Roy Bhaskar’s Premature Death: A Profound Loss for the Tradition of Dialectical Thinking

Abstract

By Otto Laske. This article is a reflection on the loss the dialectical tradition has incurred through Bhaskar’s early death. In particular, I spell out how his work contributed to CDF, and mention his utter humility as a person.

To my friends Brendan Cartmel, Jan DeVisch, Bruno Frischherz, Nick Shannon, Karin Ulmer, and Iva Vurdelja
in whose work dialectic has taken on a new form

With the early death of Roy Bhaskar (1944-2014), the theory and practice of dialectical thinking has suffered a great loss. It was Roy Bhaskar who, after the Frankfurt School and Sartre, single-handedly reinvigorated dialectic. As a philosopher, he sensed in dialectic the pulse of freedom in the specific sense of a possible way out of the master-slave predicament he saw society members labor under. The predicament was this: to be kept out of power by the powers that are, which in their sophisticated use of new technologies suggest that it is better to keep out of deep thinking, and in focusing on individuals’ consumptive needs meanwhile drive the production of added-value to the point of making the planet uninhabitable.

For Bhaskar the academic thinker this meant that people were falling victim to the long-standing philosophical tradition of “irrealism” which denies the existence of a real world independent of human thinking and action, and whose members thus remain confined to the “actual” world, unable to enter the “real” world on account of the epistemic fallacies – thinking errors – they commit (essentially, lack of dialectical thinking).

I took Bhaskar’s notion of freedom from coercive conventions to be a subversive academic belief that itself needed to be liberated from existing only in print, to become usable in the empirical world of organizations and global institutions. When writing volume 2 of Measuring Hidden Dimensions (2008), Bhaskar’s 1993 book, Dialectic: The pulse of freedom, therefore became for me a major pillar in presenting dialectic as a method of dialog between consultant/coach and organizational client.

In contrast to Bhaskar I came from the tradition of semi-structured developmental interviewing exercised in Basseches’ and Kegan’s work (but little talked about by them). So schooled, I took dialectic to be a dialog-based, not an argument-based, discipline. In this discipline, emphasis falls on letting knowledge emerge in a real-time dialog, and only secondarily on the printed page. In my teaching of dialectic at IDM, I was actually suggesting, in harmony with the dialogical turn in the social sciences since 2000, there really was no valid knowledge outside of that created through dialog between people, with printed-page knowledge a poor derivative of dialog, (exercised largely with oneself as a writer).
However in my view, dialectic as a way of knowing through real-time dialog with others needs to be situated within the real world as described by Bhaskar’s DCR (Dialectical Critical Realism). It is therefore within DCR that I saw DTF (as well as CDF) situated. To this day, I have not found a more convincing way of positioning DTF-dialectic than as a way of thinking embedded in Bhaskar’s dialectical ontology, and therefore, like it, centered on what is REAL (as thought) rather than only ACTUAL (as shown, e.g., on TV).

In a paper written for the last conference Bhaskar was to attend, in June of 2014, I presented CDF as a way of connecting Roy’s DCR to the world of work in organizations, using the diagram below. I pointed out that participants in IDM’s cognitive case study work, focused as they were on dialog, where actually modeling the use of dialectical thinking in real world organizations.

![Diagram of DTF and DCR](image)

**Fig. 1** DTF Thought Forms realized by IDM study cohorts modeling “deep thinking” between consultant/coach and client in the world of organizations

The pragmatic teaching methodology I used at the Interdevelopmental Institute (IDM) amounts to a very different take on Bhaskar’s work than is followed, for instance, in the integral movement as it begins to absorb Bhaskar’s dialectic -- not an easy task for it, given the pervasive absence of dialectical thinking in that movement so far.

The most striking difference between the integral and the IDM approach to Bhaskar’s dialectic lies in the fact that at IDM, dialectic is not exercised as an argument-based but a dialog-based discipline impersonated in real time, with individuals as well as teams, as shown above. In my conference paper, I referred to this as the *IDM case study cohort method* because it is in IDM case study cohort work that
dialectic is most powerfully learned. In other words, the dialog about individuals’ cognitive profile that happens in an IDM case study cohort is a potent model for the dialog between consultant/coach and client in the empirical world of organizations.

Bhaskar’s academic work is for me inseparable from the person he was: a nearly selfless, Buddha-like creature who, despite his own visible suffering, was always there to help and engage others, a person of immense kindness and humanity few people can lay claim to. He is unforgettable to me and many others who knew him.