freedom* (Bhaskar, 1993) will note that this, then, is “the pulse of freedom” that manifests itself throughout human history and lends it a “rational directionality”. Strictly speaking, the soul has a dual dispositionality: to be embodied (in the physical or astral domains, but mainly the former), and to be disembodied, i.e. liberated or freed from the cycle of rebirth and redeath—“to return, in self-consciousness . . . to its basic self as spirit” (132). “This dual dispositionality of the soul to experience and to be free . . . is the motor of the dialectical learning process from life to life” (92). The soul is the bearer of karmic connections between incarnations.

“Absence” is the central driving category of Bhaskar’s *Dialectic* (1993).

Bhaskar (1986: 9) defines irrealist philosophy as that which is “non-transcendentally realist”.

Absence is the central driving category of Bhaskar’s *Dialectic* (1993).

[A]bstaining from doing in order to be” (50).

Cf.: “The younger Hegel had been explicit that desire, in love, includes the desire to be desired, and loved, and that this drive incorporates the desire to be united with the loved one—a paramorph for the desire for de-alienation, that is, for the restoration, perhaps in a much more complex and differentiated totality, of the unity between the agent and everything essential to her nature (i.e. from the standpoint of totality, a part of herself).” (Bhaskar, 1993: 243)

Thus astral zones of being, for example, are already hinted at in Bhaskar’s *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975: 182) and demi-reality has its forerunner in the concept of “compromise formation” (1986: 9–10). In retrospect, we can see more clearly, too, that the [DCR] ontology, with its central driving categories of alterity and absence, had been strongly influenced by “East” all along. Thus the quotation from *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975) at the head of this paper seems to capture something of the Eastern notion that it is the Absolute Void-Substance-Ground beneath the fragile phenomenal world that constitutes the “normal order of things” (as contrasted with the Christian notion that it is the Absolute that is fragile, and the world of appearances solid and stubborn) (Žižek 2000: 128).

FEW explicitly calls our attention to the fact that “[d]ialectic and negativity . . . [are] clearly related to Buddhist and Vedic teaching”.

That Bhaskar himself feels the need for this is suggested by his announcement that FEW will be followed by works of theoretical philosophy in the idiom of his earlier works (2).

Cf.: “Not in entire forgetfulness, / And not in utter nakedness, / But trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home”. (Wordsworth (1956 [1807]: 460), who however, like most Romantics, did not understand that science is not exhausted by analytical reason.)

In “Preface and Acknowledgements” (v), Bhaskar states that he is indebted to Mike Robinson and Kenny Pask “for the details of the narrative” in the second part of the book. Robinson and Pask are New Age clairvoyants based in Norfolk, UK (Robinson 1999; Pask 1999). FEW is dedicated to Robinson.

For New Paradigm, see for example Baring, Clarke, and Kumar, 2000; British Broadcasting Corporation, 2000.

This view of New Age is the basic thesis of a sociological account by O’Leary & Sharp forthcoming. It has its pedigree in Adorno—see especially his scathing and prophetic “Theses against occultism” (1974: 238–44)—and has recently been endorsed by Žižek (2000).

This is a sociological statement, not a “judgemental” one in regard to any concretely singular person.

To fit the Bhaskarian case fully, Williams’ definition needs amending by substituting “in relation to” for “in terms of”.

Cf.: “Of course there is [ontological] stratification (including arguably conceptual stratification) prior to the level of the most underlying real essence or intrinsic nature of human beings, or of social totalities” (35, n. 18, emphasis added).

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Northern English and Scots for “without”. By inverting the word readers expect, Bhaskar is encouraging them to make a “perspectival switch”. This he defines as “[t]he switch from one transcendentally or dialectically necessary condition or aspect of a phenomenon, thing or totality [here the parity of being and non-being within the world as we know it] to another which is also transcendentally or dialectically necessary for it [here the sea of negativity of the unknown].”

As the Note on p. 47 of Dialectic indicates, Bhaskar does not accept that something could come of nothing, or that there was a unique beginning to everything. I take this to mean, in terms of his later position, that God, who is in all things, has always existed. Within the relative zone of Totality, beginnings (such as the “big bang” of our own universe) are “of a dyadic/polyadic-fusing kind (e.g. as involving an asymmetric compression of pre-existent forces)”, not of “a monadic-fussing type”. Here again the earlier work prefigures the later.

See note 18 (above).

“The fact that God is unbounded . . . does not mean that he can have no positive qualities (rather he has infinite qualities) or that he can only be defined by the *via negativa*, as not this, not that and so on” (47).

“Of course what is absent or void at or from one level, region or perspective may be present at another. This is what I shall refer to as the ‘duality of absence’” (Bhaskar, 1993: 5).

Collier (2001: 18) plausibly suggests that Bhaskar’s *argument* for reincarnation is dualist, entailing “the causal autonomy of mind”. However, reincarnation itself (together with resurrection) is in Collier’s view compatible with critical realist non-dualism (“a new material substance may have the complex of powers which constituted an old mind”), though it does not follow from it—it requires additional premises from revealed theology. While Collier detects a Gnostic (dualist) influence in *FEW*, he rightly suggests that Gnosticism’s disregard for the body is “light years away from . . . Bhaskar’s ethical teaching about universal emancipation and . . . about the essential goodness of being, including material being”. Bhaskar himself maintains that his position in *FEW*, far from being dualist, is the only one consistent with non-dualism (and non-reductionism) (68, 92).

Partly because of this problem, Daly (2000) tentatively suggests that the only coherent interpretation is that we are only *potentially* (it is our *telos* to be) Godlike. The fundamental thrust of the ontology seems stronger than that.

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Bhaskar does speak of the inevitability of eudaimonia, but I take this to be a manner of speaking. “Unity existence” entails, of course, not that the eagle ceases to do what eagles by nature do, but that the conditions for each species to flourish are rationally maximized within the overall order of being (cf. Collier, 1999).

Cf. 38, n. 23: “there could be no enlightenment without *avidya* and . . . if we are already enlightened, no recognition or realisation of it without a prior forgetting (or fall)”.

Bhaskar’s own characterisation (1986: 22) of his conception of philosophy as “essentially post-critical in form, but pre-critical in function” would still seem to apply.

REFERENCES


Roy Bhaskar’s From East to West


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