Green Idealism and the Educational Endeavour: Towards a Philosophical Critique of Materialism to Meet the Challenge of Climate Change

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ABSTRACT: The recent COP 26 conference in Glasgow served to highlight the urgency of dealing with the urgent challenges of climate change. Although some progress was made, the various activist groups – especially those involving younger people who had been spearheading the campaigns in this field – were generally disappointed with the Glasgow outcome, and there are demands for a redoubling of effort at political, economic and educational levels. The role of education – whether this is in the informal sphere of social media or in formal science or environmental education – is clearly of the first importance in this general project. After exploring some of the central issues in this sphere, a case for introducing a critique of materialism – both scientific and cultural – will be examined as a foundation for an appropriate and effective educational contribution to this vitally necessary work. It will be argued that a non-materialist framework – along the lines of the models being developed by neo-idealist thinkers such as Donald Hoffman, Steve Taylor and Bernardo Kastrup – is required to mount a realistic challenge to the urgent problems facing everyone on the planet.

Key Words: climate change, green revolution, materialism, idealism.

I. INTRODUCTION

In a recent article published in *The Guardian*, Tayo Bero (2021) noted the general disappointment at the outcomes of the recent COP 26 meeting of nations in Glasgow and summed up the present state of affairs by observing that:

As the race to save the planet continues, much of climate action rhetoric these days remains split between personal calls to action – such as recycling or cutting down on individual consumption – and calls for governments, corporations and international organizations to wind down fossil fuel production, switch to renewable energy on a mass scale and protect key ecosystems that can help mitigate the effects of the climate crisis (p.1)

This summary was followed by a range of suggestions for those of us who might feel daunted or powerless in the face of the intimidating obstacles in the way of progress in this sphere. The scale of the problem was graphically illustrated in the general disappointment of some of the main climate activist groups over the outcomes of the recent COP 26 Glasgow conference. Greenpeace (Chadwick, 2021), for example, after welcoming the 'tiny bit of progress' in areas such as phasing down fossil fuel emissions, the 'pledge to slash methane 30% by 2030', and the commitment by 100 governments to a 'voluntary side agreement that promised to end deforestation and protect indigenous rights' declared, along with most climate activist groups, COP 26 to be a disappointing failure. Even if governments managed to meet their modest targets for 2030, the predictions are that 'we would have 2.4°C of warming in 2100. But right now, current policies put us at 2.7°C' (pp.1-2). The scenario is even more disastrous for developing countries with floods, drought, famine, rising sea levels, and wildfires predicted particularly for Asian and African Nations (European Investment Bank, 2020).

The prominent role of young people in climate activism over recent years has been well documented, and school strikes for climate action inspired by the passionate work of Greta Thunberg heads the list of the most successful and effective campaigns (Plan International, 2019). In addition to such informal global activism, young people are involved in a broad range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working for climate justice in countries around the world (United Nations, 2021). In spite of this prominent role of young people, formal

education has been disappointingly slow in taking up the environmental challenge. As Fiona Harvey (2020) observed in discussing the role of children in climate activism:

With so much focus on children – who will have to live with the consequences of climate breakdown and ecological disaster, species loss and pollution – the role of education is key. But in England, climate change barely figures on the national curriculum, and campaigners complain that schools are not required to teach it directly (p.1).

In fact, when Michael Gove was Education Secretary in 2013 references to climate change where removed from the national curriculum and replaced by requirements to cover environmental change (ibid.). More recently, Andrew Charlton-Perez (2021), Professor of Meteorology at Reading University, expressed similar criticisms in noting that:

The word "climate" features twice in the science curriculum for Key Stage 4 (KS4) for 15- and 16-year-olds – instructing teachers to explain the "potential effects" of greenhouse gases, plus "evidence and uncertainties" for human-caused climate change. And once for KS3 (12-14 years), but not at all for KS2 (8-11 years) and KS1 (5-7 years) (p.2).

These shortcomings were recently debated in the House of Commons with Hansard (2021) reporting that 'climate change barely features on the national curriculum' and recommending that:

We need to put climate change at the heart of education. In practice, this would mean that properly taught climate change education would be integrated into subject areas across the curriculum—not just physics, chemistry and geography, but economics, history, arts and food technology. It would be integrated into vocational training courses as well, with plumbing courses teaching how to install low-carbon heating systems and catering colleges covering sustainable diets. Climate change would be a thread woven into every part of our education system, just as it impacts every part of our lives (p.1).

All of these suggestions for curriculum development are both laudable and welcome but, of course, are some way from practical implementation in schools and colleges. However, in responding to the contemporary critical challenge a number of useful recommendations for practice have emerged in recent years.

II. EDUCATION FOR A GREENER WORLD

The UNESCO (2020) programme *Education for Sustainable Development* (ESD) incorporates a wide range of resources and materials all of which are intended to address the 'great individual and societal transformation required to address the urgent sustainability challenges' (p.9). The 17 sustainable development goals identified by the member nations target key educational projects designed to address the global climate change challenge. Priority action areas include 'transforming learning environments, building capacities of educators, empowering and mobilizing youth projects' (ibid.,p.60) at both local and global levels. In a similar vein, Ramli, Rasult & Affendi (2018) offer a comprehensive range of specific curriculum recommendations within the framework of the knowledge and skills required for sustainable green developments for a fourth industrial revolution. They identify three key areas:

Employee productivity – reemployment, green job opportunities, wage, reduce unemployment

Green technologies - material shortage, automation, smart manufacturing, innovation

Education - skills for green economy, up-skilling, social skills, environmental skills

Their conclusion that 'green skills are essential to ensuring a transition into a low-carbon economy' (pp.9-10) echo the recommendations of activist organisations such as Greenpeace and UNESCO. In terms of practical curriculum implementation, the work of UNICEF (2020) has identified a broad range of successful interventions involving young people around the world. All of this calls for the sort of radical plan to save education identified in recent work by Michael Hrebeniak and Isabelle McNeill (2021) at Cambridge University which argues for an interdisciplinary green dimension of educational activity from school to university designed to address the urgent social, economic and climate challenges which are threatening the future of all life on earth.

A central element in such green educational aims must be the determination to enhance the standing (both in terms of policy priorities and funding) of technical and vocational education (Hyland, 2014, 2018) since the key objectives for a green skills revolution will not be achieved without such a re-alignment of the

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vocational/academic imbalance. In this respect, political parties and trades unions have published some ambitious plans (UnionLearn, 2020: Labour National Policy Forum, 2020; DfE, 2021) but there is a need for a more granular specificity in this area such as that identified in recent work by Richard Bull and Ana Rita Domingues (2022, pp.1-2) who describe four clear steps on the way to developing skills for a green economy.

- New vocational courses to provide for the estimated 1.18 million new low carbon jobs predicted to be available by 2050 (LGA, 2021)
- Partnerships between local colleges, universities, and employers to connect education and training with the needs of an emerging green economy
- Support for small and medium enterprises in developing new technology and jobs in response to emerging needs
- Gender equality in relation to ensuring a just transition from the current fossil-fuel to a new low carbon economy

Many of these central issues – and related ones such as existential threats to biodiversity and the challenge of infectious diseases – are examined in a recent collection of readings edited by Herner Saeverot (2022) which argues forcefully for educational innovation as the first line of defence against the many challenges facing humankind **III. SCIENTIFIC MATERIALISM: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

All of the practical education policies and curriculum recommendations outlined above will be centrally important in responding to the current climate change challenge, particularly the idea of incorporating a green dimension in all curriculum areas and upgrading practical green skills within vocational education and training. However, a key purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of criticizing the scientific materialism which – it will be argued – underpins and supports the present manic and irrational consumption of the earth's resources which is responsible for causing much of the current catastrophic climate change. In offering such a critique, it is necessary to examine carefully some of the basic concepts – specifically materialism and idealism – which will be used in the following arguments.

First, materialism which, of course, has both ordinary, everyday meaning and also specialist connotations within science and philosophy. In order to define clearly the principal aims of this critique, it needs to be stressed that the scientific materialist worldview identified below is inextricably connected by critical commentators such as Kastrup, Hoffman and Taylor with the ordinary language or everyday meaning of materialism (as distinct, for example, from its technical use in Marxist and postmodern analyses, see Olssen, 2006). Mal Leicester (1999) describes that materialism in terms of:

inordinate, or excessive, valuing of material objects and activities. This includes valuing material objects and activities as an end in themselves; it also implies a hierarchical valuing of material objects and activities over the emotional, intellectual, psychological or spiritual needs of others and/or the self. Crass materialism may be seen in such behaviours and attitudes as possessiveness, covetousness, envy, non-generosity, hedonism, acquisitiveness, and greed (p.263).

The links between such materialistic values and scientific materialism are located in the mainstream scientific picture of a world of shadowy material objects – at bottom just quantum fields – whose true or real nature is forever closed off to individual centres of consciousness isolated from each other and from a world which is indifferent to human purposes. As the philosophers, Thomas Nagel (2012) and William Jaworksi (2016) have claimed, not everything can be reduced to physics and chemistry, and attempts to do so have conjured up visions of bleak and soulless worlds.

In a similar way, idealism has a number of denotations/connotations which are worth disentangling. A primary meaning would relate to having values which are deeply held principles – ideals – which may be used to inspire and guide practice in various ways. In this sense, the 'green idealism' which is the central theme of this article would incorporate a passionate commitment to climate action which is powerfully expressed in the words of Greta Thunberg given at the World Economic Forum in 2019: "I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is." (BBC, 2019, p.1), The other meaning of idealism, drawn from philosophy and science, represents a set of ideas and arguments which seek to challenge and replace scientific materialism as the dominant ideology and *telos* of contemporary Western (though not Eastern) culture. This philosophical perspective is

provided by means of a diverse range of interdisciplinary arguments expressed in the writings of the neoidealists discussed below.

Before offering a critique of scientific materialism it is worth pointing out the many unanswered questions of contemporary science – from a universe which contains 96% of unexplained and unknown dark matter/energy (Panek, 2011), to the still unsolved hard problem of consciousness (Chalmers, 1996), to the difficulties of interpreting the quantum world (Rovelli, 2021) – which the recent scientific triumphalism of the discovery of the Higgs boson or the rapid development of a Covid-19 vaccine might tend to deflect us from. As Philip Goff (2019) has suggested, in terms of an ontological conception of the cosmos, unvarnished materialism leaves much to be said. As he puts it, 'physics tells us not what matter is but only what it does' (p.125). Similarly, Kastrup (2021) reminds us that Bertrand Russell observed that 'science says nothing about the intrinsic nature of the physical world, but only about its structure and behaviour' (p.86). More significantly a contemporary of Russell, the physicist Sir Arthur Eddington, argued that 'the only physical entity we have intrinsic access to is our own nervous system, whose nature is clearly experiential' (ibid.). Given all this, Kastrup asks:

Might this not be the case for the rest of the physical world as well? Under this panpsychist hypothesis, the explanatory gap disappears: consciousness isn't generated by physical arrangements but, instead, is the intrinsic nature of the physical world. The latter, in turn, is merely the extrinsic appearance of conscious inner life (ibid.,p.87).

This view that the universe is fundamentally mental or experiential in nature – labelled analytic idealism by Kastrup (2019), panspiritism by Taylor (2018), objective idealism or cosmopsychism by Chalmers (1995), and conscious realism by Hoffman (2019) – not only satisfies the parsimony demands of Occam's Razor whilst avoiding the dualism of materialism and physicalism – but also neatly solves the hard problem of consciousness and provides a more satisfactory account of the nature of reality than scientific materialism. The full implications of this idealist version of panpsychism are discussed in the next section but at this stage it is worth outlining the key features of the idealists' thoroughgoing criticisms of the nature and implications of materialism.

As already noted, science tells us nothing about the intrinsic nature of material objects since it is concerned only *quantities* – mass, spin, charge momentum, and so on which can be measured and labelled with concepts and numbers - whilst saying nothing about the *qualities* which we experience in the world such as colour, taste, smell and, at the root of the mind/body problem, subjective phenomenal experiences such as listening to music or appreciating a beautiful sunset. Moreover, Kastrup (2014) points out the crucial difference 'between materialism as a *metaphysics* and scientific theories as *models*' (p.10). Scientific materialism observes patterns and regularities in nature and constructs models which explain objects and forces – such as subatomic particles and negative electric charge – in terms of their relationship to other cognate constructions. Explaining and predicting how aspects of the material world operate relative to other aspects reveals nothing about the fundamental nature of everything in nature. The upshot of this, as Kastrup argues, may be expressed in the following way:

Capturing the observable patterns and regularities of the elements of reality, relative to each other, is an empirical and scientific question. *But pondering about the fundamental nature of these elements is not; it is a philosophical question* (ibid., p.12, original italics).

Consequently, there is no bridge which can join and support the move from scientific materialism to metaphysical materialism. The scientific method is a foundation for knowledge about the cosmos – at both classical and quantum levels – but it does *not* justify metaphysical conceptions of reality and provides no evidence for beliefs in metaphysical materialism or, indeed, so-called common-sense realism. We need to look elsewhere for this.

IV. THE NEW IDEALISTS

Many of the shortcomings of materialism outlined above are fully illustrated in the long-standing 'hard problem of consciousness' (Chalmers, 1995, 1996), and it is in the search for a solution to this problem that the neoidealist thinkers have constructed their most innovative and cogent arguments. Many of these arguments make use of the idea of 'panpsychism' (Hyland, 2021) though – as noted in the preceding sections – idealists tend to prefer their own terminology and ontology in relation to this phenomenon. Shan Gao (2014) offers a succinct identification of the contemporary background to accounts of panpsychism in noting that: Consciousness is the most familiar phenomenon. Yet it is the hardest one to explain. There are two distinct processes relating to the phenomenon: one is objective physical processes such as neural processing in the brain, and the other is the concomitant subjective conscious experience (Kindle edn., loc..47).

Forms of panpsychism are thus introduced to make the connection between the objective and subjective aspects of reality. Philip Goff (2018) expresses the basic problem by noting that:

Nothing is more certain than consciousness, and yet nothing is harder to incorporate into our scientific picture of the world. We know a great deal about the brain, much of it discovered in the last eighty years...But none of this has shed any light on how the brain produces consciousness (p.5).

Galen Strawson (2006) – one of the leading exponents of a physicalist form of panpsychism – prefers to characterise the contemporary debate by declaring that:

Consciousness... [by which] I mean what most people mean in this debate: experience of any kind whatever...is the most familiar thing there is, whether it's experience of emotion, pain, understanding what someone is saying, seeing, hearing, touching, tasting or feeling. It is in fact the only thing in the universe whose ultimate intrinsic nature we can claim to know. It is utterly unmysterious (p.1)

Strawson then goes on to assert that the so-called objective and unmysterious nature of the physical world is, in fact, far from the truth. As he comments:

The nature of physical stuff, by contrast, is deeply mysterious, and physics grows stranger by the hour. (Richard Feynman's remark about quantum theory — "I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics" — seems as true as ever.) Or rather, more carefully: The nature of physical stuff is mysterious *except insofar as consciousness is itself a form of physical stuff* (ibid., original italics).

Although Strawson's account does offer some sort of solution to the hard problem, Kastrup (2019, 2021) shows that it is open to all the problems of the Cartesian mental/physical dualism that bedevils scientific materialism and, moreover, is extremely unparsimonious in its implications.

In addition to the glaring inadequacies of the dualism which physicalist panpsychism merely perpetuates, there is the absurdity of positing a theory which involves consciousness somehow emerging from non-conscious material. Moreover, as Kastrup (2021) argues, from a philosophical perspective, 'materialism is...unparsimonious – that is, uneconomical, unnecessarily extravagant – and arguably incoherent' (9). He elaborates this notion:

As we have seen, matter is a theoretical abstraction of mind. So when materialists try to reduce mind to matter, they are effectively trying to reduce mind to one of mind's conceptual creations. This is akin to a dog chasing its own tail. Better yet, it is like a painter who having painted a self-portrait, points at it and proclaims himself to *be* the portrait (p.10).

Kastrup's concludes with the observation that 'materialism is a relic from an older naiver, and less sophisticated age...But it has no place in this day and age' (ibid., p.11).

However, the full idealist project needs to explain how the notion of a mental universe can accommodate our everyday assumptions that world really does seem to be outside of us and that our individual selves are separated from those of other minds. Kastrup (2019) proposes the much simpler and more parsimonious strategy which argues for an 'idealist ontology consistent with empirical observations', and which obviates the so-called mind-body problem of explaining consciousness. The position is summarised as follows:

spatially unbound consciousness is posited to be nature's sole ontological primitive. We, as well as all other living organisms, are dissociated alters of this unbound consciousness. The universe we see around us is the extrinsic appearance of phenomenality surrounding – but dissociated from – our alter. The living organisms we share the world with are the extrinsic appearances of other dissociated alters (p.57).

On this account, our subjective experience as 'dissociated alters' – that is, individually segmented parts of an all-encompassing mental cosmos – is founded upon and supported by a robust metaphysical idealism which may be used to circumvent the false picture presented by physical science and the illusions of mind-body dualism.

Kastrup goes on to elaborate his thesis that the cosmos is mental and everything is mind by means of a serious of ingenious metaphors and analogies which seek to explain the world revealed to us through experience in ways which are both cogent, precise, and more epistemologically and metaphysically satisfying than the mainstream materialist theories. We are asked to picture the ultimate primitive mind or cosmic consciousness as a 'thin, mirror-like membrane with some rigidity, but also some elasticity' such that the 'qualities of experience now correspond to the specific patterns of vibration of the membrane' (2014, ibid., p.138). There is, thus, 'nothing to reality but the medium of mind itself' (ibid.) and all our experiences of the world may be explained in terms of the vibrations and oscillations of the membrane of mind. Subjective individualised experiences of the world may be correlated with the ripples and loops of this membrane which brings about segmented islands of consciousness. The metaphor is thus intended to explain both why we seem to have limited control over the unfolding of events in the world and also why we seem to be separated from each other in terms of our individualised states of consciousness.

In other work, however, Kastrup (2015, 2016, 2019) is concerned to emphasise that both of these characteristics of subjective consciousness – lack of control and individual ego states – are actually largely illusory and, as such, present us with a confused and partial perspective on reality. In order to escape such confuse it is necessary to wield Occam's Razor forcefully and accept that everything is a modification of consciousness. As he explains:

I claim that we do not need more than consciousness to explain reality: *all things and phenomena can be made sense of as excitations of consciousness itself.* According to this more parsimonious view, the ground of all reality is a transpersonal flow of subjective experiences that I metaphorically describe as a stream. Our personal awareness is simply a localization of this flow: a whirlpool in the stream (2015, p.13, original italics).

Following on from Eddington's assertion that the 'stuff of the world is mind-stuff' and Julian Huxley's idea that 'mind or something of the nature of mind must exist throughout the entire universe' (in Gao, 2014, loc.827), Mathews (2011) argues that 'a holistic or cosmological version of panpsychism, according to which the universe as a whole is the ultimate locus of mind, or of mind-like properties, can function as a rival to materialism' (p.2). Like Kastrup's radical idealist perspectives, this position is taken to its logical conclusion by Hoffman (2017, 2019) in this theory of conscious realism.

Hoffman's startlingly radical thesis incorporates ideas and data from evolutionary theory, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, quantum physics and philosophy to establish a position which suggests that our assumptions about our knowledge of the objective world are mistaken and, moreover, that forms of consciousness are fundamental to everything that we may claim to know, think and experience. There are two principal aspects of Hoffman's approach: one drawn from evolutionary game theory which purports to explain why our perceptions of reality are mistaken, and another strand which attempts to move beyond the hard problem of consciousness by offering a conception of interacting conscious agents supported by a mathematical model of consciousness.

In dealing with the counter-intuitive notion that our senses deceive us as to the nature of reality – why would evolution, after all, not favour true perceptions of an objective world – Hoffman uses the metaphor of a computer interface (p.xii). The purpose of a desktop interface, he argues, is not to reveal the "truth" of the computer in terms of its various circuits, voltages and layers of software but to hide this truth to enable the pragmatic task of writing emails and completing internet research. This metaphor is then applied to evolution and our experience of the world in the following way:

This is what evolution has done. It has endowed us with senses that hide the truth and display the simple icons we need to survive long enough to raise offspring...You may want truth, but you don't need truth. Perceiving truth would drive our species extinct. (ibid.,pp..xii-xiii).

This argument from evolution is reinforced by data from the field of evolutionary game theory to construct an operationally pragmatic theorem which Hoffman labels 'Fitness-Beats-Truth (FBT)' which is itself based on universal Darwinism by which survival, adaptation and reproduction trumps all other considerations. Applying game theory models to this construction (Prakash, et al, 2017), we arrive at the astonishing conclusion that 'fitness drives truth to extinction' (Hoffman, 2019, p.61). This is expressed in the observation that 'What the FBT theorem reveals is that natural selection, however major or minor a force it may be, does not shape our

perceptions to be veridical'. Hoffman then goes on to demonstrate how this perspective influences – indeed, dramatically changes – just about every feature of human experience across all disciplines. Given that 'evolution shaped our perceptions to hide the truth and to guide adaptive behaviour' the key question is how are we to escape from the 'lifesaving fiction' (ibid.,pp.178-9) of both the everyday and scientific view of reality to arrive at a more accurate picture of the world. To answer this challenge it is necessary to return to foundations and to investigate conscious experience itself.

After examining various speculations – most notably those proposed by Nick Bostrom and others – that consciousness may arise out of a computer simulation (see Hyland, 2019), Hoffman (2019) employs the Occam's Razor mentioned in earlier sections to conclude (as Kastrup does also) that 'all attempts at a physicalist theory of consciousness have failed' (p.183). He reasons that:

Occam's Razor, applied to the science of consciousness, counsels a monism over an amphibious dualism, a theory based on one kind rather than two...If we grant that there are conscious experiences, and that there are conscious agents that enjoy and act on experiences, then we can try to construct a scientific theory of consciousness that posits that conscious agents – not objects in spacetime – are fundamental, and that the world consists entirely of conscious agents (ibid.,pp.182-3).

Hoffman accepts that this theory of conscious realism may be mistaken and, in the light of the need for verifiability/falsifiability, he offers a mathematical model of how conscious agents interact within networks (ibid.,pp.203ff.), and comments that:

Conscious realism makes a bold claim: consciousness, not spacetime and its objects, is fundamental reality and is properly described as a network of conscious agents. To earn its keep, conscious realism must do serious work ahead. It must ground a theory of quantum gravity, explain the emergence of our spacetime interface and its objects, explain the appearance of Darwinian evolution within that interface, and explain the evolutionary emergence of human psychology (ibid.,p.198).

Given the enormity of this task, Hoffman insists that his theory goes beyond panpsychism to avoid any hint of a dualism which may, even remotely, allow for materialist conceptions of the world. All such materialist notions fail to acknowledge the limits of our interface and mistakenly take these as a picture of reality. As he expresses it, 'We have finite capacities of perception and memory. But we are embedded in an infinite network of conscious agents whose complexity exceeds our finite capacities' (ibid.,pp.186-7). In the conclusion, he remarks (using the analogy of the simulated world created in the movie *The Matrix*):

What is spacetime? This book has offered you the red pill. Spacetime is your virtual reality, a headset of your own making. The objects you see are your own invention. You create them with a glance and destroy them with a blink. You have worn this headset all your life. What happens if you take it off? (ibid.,p.202).

V. THE NEW IDEALIST WORLDVIEW: ETHICS AND SPIRITUALITY

The radically alternative perspectives offered by the neo-idealist visions – allowing us to, using Hoffman's terminology, remove the old materialist headset – open up a wealth of possibilities for education in the sphere of climate change and the move towards a greener world and more sustainable form of life. Practical aspects of curriculum development in this domain were outlined in an earlier section but these need to be underpinned by philosophical arguments relating to the broad domains of ethics and spirituality.

<u>Ethics</u>

Jeremy Lent (2017) describes how the the idea of 'conquering nature' (pp.277ff.) derived from the scientific revolution emerging from the Renaissance – particularly from the writings of Bacon, Boyle and Leibniz – led to the exploitation of the earth's resources for material profit. Such a powerful metaphor later came to legitimize the development of capitalism, possessive individualism, colonial conquest and the 'untrammelled exploitation' (ibid., pp.309ff.) of the natural world. Kastrup (2019) similarly wishes to challenge the 'physicalist narrative' which 'enables a sense of direct egoic control over nature' (p.211). Such a perspective serves to 'turn the universe into a mechanical contraption fuelled by mere chance [which] drains the meaning out of life' (ibid.,p.214). Taylor (2019) is even more forceful in his attack on materialism. He asserts that:

The materialist worldview is bleak and barren; it tells us that life is fundamentally meaningless, that we're just here for a few decades and it doesn't really matter what we do...It seems inevitable that people should try to take

refuge from the bleakness of materialism, treating themselves to as much fun and as many consumer products as they can afford, or trying to build up their wealth and status and power (pp.229-230)

As an alternative to this bleak vision, a perspective which places consciousness at the heart of existence allows for the fostering of a 'spiritual worldview [which] tells us that our lives are meaningful and purposeful' (ibid.,p.230).

As important as promoting such a non-materialist vision, an ethical standpoint will require the provision of a critical alternative to the current short-term approaches to work, economics and the organisation of politics and society which has led to the depletion of the earth's resources and the climate crisis. In a number of writings over the years, Oliver James (2007,2008) has argued that levels of emotional distress in industrialised, urbanised societies are much higher for English-speaking countries such as Britain, United States, Canada and New Zealand than they are in other nations such as France, Spain, Belgium, Japan and the Scandinavian states. Using the World Health Organisation (WHO) definition of emotional distress to include illnesses such as 'depression, anxiety, substance abuse and impulse disorder' James (2008, p.10) contends that - contra recent fashionable notions about genes – such distress has little genetic causation but is directly linked to both parental upbringing and the impact of 'selfish capitalism' which expounds radically materialistic values in conjunction with bringing about a deterioration of income levels and working conditions for millions of ordinary people in mainly English-speaking countries over the last thirty years or so. Gerhardt (2010) presents similar arguments in her survey of the 'selfish society' brought about by neo-liberal economic policies. Addictive and mindless consumption connected to growth for its own sake (or rather for the sake of a minority of rich capitalists) has brought us to the brink of disaster. She expresses this in graphic terms in saying that, over the last few decades, many people in the developed world have been:

Like children let loose in the sweet shop, we have gorged ourselves on everything we could get hold of, blissfully unaware of the true cost of our activities. We have been careless or ignorant of the impact of our behaviour on the poorest and most powerless inhabitants of the planet, on our own children, and on the environment itself (p.17).

Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) have demonstrated the impact of such careless self-interest on the world's richest nations in indicating direct correlations between inequality of income and levels of mental illness, addiction, rates of imprisonment, levels of trust and the general health and well-being of nations. In all cases the data are unequivocal: 'most of the important health and social problems of the rich world are more common in unequal societies' (p.173). In an update to their groundbreaking study (2018), the researchers reiterate and justify the main arguments that 'people in societies with bigger income gaps between rich and poor are much more likely to suffer from a wide range of health and social problems than those living in more equal societies' (p.xvii). More significantly for the main concerns of this discussion, Wilkinson & Pickett demonstrate that the manic consumption and drivers of economic growth at any cost prominent in the richer northern states has revealed graphically the 'environmental limits to growth' (p.219). By emphasising co-operation, equality and the overall well-being of citizens, improvements in the 'social functioning of our societies will put environmental sustainability within our reach' (p.264).

The crucial role of an ethical dimension of educational innovation – emphasizing social justice and equality - to meet the existential threats of climate change and the global spread of diseases such as Covid is foregrounded by Saeverot (2022) and colleagues in a recent collection of articles on the topic. Consequently, in addition to challenging the selfish short-term perspectives which appear – like possessive individualism and the belief in freedom of the will – to be part of the hidden curriculum of much of Western (though not, to the same extent, of Eastern) culture, there is an urgent need to educate students with an eye to future worlds and future generations rather being obsessed only with our contemporary needs and concerns. This question is addressed in a recent book by Toby Ord (2020), an Australian philosopher who helped to popularise the notion of effective altruism (Effective Altruism, 2020) which sets out – like Peter Singer's *The Life You Can Save* (2016) - to provide a cogent ethical justification for charitable giving. Having dealt with our current existential problems, Ord, in his new book, turns to the principal existential threats to future generations.

Arguing that we have as much ethical responsibility for the care of future generations as we have in relation to contemporary humankind, Ord painstakingly analyses both natural and anthropogenic risks to humanity in his attempt to offer both factual and moral arguments to support the claim that 'safeguarding humanity's future is the defining challenge of our time'. He goes on to observe that:

[W]e stand at a crucial moment in the history of our species. Fuelled by technological progress, our power has grown so great that for the first time in humanity's long history, we have the capacity to destroy ourselves – severing our entire future and everything we could become (pp.12-13).

<u>Spirituality</u>

David Carr (1996) has has usefully examined a number of rival conceptions of spirituality such as the Kantian notions of wonder, awe, the sublime and the ineffable which may be connected with aesthetic and affective psychological and intellectual processes. Dawkins (2017) favours versions of spirituality derived from contemplating the wonders and majesty of the natural world, and Harris (2006) explains spirituality in terms of 'investigating the nature of consciousness directly through sustained introspection' (p.209). What is common to all these versions of spirituality is some notion of holistic and transcendent understanding typical of metaphysical questioning – common in philosophy since the Ancient Greek thinkers – aimed at exploring the nature of human existence and our place in the world.

Advocating an orthodox materialist metaphysics, Hawking & Mlodinow (2010) – in claiming to be better than philosophers in answering the big questions such as 'what is the nature of reality?' and 'where did all this come from?' (p.5) – offer as their final answer something called 'M-theory...the only candidate for a complete theory of the universe' and the 'unified theory Einstein was hoping to find' (p.181). But this is a highly speculative theory rather than a definitive answer since we are asked to contemplate – without any experimental evidence to support it – a cosmos with perhaps 11 dimensions and which 'allows for 10500 different universes, each with its own laws' (ibid., p.118). We might be forgiven for responding to this abstract vision by observing that – borrowing the words of T.S. Eliot used in the *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1961 edn) – 'That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all' (p.14).

Alternative visions are readily available in the neo-idealist perspectives which posit consciousness as the ultimate primitive which generates and grounds all experiences of the world. Hoffman (2019) expresses the point very well in his observation:

I think that conscious realism can breach the wall between science and spirituality. The ideological barrier is a needless illusion, enforced by hoary misconceptions: that science requires a physicalist ontology that is anathema to spirituality, and that spirituality is impervious to the methods of science (p.199).

Similar arguments about the importance of alternative conceptions of reality – emphasising that *logos* needs to be balanced by *mythos* – are put forward by Ian McGilchrist (2012, 2021) in his work on the divided brain which foregrounds the importance of the right hemisphere in understanding the world rather than simply manipulating it. Drawing on a wealth of research on the asymmetrical nature of the divided brain – and the evidence of the narrower, manipulative, and utilitarian focus of the left hemisphere as opposed to the more holistic, expansive and creative right brain (2021), McGilchrist observes:

The left hemisphere tells us that the quest for meaning is meaningless, because it is not equipped to deal in meaning and understanding, but manipulating and processing...From the right hemisphere came careful observation of the natural world...a sense of the uniqueness of the individual, with interests that needed to be harmonised with those of the community, which itself was seen as a living, changing entity that was more than the sum of its parts (2012, pp.24, 33).

On this account, left-brain dominance is connected with materialist individualism whereas idealist communitarianism would link with the more holistic right-brain understanding of the world. Materialism posits a cosmos of isolated individuals alienated from an outside world of objects, and this perspective has helped to produce a culture of selfish individualism, manic consumerism and the near destruction of the planet. As Taylor (2018) concludes, 'moving beyond materialism means becoming able to perceive the vividness and sacredness of the world around us...transcending our sense of separateness so that we can experience our connectedness with nature and other living beings' (p.231).

VI. EDUCATION FOR ALL OUR FUTURES

Following the dire warnings of theorists such as Ord, Lent, Taylor and the climate science which informed the recent resolutions agreed at COP 26, educators are faced with the crucially urgent challenge of ensuring that our school and college students are equipped to add their weight to the existing youth movement in this sphere

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inspired by Greta Thunberg. In addition to the practical curriculum proposals offered by UNESCO, Greenpeace, political parties and the trades unions, it will be crucial for educators to emphasize the importance of the ethical and spiritual foundations which follow from the neo-idealist critique of materialism described above. Education is, of course, of the first importance here since – in Toby Ord's (2020) words – the ultimate goal is that of 'safeguarding humanity' (p.158) for future generations. As Ord concludes after identifying the major existential risks to our future:

We need to take responsibility for our future. Those of us alive right now are the only people who can fight against the present dangers; the only people who can build the communities, norms and institutions that will safeguard our future. Whether we are remembered as the generation who turned the corner to a bright and secure future, or not remembered at all, comes down to whether we rise to meet these challenges (ibid.,p.158).

Such an ethical and spiritual vision can provide the vital inspirational and motivational support for educators striving to deal with the urgent global challenges. Greta Thunberg's 'Youthquake' deserves nothing less. As Greta herself has warned us all: there must be no more 'blah, blah, blah' (BBC, 2021) about the climate crisis facing the planet.

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