

Spiritual and Critical Perspectives  
on Freedom and Oppression

*Or does power make or break your throne?*

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*To all activists; you have taught me the important things*

# 1 Motivation

*Two bottles, one of water, one of that water alchemised into fire, the same colour.*

This essay is written with a sense of urgency. My previous work has consisted of the following:

- *A Singular Reality*. This long essay was ten years in the making, and retrospectively, it is hard to say what it is *about*. It is a mediation on consciousness and self-reference, and to a significant extent, irreducible, although it contains many digressions of limited value.
- *Admission of Ignorance*. Three shorter essays.
  - *Summary of A Singular Reality*. This probably does not make matters clearer.
  - *On Tension and Vulnerability in Knowing*. This work was almost exclusively inspired by *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, although the connections may not be obvious. It contains observations about the *dynamics of knowing*, and a tentative reconciliation of science and spirituality in their traditional senses. I feel the observations contained herein to be of importance.
  - *Part III: Consciousness or Extinction*. More or less this. The inquiry into consciousness present in all of the above aims to make clear the urgency of its exercise, as a matter of survival.
- *Word in Process*. An afterword to the above, dealing with what is either the staggeringly hard or falsely premised question of how patterning (the Word) may be understood to inform reality (process) in a non-dualistic sense. A work in progress.

- *Materialism and Where It Leaves Us*. This somewhat flawed article attempts to make a case of some importance: the human encounter with ecological imperative, and the intellectual encounter with (human) consciousness are both highly problematic; therefore the significance of human agency to the existence of life (which gives rise to the concept of the Anthropocene) is a challenging relationship, given that both *relata* are themselves challenging to us, as broken relationships in themselves.

It is my hope to elaborate the above into a substantial work, to carefully and clearly draw from the all experience and knowledge the threads that weave the fabric of this art. It is a substantial project, and this present work is written to listen and speak to the intense of urgency of our moment in history; so while I hope to elaborate it on the basis of the above, it is not intended to rely on the above discussions.

To be clear: the consensus of all serious scientific thought is that we have about to a decade to avoid catastrophic climate change; nor is it clear that we will, nor is clear the extent of the social and ecological and catastrophe that is unfolding *now* with terrifying force. If this is the most stark crisis of our times, it is just as true that numerous interconnected crises are unfolding: the devastation to soil, oceans, air; of biodiversity; of human health and community. Unfolding by a series of tightly coupled effects, informed by the path dependency of history, we are living *now* through the question of a human future. The significance of the human history that has made this crisis, and could yet offer a way out, is a central theme of this essay.

This is a lot to live with, and a look around makes it clear that to a significant extent we are not, although this should be qualified. Living ones own life is challenging enough, and it hardly needs to be said that this understandably occupies a great deal of our effort – and so it should, in the sense that self care and self development are not luxuries, but the beginning of healthy agency. Following from the theme of the significance of

history (how we have conducted ourselves), this theme of how we conduct ourselves *in light* of this, in conscious awareness of this, and not in ignorance or denial, is further central to this essay.

There is another observation of great significance: we are witnessing an unfolding of the best and worst of human capabilities. In the major book *Blessed Unrest*, Paul Hawken explores how we are part of the biggest social movement in history. All over the world, often in great adversity and risk, millions of people are resisting oppression and building an alternative, from the ground up, one struggle at a time. At the same time, *the same species* is carrying forward the historical trajectory of *power over the other* with unprecedented scale and sophistication. These processes are occurring in parallel, at least the latter is driving the former, and it seems to me that it cannot be coincidence that the most beautiful and most terrifying human capabilities are thus engaged, when there is *everything* to play for, and all of this could end.

There is a sometimes helpful heuristic device of those seeking change, those resisting it, with those in the ‘middle’ relatively unengaged, and the above two paragraphs may imply such a view. However, a much more sophisticated analysis is needed, that goes to the heart of the dynamics of inner and outer oppression, and it is this that I attempt here.

This essay will argue that the ecological crisis cannot be faced without facing oppression of all kinds, and that social justice and ecological justice are inextricable challenges. It is about oppression — historical and present — and facing it, and about this being an absolute precondition of our survival. It speaks to a crisis that cannot be resolved until its heart of darkness becomes an active, painful, rekindling discourse. It is about fighting oppression as a spiritual task.

A final motivation is the sensed imminence of a great conflict. This is born out by

an observation of world events, but also by an observation of heavenly ones. Despite the near complete demise of astrology in modernity, the exploration of correlations of planetary events to historical and biographical events in *Cosmos and Psyche* shows, to my mind, that there is a set of phenomena of work of great significance, that yet our worldview feels (falsely, in my view) incapable of admitting. The topic is too big and too controversial to address here, but this remarkable book is an excellent starting point for making up your own mind. One of the strongest correlations explored is that of Saturn Pluto alignments to major global conflicts, and, with far from good odds, a decade left to tackle climate change, this alignment will occur this year.

## 2 Metaphysics and Values: Critical Perspectives

My previous work has been decidedly metaphysical, in the older sense – metaphysics as the deepest possible conception of reality, as opposed to the sadly negative sense imparted by modernity: ‘dead end’ speculations superseded by empirical epistemology.

How are such questions relevant to the questions that will be explored? After all, we are more or less free to ‘do’ metaphysics in the same way that we are to make music, for example. We are free to speculate about the nature of being, and the results can be very beautiful. There are two reasons why I feel metaphysical exploration to be important. One is that so we may impart a deep and ancient ground to the struggle of our moment in history, and draw on it – for we need it. This leads to the second reason – we operate with a strong metaphysical disposition, without this being particularly explicit. This also leads to the sense that the ecological crisis is accompanied by a crisis of ideas, a theme that framed *Materialism and Where It Leaves Us*.

It is my view that an understanding of reality comprises of an attention to the phenomena of the universe; to the clues imparted by experience and knowledge; to what is revealed by multiple ways of knowing. This leads to two important points. Firstly, experience and knowledge are co-substantial, the former the ground of the latter, the latter the flowering of the former. Certain ways of knowing limit the validity of experience, for example the emphasis on repeatability in scientific thought; sometimes this is helpful, sometimes not, but these are just particular cases in the great creative unfolding of life. Related to this qualification, the above view is seemingly resisted by the state of affairs whereby particular attention to phenomena, through particular ways of knowing, precludes the ground of inquiry, so that what emerges from curiosity becomes, as opposed to curiosity itself, the significant thing, the fruits taken to be the ground, and a great deal of ground therefore missed. That is to say, the above metaphysical approach is capable of including *within it itself* an understanding of its own trajecto-

ries, if we do not harden the lines between experience and knowledge, knowing and the known – it is abundantly clear of our consciousness that knowing includes itself. We see here Ouroboros eating himself; we would be unwise to suppose that there was a way to avoid such a fate, so long as we are engaged in thought.

Before considering the implications of this, let us pause on the comment that we are implicitly metaphysical. In what way? One of the more explicit ways to see this is in the ‘Laws of Nature’, a small number of which scientific thought admits as underlying everything. Beautiful work pushes back more specific phenomenal observations to more general ones, inferring in the process an order to the universe in which mathematics seems to play an inextricable role. In the seminal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn shows that multiple scientific paradigms are possible, and that understandings that seem irrefutable can later appear even non-sensical. Great humility should be imparted by these observations. The questions of the seeming relativity of paradigms against the seeming unification of phenomena within physical inquiry, and also of ontological or instrumental nature of mathematics are complex, and must await a fuller discussion. However, the point here is that the scientific turn, despite providing a second meaning to metaphysics, has left metaphysics alive and present. What it boils down too is that scientific inquiry, for all its predictive and *relative* explanatory power, does not change the fact that at the heart of it, the universe works in a certain way; in this sense it comes full circle to the observations that it rightly begins with.

This is one aspect of scientific metaphysics. The other is more diffuse. The scientific turn has left us with a particular sense of the universe, not just as a speculative ontology, but as a worldview that is preferential in regard to ways of knowing, and ways of regarding. The former refers of course to the rational and empirical, which has its place – there seems little point labouring this; we would be foolish not too marvel at this, nor to be radically critical of its value. And this leads to the latter: the scientific turn has co-created a worldview that allows prediction, and through this, control. It

is a worldview that has always emphasised a reductionist approach, and even the shift to a more holistic approach in complexity science and its key concept of emergence, does not, in my view, truly face the question of agency that emergence begs. The natural world, the ground of our being, comprises of intricate networks of co-dependent relationships, while the traditional scientific approach struggle to meet these, being best placed explore specific relationships, or dissect the *relata*. While we would not have modern medicine without dissection, we may also notice that the same spirit is often misplaced when it seeks to solve a problem by countering one effect by manipulating the nearest (or most profitable) cause.

And here a vital point emerges: we do not have a worldview for *life*. We have a sophisticated worldview of physical complexity, from which we suppose life emerges. And we have varyingly sophisticated views of ourselves, of why life is so hard, and how we might conduct ourselves for the better. But there is little inbetween that is of substantive and independent value (although unpopular traditions such as animism have intended otherwise). So should it be any surprise that human life treats non-human life like shit? If something seems possible within frameworks of rational physical understanding, the enthusiasm is substantial. If we can find a way to manipulate ourselves out of the consequences of our disregard for other life with biotechnology, it is seen as positive. And society attempts to a significant yet still profoundly limited extent to sanctify regard for human life. However, a regard for non-human life simply because it is alive is a battle of our time. I think it is clear that the idealogical basis of our culture has a great deal to do with this.

As explored in previous work, the scientific turn has (for varyingly understandable reasons) put us on a poor position for the encounter with the various grounds of our being – the web of life, and our conscious experience. The understandable preference for tractable problems accounts for this to an extent, but there is more to it than this: the pre-eminence of reason, in science and scientific epistemology, has helped us be



blind to the world that it is also helped to reveal in such astonishing beauty. Just as religious ideas and practice, and the acts committed in their name, must be understood as an interaction of ideas and human agency, the same is true of science. Neither can be singled out for their sins. But the scientific legacy needs to be carefully picked apart, to understand on the one hand its actually rather mystical nature (the first aspect of scientific metaphysics) and on the others its rather truncated apprehension of the living universe (the second aspect).

Returning then to experience and knowledge, I think that it is a mistake to suppose that they lead to one underlying reality, while it is also a mistake to suppose that they are purely constructs – experience and knowledge are a relationship. Is it full of wonder or exploitative? Is it respectful or dismissive? Is it tender or abusive? It varies greatly. So focussed on the *relata* (in this case the ‘object’ of study or ourselves), we easily miss that it is all relationship. We are in relationship to all that we explore, and the ideas that emerge from this are in relationship to everything else – more of this later. Knowledge is a tentative reach into a mystery, not a circumscription (or circumcision). At its best it is akin to getting to know someone, but enslaving has sometimes proved easier. Another way to put it is that knowledge will always be incomplete and inconsistent. It is incomplete because experience and agency are embedded in the universe, and it is inconsistent because of the multiplicity and difference of experience and agency. Number theory, unreasonably perfect, famously permits one of the two. The deepest spiritual senses may make a claim on completeness *and* consistency, but they are unlikely to be stateable matters.

I would go further to say that objective reality is an epiphenomena, that reality is in some limited circumstances transiently objectifiable, but that is it. Relationship is primary, and further, meaning is primary, a point that is intuitively true, and that I will also attempt to elaborate. The universe may seem to be the *relata*, but these are epiphenomenal, and themselves composed of relationships. In the famous comparisons

of quantum physics and complexity science to Eastern mysticism (and pre-Socratic philosophy), this is a much emphasised point as regards quantum reality. But by strange twists and turns of narratives, points like this have gained a value of ‘saving’ us from reductionist science. These dimensions *add* to the richness, but it should be obvious anyway. In the later discussions of politics and psychology, the spaces between are the significant thing. We can perhaps cultivate a more interstitial sense of ontology.

### 3 Metaphysics and Values: Spiritual Perspectives

Informed by all my experience, it seems to me that a metaphysics far more expansive than the scientific one is possible, and that the following are of great significance: creation and persistence; death and rebirth; formation and emergence; unity and difference; time and freedom; and quality and meaning.

This goes back to the clues. I hope to elaborate these insights in much more depth in future work, but my sense, and my faith, is that there is a universal consciousness, that our awareness *is* the same source as all the form in the universe, including our thoughts. And it seems to me that this source has two particularly interesting properties: a wish to exceed itself, and a tendency to stick to itself. There is no denying that this is an odd claim. For the former, the intricacy of creation is sufficient testament. We may make various claims about the sufficiency of different patterning to account for this (like the ‘Laws of Nature’). The more metaphysical part of *A Singular Reality* offered the view of a co-creation of patterning and the universe, which I stand by to an extent, but with reservations about the duality it implies. One way or another though, the universe is creative, however we account for this (or don’t). The idea that through its creative process, reality sticks to itself, is stranger. If consciousness is universal, then there is no distinction between the unfolding of nature, and the unfolding of our minds. It is all form. We can observe in ourselves how when we think something, it replaces the reality from which the inquiry was made – consciousness sticks to itself. And it needs to, because this is how we get persistence alongside creation. Drawing on cosmological evolution, biological evolution, human evolution, and the history of human ideas, both religious and scientific, we can see an astonishingly consistent process of persistence at work, where innovations last. And exactly as with creation, we can make differing claims about what is sufficient to account for this. I believe that we make an inference about the *nature* of universal consciousness, informed by the diverse and particular

ways in which the dynamic of creation and persistence place out.

To be clear: creation and persistence can be understood in playing out in particular ways in particular contexts, with some degree of informing patterning invoked. The idea is not to replace these specifics, but embrace all of them, and value them on their own terms, and perhaps be drawn by certain processual commonalities to the inference of a connecting order: the slippery and sticky oneness.

If creation and persistence are fundamental in this way, then destruction is just as important. Hence the significance of creation and persistence leads to the all-pervasive cycle of death and rebirth. Creation and persistence also lead to the significance of formation and emergence. Where is the creativity coming from? Science admits a certain amount of formation via its laws, and a great deal of emergence (leading rather inexorably and unhelpfully to the odd conclusion that consciousness is illusory). Other views admit more formation. Whitehead suggests the presence of an intention (formal cause) as well as an emergence (efficient cause) in every occasion of experience. Shel-drake suggests a resonance of form across time, but does not especially account for its first appearance.

To elaborate on this limited admission, science both precludes and relies on its phenomenal scope, in a rather strange sleight of hand: it denies the significance of phenomenal grounds that it is often unwilling and perhaps incapable of taking seriously. It admits agency imparted by its laws, and unless it actively denies it, it more or less has to admit the pervasive and convincing experience of free will. But it says remarkably little about what happens in between. Emergence is important, and it essential to recognise that behaviour at one level can give rise to behaviour at another level that is different in kind. But for life, this is about as good as we have. Shel-drake's ideas about life are highly controversial, as is any admission of principles that 'belong' to life. And yet we share our home with so many intelligent and caring non-human animals, who may very

well be more enlightened than us. Archetypal psychology and astrology is another area where there is radically neglected agency evident. Finally, the array of ‘impossible’ phenomena, meaningful coincidence and impossible knowledge are exactly examples of scientific incapability that nonetheless provide a much enriched view of agency: they belong to the intense circumstances of life, and therefore are not repeatable.

Some of the remarks of early scientists make it clear just how much of a sense of the numinous informed their work (e.g. Newton). The remarks of others prefigure the worst of dominatory technoscience (e.g. Bacon). Overall, we can discern an arc from wonder and numinosity, and mathematics, to explanation and prediction, to control, to objectification and commodification. But just as much, all of these are present to varying degrees in all scientific contexts. We shall never lose our wonder. And despite the self-vindicating pre-occupation with repeatability in modernity, in more humility than we are accustomed to, we can see it as *a* way of understanding the world, with advantages over earlier ways, but, as alluded to above, by no means necessarily sufficient, or all that is ‘out there’. And beyond the specific question of repeatability, it is clear that religion and science are akin in that they have mystical and metaphysical dimensions, and that their ideas, in interaction with human agency, can be the basis for power over.

These remarks on the brilliant but limited nature of scientific enquiry should be concluded with a staggeringly obvious point that is not made nearly enough: there is *absolutely no way* that a set of ideas about how the universe *does* work can in anyway claim that they are a sufficient basis for understanding *all the ways that the universe works*. Empiricism becomes ideology, and the world burns.

We have been left with a very sorry conception of ‘matter’ and ‘mind/spirit’, and philosophical speculations have played their part. To my mind, the conception of the real and ‘Ideal’ in Plato is hollow, and cannot hold water. Part of the problem with it is

a duality that I do not feel to be there or to be healthy, but there is a subtler objection too: the choice of ideal forms is very much dependent on where we find ourselves in reality, and a human and a blind sea creature would be unlikely to use the same examples. That is not necessarily bad, but when we realise that what might be one creature's superset might be another creature's subset, we see that there is an impossible situation, at least in the sense of imparting an ontology to Ideal Forms. Whitehead's rules regarding Eternal Objects in *Science and the Modern World* interestingly have all the echoes of pre-Godelian set theory, and Russell, whose work was refuted on the basis of a paradox linked to Godel's work, was Russell's supervisor. I could not disagree more with Whitehead that all philosophy is footnotes to Plato, and the intellectual thread about sets containing themselves may be enough to shatter the notion of a hierarchy of ideals in favour of the humour of self-reference. In addition to the real and 'Ideal', the 'Enlightenment' concepts of primary and secondary quantities, sensory data, an abstracting brain, and Kantian *a priori* forms to make it work, is, I feel similarly unhelpful. The point I am finding my way towards is that the non-duality of reality that can yet seem otherwise should not be pursued with these crude implements, but with all the nuance of quantum field theory, molecular biology, depth psychology and so many fields. If we do not see that nature (ourselves included but not elevated) as genius, we have missed the point.

Returning to better conceptions of non-duality, the Heart Sutra says that 'form is emptiness and emptiness is form', and I am drawing on this in a deep way. The emptiness is the source I alluded to earlier, the form, the ten thousand things, are differentiated unity, the unity that just maybe sticks to itself while it always tried to exceed itself, because that is the most interesting way for things to be. Moreover, there is a very interesting set of properties suggested by both quantum physics and archetypal psychology and astrology: the world is made by the manifestation out of a set of possibilities. In quantum mechanics, this is the strange and unresolved question of measurement. An archetype is a 'preformed mode' that can manifest in diverse ways, light and dark.

Elaboration of these speculations must await future work. However, they do lead to an intuition about time, and how time is created by, indeed *is*, manifesting possibility. It is vital to make this speculative link, given the ultimate theme of this essay: freedom. Various phenomena suggest that some parts of experience are more temporal than others, and especially dreams, where it has little meaning as such, and where sometimes the experience of the dream reaches into the past and future, and to other parts of reality, imparting a knowledge to the dreamer that was not accessible in a waking state. Going back to multiple possibilities, in a sense that is freedom, but not freedom where we can evolve, because *it is all already given*. In time, at some level we have to chose, and that means we can fuck it up, and learn, and the freedom is *ours*. Time is what God makes to be free, the fleeting eternity: time is where the pain is, and where the freedom is.

*A Singular Reality* argued for the co-evolution of patterning and process evolving through each other. Does the falling back out of time of process leave a residue of patterning that pervades, and can fall back in? In such a view, ‘matter’ and ‘spirit’ (often associated with temporality and atemporality respectively) are not ‘realms’ but a heuristic for the dynamic passage of waves of meaning, surging into and drawing out of time, and in the process creating it.

Can it be put into words? Consciousness *is* the experience of all things, all things are experience, the experience of all things is experience of that consciousness. The agentic moments of all complexity is the primary thing, the true ontology. Consciousness *is* emptiness, and it *is* form, this is why the levels of complexity are real, not reducible or containable. Of course this is deeply Whiteheadian, and of course it can’t be put into words, but can we try to hold onto this sense: a child’s laughter is not at something, but of something.

We come easily to quailty – in Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Main-*

*tenance*, Quality is explicitly identified with the Dao, the source. And meaning comes out of this too – any creative becoming of form exists in relationship to the persisted form it grows from, and that is its meaning. Meaning is relationship, hence just as relationship is primary, so is meaning. And importantly, Quality greater than creation and persistence, because it is their exercise, conscious or not. Quality, consciousness and creativity are the same flux. And Quality is greater than death and rebirth too, because it is *how* we die.

Now let's take a big step back. These are speculative ideas, arrived out though sustained attention to the world. That is all I can say. They are not offered as an answer. And they are emphatically not Platonic: the dualistic idea of an Ideal realm forming the real one is not what I wish to imply. Form *is* emptiness; emptiness *is* form. It is only Real; we are form exploring form; and I would not be the first or last to have a sense that this leads to the mind of God.

We should further consider what it is *to make a claim about the nature of reality*, and this was a significant thread of *A Singular Reality*. Any such claim relies upon its making, in a slippery spectrum of of posited ontology or knowledge as a human construct. The claim cannot be made without the ground which *it itself* implies. The construction and the ontology necessarily refer to each other, and this leads to a seemingly hard and much discussed question that emerges from critical thought. But perhaps this question can be transcended by conceiving of a *constructed* self-referential flux, where the true nature of reality is *exposing itself*. The matter is so slippery that it is almost beyond words, but I do not think for a moment that the universe gives us hard ontological lines, as much as we would like to find them. The act of knowing *reveals* the universe, but not in an way that is, or can be, independent of *itself*: giving a paradox that could be regarded as frustrating or liberating.

To take an even bigger step back, these matters cannot be put into words. These are



deep insights, held at the limit of expression in my own mind, and already dying as they are written down. It is not a matter of writing it down once and for all (in the company of various white men), it is a matter of life. This discussion has attempted to open out narrow and unconscious metaphysics, and make a space in which we may think about fighting oppression as a spiritual task, the theme we will finally refer to. It also opens a space to ask the question 'why are we moved to fight for this' and see that this is a falsely premised; we are this; following our bliss, *there is no alternative*.

## 4 Social and Ecological Justice

And, *there is such a thing as society*. This section explores how social justice is inextricable from ecological justice; we do not navigate this crisis without facing the intensity, and dramatic worsening in the neoliberal era, of the root causes of suffering and inequality. There is no room for dressing this up: our entire world and way of life exists because the West have exploited and manipulated nature; enslaved other cultures; and cynically pursued power over the Other. The effectiveness of this is at once both terrifying and completely hollow: it has set us on a path to extinction.

This section, this essay, and all my thought are hugely indebted to the work of Naomi Klein: *No Logo* on globalisation and the rise of brands; *The Shock Doctrine* on the exploitation of disasters (real or manufactured) as the *modus operandi* in the neoliberal era; *This Changes Everything* on climate change; and *No Is Not Enough* on Trump. Klein is a historian of the present, and her understanding of the last four decades is a service to world whose narratives by and large miss the point.

The essential link between ecological and social justice is threefold. Firstly, the extraction enabled by historical injustice is responsible for the present ecological crisis. Secondly, the communities most vulnerable to this crisis are the ones who have been, and continue to be the most oppressed, while the rich are the most able to protect themselves from it. Thirdly, the measures that would increase the resilience of all people (not just the rich) to the impending devastation are ones that would *empower* the poor oppressed, and as such begin to reverse the historical injustice that has put us here.

From the beginning of colonialism to the present day, the sophistication and brutality of oppression has increased. If the spells of our time suggest that it is otherwise, it is because the of this increased sophistication. We cannot talk about real change if we

do not acknowledge the ubiquity of the methods and structures that create suffering: oppression by military force; oppression by debt; complicity of political and corporate agendas; limited liability and rights of corporations; pro-corporate trade deals, the revolving doors in all reaches of power over. Perhaps the most significant the charging of positive interest on money lent is probably the most significant structural factor that means that wealth accumulates, inequality increases, and many suffer for the benefit of a few. The history of all this is beyond the scope of this essay, but its key aspects include the innovation of money in the Axial Age; the morality of money lending in different Western religions; the post-reformation rise of capitalism; the European colonial empires; and the contemporary neoliberal global empire. This last is in a long history of empires, and we may safely say that it is the last: its material and ideological aspects are untenable. It is a death throw of a consciousness exceeding itself.

Neoliberalism suffers from some astounding contradictions. It claims to raise living standards while being structural geared to be unable to do this, and it claims to require and supply economic growth while the planet is structurally unable to support this. The claim of increasing living standards is fallacious on many grounds: plenty of governments the world over succeeded at this to an extent (at least until they were violently overthrown by the West to open up their markets); the introduction of neoliberalism has consistently increased inequality; the standards it increases do not result in an increase of human happiness, as testified by extensive and ongoing research; and decimation of environment (non-human community) and society (human community) has increased. Its metrics such as GDP are nonsense, and widely recognised as such. And its requirements of economic growth, which derives from charging of positive interest on money, creates a situation where the barrel is scraped deeper and deeper to find something to sell – sell to people who can't afford it and don't need it, to buy it with money they don't have. There is perverse brilliance to capitalism: it can seemingly commodify everything. Two interesting cases in point: in China, air, the last of the commons, has been commodified, while advertising, one of the exploitative methods of

capitalism (especially of women), has succeeded in commodifying our discontent with capitalism by providing the option, at a price, for the ads to be turned off. We should note well that these things have come to pass.

Moreover, the historical injustice is now so entrenched that through colonial history, depending on the country you are born in, what you can earn can give you access to anything you want, or be just enough to survive, due to the differential values of currencies and their ability to pay for human time. And depending what country you are born in, you can freely travel, or be completely unable to do so. This perpetuates historical injustice and when that injustice bites, the migration it drives is labelled as a crisis, as though this was not all the West's fault. The perversity can hardly be overstated: a system that reckons on infinite growth on a finite planet is perpetuated by those who have benefited from an uneven playing field, unlevelled by centuries of horrific violence.

On the other hand, modernity has also seen a series of social movements that have resulted in real change: the abolition of slavery; voting; voting for women; women's rights, civil rights. All of the progressive things we take for granted in society have arisen not through any enlightenment of power over, who consistently argued they would be ruinous, but by refusal by people to accept injustice, by disobedience, and great personal risk, and it continues here and now, all over the world. The structures of power over can claim no credit for the greater justice now that they two-facedly embrace. Modernity has also seen an increasing sophistication of these movements, which have learned from and built on past successes and failures. The concept of solidarity has always been important in social justice, and recently the concept of intersectionality has articulated how all oppressions are linked. This theme will be returned to in the evolutionary discussions in the next section, but it is vital to note that the struggles for justice have become one struggle, that is nonetheless infinitely diverse: the crisis we are facing is so serious that every struggle is now linked.

We therefore have a situation where neo-colonialism and post-colonialism contend. This goes back to the unfolding of the best and the worst in parallel. Do we seek to recover the diverse identities of the exploited and homogenised Other under colonialism, or do we seek to exploit the Other like never before? Both are occurring. So Zizek can say world leaders taking selfies at Mandela's funeral is proof that he failed<sup>1</sup>. I am emphasising all of this to point out the manner in which change is accompanied by its antithesis – the rich and powerful becoming more so. Social movements have changed the fabric of society, from the bottom up, but they have rarely resulted in a redistribution of wealth. Naomi Klein explores this important question in *This Changes Everything*, and social change sometimes has resulted in wealth redistribution: the Great Depression is the most significant example. However, it impossible to deny that the sophistication of the accumulation capital has increased in the modern era.

The ecological crisis has been created by and perpetuated by exploitation of other cultures, and nature. A result of this is that the people on its front lines are the populations of poor countries most vulnerable to the early effects of climate change, women the world over through, Black communities in the richest country on earth (that became so by enslaving them), etc. These is painful and essential territory: the ecological crisis dramatically puts centre stage the present consequences of historical injustice. The same capitalist paradigm has created worsening social injustice and the ecological crisis. But if as they have, ecological and social justice have become the same question, then we cannot continue to kick the can down the road in terms of systemic change around wealth distribution. If we are to survive this moment in history, then we the abundant wealth in the world needs to pass from those who stole it to empower those who are most vulnerable as result of the consequences of this theft. The alternative, which Naomi Klein discusses extensively, is a world increasingly divided into Green and Red Zones, capitalism taken to its sick end.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/09/if-nelson-mandela-really-had-won>

So again, there is in a sense no alternative. Climate change has brought and will continue to bring historical injustice to the foreground. The weather, war and migration we have seen in recent years is just the beginning. We will see the consequences of how we constructed the world wrought first on those exploited to build it, then on those who built it. The moral challenge is stark. If we collectively rise to this moment in history, and *truly meet* the ecological crisis, then social injustice will not be perpetuated by capitalism finding another way to exploit.

## 5 The Evolution of Consciousness

The preceding two sections contain subject matter that is not frequently discussed together. And yet both discussions are essential to frame what I am trying to get to. The evolution of consciousness comprises of a set of perspectives on how the sophistication and scope of human consciousness changes through human history, and it can perhaps bridge the previous two discussions, by linking the deep nature of reality to the present crisis of humanity.

Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* is a sociological study of the development of religion and of the Axial Age, drawing on evolutionary biology, anthropology and history, that gives a remarkably coherent account of human evolution. One of the key themes relevant to the earlier discussions is cultural innovations building upon previous ones, such that at some level they superseded them, while also what was there before is never completely replaced. For example, the institution of kingship is dealt with extensively, and we see that this artefact of the bronze age, whose insights were superseded by the religious thinkers of the Axial Age two and half thousand years ago, has by no means lost its appeal. The same kind of thing can be discerned in biological evolution, from the appearance of DNA onwards (we have much less to go on when looking back further than this, but the complexity that preceded this innovation is an area of active research). Putting it all together, we see a series of roughly logarithmically decreasing timescales defining the periods of single celled life to the industrial age.

Another theme is the changes and chances in early human physiology that necessitates larger and more cohesive social group, with the suggestion that language and perhaps music evolved out of this. This is really the reason for mentioning this work: we came into history as social animals, reliant on community. Moreover, the anthropological evidence suggests that hunter gatherer groups were significantly egalitarian. Other work suggests that the advent of agriculture gave rise to the beginnings of the power

over dynamics that have amplified throughout subsequent history, and also to gendered roles. While Bellah does not deal specifically with gender, it seems that in the present moment of necessarily confronting the consequences of oppression wrought over many historical timescales, and confronting patriarchy, a history of gender is a work that wants expression.

Richard Tarnas' *The Passion of the Western Mind* in a sense picks up where Bellah leaves off. Of course both these texts are among many important historical perspectives, and are emphasised not least for their particular influence on the present author. Tarnas' work is relevant to this essay in its understanding of the evolving duality in Western thought: the Real and the Ideal in Platonic thought; Earth and Heaven in Christianity; object and subject in scientific thought. It is also helpful in its inclusion of Christianity in narrative arc of Classical and Scientific era thought, where this former is usually omitted. The intellectual effort of a thousand years was the meshing of Socratic and Christian philosophy, and the scientific era cannot be understood without *both* these legacies.

Just as Naomi Klein's gift is her historianship of the present (relatively), these and many other scholarly and sensitive accounts of deeper history are vital. A theme of complexity science, explored extensively in Jean Bolton's *Embracing Complexity* is the interaction of the the historical trajectory with the influences of the present, and how this creates very specific path dependency. It goes without saying, but a historiographically nuanced understanding is vital. And what this does not look like is understanding the past by imposing our present values on it, for then we do not know history, and then we will repeat it.

A work that significantly adds to the understanding of an evolving duality in Western thought is Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. This is a foundational text of ecofeminism, and contains insights that are absolutely central to this essay. In



discussions of persistence elsewhere, I pointed out that a small difference in observations readily becomes polarised into schools of thought, the consequence of which is that a resulting preference for one of these can lead to inclusion or rejection of potentially significant observations, so that the inquiry is actually hindered. ‘Sane’ *a posteriori* analysis usually renders the whole thing somewhat ridiculous (‘both were onto something’), but one must wait for the polarised thought to lose its grip. We shall return to the origin of power over, but dualism obviously serves its purpose: it provides a basis for discrimination. Specifically, Plumwood shows how different dualisms become conflated to extend — and therefore link all — oppressions. It also describes the dynamics of otherisation, including, importantly, denied dependency. The dualisms listed above loosely capture the pervading dualism in different historical epochs; Plumwood shows how many have been in operation, and how they have engendered new oppression via their conflation. It would not be essentialising it to say that the core question is the self-other relation. The effect of dualistic thought is to homogenise the other while being dependent on it. The redemption of dualism is difference: the other is diverse, and the self if no more or less significant, or different, than anyone else. From here we can get to a more hopeful way of being, and hence history is an urgent matter, because the dualism of our culture will unconsciously engender oppression if nothing else – it always has done.

Returning to Bellah, half of *Religion in Human Evolution* comprises of a discussion of the Axial Age in its four most significant cultural contexts: the pre-Socratic and Socratic philosophers in ancient Greece; the Hebrew prophets in Israel; the Upanishads and Buddhism in India; and Lao Tse and Confucius in China. A remarkable astrological observation is significant here: all of these developments occurred within the *only* alignment of the three outermost planets (Uranus, Neptune and Pluto) in human history. They also occurred in turbulent societies and civilisations, and have endured *far more* than any of the historical context in which they happened. Plumwood deconstructs Plato on his preference for death and the ideal world over life and the mess of

the real world (women were not allowed to be present at Socrates's death, because they would be too emotional). It is an exhilarating critique, and shows the substantially dualistic sense that began with the Socratic (as opposed to pre-Socratic) philosophers (although some readings attribute less dualism than there is generally taken to be – there is never one interpretation). However, the trajectory of Western civilisation in no small way began with the Socratic philosophers, and its legacy is everywhere. It is interesting to note that the work of the existentialist and phenomenologists represent one of the many shifts into radically new territory in the 20th Century. So does quantum physics and mathematics and art and literature in this time. So does post-colonialism, post-structuralism and post-modernism, and the recasting of knowledge of the world as constituted by power dynamics, and multiple situated epistemologies and values and experiences. Perhaps as the ecological crisis of the world unfolds, a crisis of ideas is also playing out, and a transformation of ideas as significant as the Axial Age is underway.

The Axial Age can be understood as representing a transition from a connection to the divine mediated by the institution of kingship (sadly alive and well) to a personal connection to the divine. Unlike the little empires that come and go, it was a change of lasting significance. Faced with our imminent extinction, it does not seem out of place to suppose that a transition of similar magnitude may be required, and indeed underway. Could it be that the transition now may be from a personal connection to the divine to the connection and interdependence of all life, that in earlier ages would have been called the divine?

## 6 Ideas as Ecology

I have already mentioned the Buddhist conception of the equivalence of form and emptiness, and this relatively short section draws on that to substantiate something already alluded to: we need to understand our thoughts, and ideas at large, in the same way as ecology teaches us to understand everything. All ideas are part of the ecology, nothing more nor less. And because we hold them with varying degrees of consciousness, there is tremendous value in understanding their often unconscious influence. For me, this philosophical work is as vital as, and in the same spirit as, the fight for social and ecological justice.

We can understand critical thought as a regard for the consequences of an idea within a matrix of ideas and creatures, in exact analogy to a healthy, empathic relationship. In the latter, we (try to) consider the consequences of words and actions, rather than assuming we can just do anything, which in all social situations we emphatically cannot. In healthy relational situations, this is implicit, while a breach of it shows how strong the hold of these imperatives are. This goes back to Bellah, and the strong persistence of earlier parts of our evolution (in this case social), despite all that followed that far away time of early human groups. There are many, many ideas out there, and these remarks are not about which are right and which are wrong. Rather it is the observation that just a single species plays a complex role in ecological system, ideas have ramifications throughout our world. And they will always be there, present in one way or another in our shared memory. So what is in question is new ones, and critique of existing ones. The world will always be full of meaning, and we can exercise considerable agency in bringing more compassion and more intelligence to that meaning, and the ecosystem in its present form depends on it, for many ideas are poison (and can therefore be a cure – more on this in the next section).

## 7 Oppression and Freedom

A significant inspiration for all of this came from Alistair MacIntosh's *Soil and Soul*, a rich account of activist struggles in the context of Celtic spirituality, ecofeminism, and liberation theology. In regard to this last, I was greatly struck by the comment of its founder, Gustavo Guitiérrez, that the aim of his work was not freedom *from* something, but freedom *to* love (REF):

Guitiérrez describes [liberation from sin] as that 'which attacks the deepest roots of all servitude; for sin is the breaking of friendship with God and with other human beings'. Liberation, he concludes, 'gets to the very source of social injustice and other forms of human oppression and reconciles us with God and our fellow human beings'. It sets us free at a social, psychological and spiritual level of experience. 'Free for what?' Guitiérrez asks. 'Free to love' he concludes, adding that 'to liberate' means '*to give life*'.

Alistair MacIntosh, *Soil and Soul*, Chapter 15

Freedom to love. This inspires all of this: that for all the suffering in the world, inner and outer, we may hold onto the possibility to *love* this: being alive, being in time. Inside and out, there is so much more to this than contemporary culture admits. The limitless possibility of being alive is not the preserve of the privileged.

We get hurt in life, in all manner of ways. We spend a great deal of time thinking about what we are scared of, but for all this chatter, what is fear? I think that it must come from our wounds, personal and collective, and who knows how far and deep into the collective unconscious, and into past lives this runs. Our wounds readily become our fear. In myth and alchemy, there is great significance to the wounded healer. These ways of knowing understand that a wound can heal, can scar, and can become our gift.

Our wounds can and do become our fears, but also can become our gifts. And if the line or argument in this essay is any way correct, then this is of enormous significance for our contemporary situation: the pain of our history is vast, and in honouring this pain, which is central to Joanna Macy's work, these wounds can perhaps become our gift, in the struggle for a just future. Otherwise they are our fears. And this is equally true in our personal lives in relation to our personal experience: our wounds are our fears, unless they become our gifts. And such self-development matters, and matters intensely, because who we are and what we have to give matters, and if we are not living this, then we will engage with the world by all manner of internalised and projected fear, and hence perpetuate fear in ourselves and others.

This is where oppression begins. If we are wounded, the dynamics of projection and internalisation then readily lead to such a state. We can internalise pain, and come to think that something that is someone else's fault is our own, and we can put pain onto others by projecting that which lies in our darkness. And both of these processes are unconscious, as Jung notes: projection is something that *happens to you*.

Theologians have struggled with the problem of evil for centuries; we think the world is full of light and dark, and in a sense it is. But my sense is that what is at stake is not the struggle of light over dark, but the hold that that the darkness has on us: if it holds no power over us, then we can commit evil, if it troubles us, then through that crack, the universe invites us to change. The darkness is where we haven't looked, but there is a strong possibility that, personally and culturally, we will see it elsewhere until we do.

Oppression, inner and outer, stands in the way of freedom to love, the aim of liberation theology, and in the way of the free exercise of compassion, the stated aim of Steiner's visionary philosophy. Freedom to love says nothing prescriptive, it says nothing about what one will do (a little like Pirsig's *Quality*), and it speaks to the possibility of

living without fear, and the alchemical transformation from wounded to healer, from poison to cure (significantly — especially to the pharmaceutical industry — the Greek *pharma* means both). Hence overcoming oppression at all levels (inner, interpersonal, societal) is a spiritual task. And just as previously I elaborated some metaphysical ideas to emphasise the *contingent possibility of freedom* imparted by being in time, being in time is the ground for overcoming oppression. For the freedom is contingent on consciousness, and it with conscious work that we can painfully change the conversation with ourselves and with others, to see what is really there.

Hence psychology and politics takes centre stage. Through psychological undertaking, we can change the make for a better relationship between the conscious and the unconscious, and through politically aware undertaking we can make an inclusive space. It is in these worldly spaces that this spiritual tasks plays out; distancing ourselves from the nuance might be peaceful, but it does not bring about change. In both spheres, and at all levels, what is in question is *relationship*, and its possibility to change.

Throughout, I have referred to that which would conventionally be described as ‘power’ as ‘power over’. For power in the conventional sense is not power, and is anything but. I think there are two sources of real power in the universe. One is psychological transformation. How after sometimes years of work, and using all sorts of methods, something can shift. Something that held you has a but less of a hold. You are freer, and it happened to you. It is anything but an achievement. The other is community. Although widely decimated in modernity, we are social creatures, and at all levels, from practical to psychological, we are dependent on each other. No one can face do this alone, supporting each other, we have a chance. In *Sacred Economics*, Charles Eisenstein makes the excellent observations that in the event of the demise of civilisation, having gold under your mattress would be the worst thing to have, while being part of a community would be the best. Both of these true sources of power leave little place for excessive ego, beyond what is required to make the inner and outer efforts

that your life demands. They are in total contrast to ‘power over’, which is perverse because it values life differentially, which can only be sustained by an excessive ego, but also exactly not be free: drawing on the earlier references to *Feminism and the Master of Nature*, a key theme of this work is how an oppressive self other relationship denies dependency; if there is dependency to deny in some contrived or blinded way, then there is a dependency, and hence no freedom. The oppressor cannot be free.

We can reclaim the power as something *within* and *between* us, rather than *over* anything or anyone. And in doing so we bridge the ancient and the postmodern, because in re-finding inner power and re-building community, we draw on the most ancient and perennial wisdom of humanity, and in critiquing power over, we draw on the postmodern thought, that clearly understands the world as comprised of power relations, rather than arbitrary statements that serve power.

We get hurt. Wounds become fears, and through internalisation and projection, these become inner and outer oppression, and the possibility of true power that lives in all of us, and can never be extinguished, even with death, becomes a perverse substitute: power over, which can only be sustained by unconsciousness, and sooner or later, everything cracks. It should be clear that none of this any way excuses oppression; rather I explore these dynamics to make a case for nuanced psychological and political discourse that seeks to continuously overcome oppression as a matter of survival. There is ample hardship in human evolution to account for a rich and dark collective unconscious, that can easily overtake us. All the pain is carried within us at some level. The wounds are there.

What are the implications of power over and the implications of true power? Put simply, oppresional contexts propagate, by fucking everyone up. They likely result in what is inside being expressed unconsciously. True power is hard, it means working with people and situations that are uncomfortable, which in turns means looking inside

to see why. The political and the psychological can then grow in a healthy way. To see this, we note that if the psychological and the political are mixed at an unconscious level, two significant pathologies can occur: we can demean our self, or an other, for the wrong reasons, and we can demean an idea for the wrong reasons. If we see how our psychology is informing our political awareness, or how political spaces are informing our psychological wellness, we will be more empowered in both.

Privilege and oppression have a outer, socio-economic and historical meaning, and also all of us are oppressed and privileged in a range of ways. It is wisely observed that we should listen with our privilege and act from our oppression. In the context of the above discussion, and in awareness of inner and outer oppression, and the dynamics that link them, privilege *can* be redeemed: it can go from that which you are *given* to your active *gift*.

Nietzsche remarks that everything in the universe is in love with each other. We do not need metaphysical territory to account for all the wounding in the human psyche, but if it does come to a mind that a corollary of this comment is that the universe is going to get hurt. One way or another, that is enough, and the rest follows easily. Facing the consequences is the task of freedom.



## 8 The Future Is Open

The future is open, and we can help each other.

Our fears (or hopes) are in no way sufficient to grasp the future, for it is vastly more open than they can circumscribe. And this is key for it leads to how the notions like ‘nothing matters’ and ‘it’s all in the mind’ (which are at some level true) are *not* at odds with purpose: a not uncommon stumbling block in spiritual and activist pursuit. *Fear of* and *hope for* prefer something other than the present moment, and as such create suffering (in the Buddhist sense), but just as much they are a response to it, and can be redeemed to true, generative hope and fear, raw emotion, prepositionally unqualified. Our wounds, rather than manifesting as something that draws us from the here and now, can become our unique and living contribution to an *open* future, born out of love, and only very slightly within our ability to foresee.

Life is beautiful and we are life: there does not need to be *reason* to fight for it. For true power, we need to be prepared to work with all life, and ourselves. The more we neglect the latter the more we jeopardise the former. We are dangerous animals. But empathy is born in the same fire as oppression.

We are rivers of light, and light casts a shadow; while the dynamics of internalisation and projection is the light of consciousness casting its shadow. The consciousness experiencing itself as the form that is emptiness is the unfolding future. Diachronically and synchronically, we are a matrix of light. In our work, our work on our wounds, and the gifts they can become, it is about us. But holding this sense, it also really isn’t.

In the earlier discussions of the challenge before us to cultivate enough power within and between to turn the tide, one of the ways we can perhaps draw comfort is that power over has already lost. We do not know how much it will take with it, and it could

take everything, but it has utterly and miserably lost. Power over is nothing, empires are dirt, anyone who needs to exercise power over is insecure, small comfort though it may be for the oppressed. Another way to draw comfort is the inextricability of social and ecological justice: the crisis of our time demands that oppression is fully faced.

The fight for social and ecological justice is the work of many people, and it is in the work — inner and outer — that change happens. We will reform the relationship between science, spirituality, and sustainability, and here ancient and critical thought will serve us well.

Activism can take so many forms. No act of compassion, no act of healing, no act of raising consciousness is ever wasted. The universe is full of meaning, and this will always be true. As such it is anything but a blank slate, and never will be, but we can write all over it anew. I spoke of Quality as the ultimate source. In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, much of the book is dedicated to understanding the relationship of Quality to science, but art gets a sentence: Quality is its stated purpose. Art is inconceivable without pain; and art is also inconceivable without awareness of pain; and as such it can be seen to central to everything that has been said: art is how we create the world anew, life is art, and life is the meaning of life. In art, we can know pain alchemised into awareness of it, and laughter.

We can learn from permaculture that everything can help each other, synergistically, creating something beautiful and abundant. Can we be permaculture? We can, and it will take great nobility, humility, fierceness, compassion and failure. It will take life, and it will give life. Human life needs the the living earth to be with it, and the dying earth needs human life to be with it.

One of the seemingly hardest reconciliations to make is of the spiritual and psychological, Hillman's 'peaks and vales', the heights and depths. We are rivers (the psychic

unfolding) of light (the source), and this is an image that can bring these two together. We are edgy god. We are this unfolding: god is not the idea (that arises from this), it is this. The realisation of the significance of human consciousness is admitting unstable, edgy, evolving god. We often find that when returning from high places (the peaks), what we have learned seems to fall away. It is not a lessening though, but a painful heightening, painful for the loss, for the everyday places (the vales) is where the challenge of freedom is lived.

Consciousness is the burning edge, but also the vulnerable, tender edge, of new life. This is what I think Lord of the Rings is about: in a world of archetypal figures (good and evil), it is only the hobbits that undergo a psychological reckoning. Frodo and Gollum encounter each other in each other and in themselves, and both are sacrificed for each other. Much more could be said, but this is a myth of our time: we bear the burden, and we can change – we can change ourselves and the world.

Life is incandescent, and we are rivers of love.

## 9 Key references

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