In Defence of Dialogue
Reflections on J. N. Mohanty

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Abstract

In a world that continues to grapple with the problem of the 'other', the predicament has been to bring the 'alien' and the 'familiar' to a dialogue. This essay argues that the philosophical quest of J. N. Mohanty has been to create the possibility of such an exchange. To this end, he develops a method that allows for the negotiation of differences to be situated within the horizons of commonality. Mohanty's life-long pursuit is evinced by his concern to bring together, at the level of religion and politics (a) Sri Aurobindo and Gandhi, at the level of concepts (b) fact and value, (c) theory and practice, and at the level of the very modes of thinking (d) East and West. This essay reconstructs the dialogue between the two-fold problems that engage Mohanty, inquiring into his relentless attempt to 'overcome', neither by denying distinctions nor by reducing them, but by recognizing them and considering a form of negotiation. It traces the motivation to 'overcome' to at least three different traditions that influenced Mohanty, *one*, phenomenology, *two*, Indian culture, and *three* the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. Finally, the problems that confronted Mohanty are demonstrated through *three sets* of schisms, which in turn relate to three broad problems: (1) dissociation of the body from the mind; (2) unity of the world versus its multifarious plurality; (3) East versus West. This revisits the problem with which we began, that of the 'alien' versus the 'familiar'. To overcome conflict in the face of diversity, one must be prepared to confront the 'alien' and in so doing prepare the grounds for a mutual exchange, an exercise of give and take. Mohanty illustrates this through his interpretation of cultures as intersecting circles as opposed to isolated units. The faith in overlapping worlds reclaims the possibility of dialogue in a society with plural motives and responses to cultural, political, economic and philosophical concerns.

Keywords: dialogue, synthesis, self, plurality

What wound was I seeking to heal, what thorn was I seeking to draw from the flesh of existence when I became what is called "a philosopher"?

(Badiou 2008: vi)

The thought of J. N. Mohanty is, at its core, a tryst with philosophical and cultural schisms: the thorn that has entered his flesh. It seeks to be healed, by overcoming the 'embarrassment' of binaries allegedly encumbering human thought.[i] The embarrassment stems from having to explain (or explain away) the two poles in a schema over questions such as epistemic priority (is knowledge arrived through language or consciousness), possibility of ontological reduction (is the world reducible to matter or to mind), political dominance (who wields power), cultural hegemony (who emulates whom), etc.

We inhabit a world that witnessed in the last century, the rise and fall of meta-narratives, with multiple cultures and identities striving for legitimacy as weavers of the social fabric. This moment in history attempted to dissolve the existent structures of dominance, and yet continues to grapple with the problem of the 'other'. It only managed to decompose the big other into a number of smaller scattered others. The predicament however has been to bring the 'alien' (whether one or many) and the 'familiar' to a dialogue, rather than be a spectator to either a dance of isolation or a reductionist devouring.

Hypothetically, the tension stemming from an encounter with difference may see three kinds of outcome. *One*, the extension of clash; *two*, indifference towards difference; and *three*, the genesis or discovery of similarities to negotiate difference. The first and the second are responses emanating out of a single belief: that of incommensurability. While one counters it with intolerance and violence, the other takes to tolerance and peace.[ii] The third however appeals to a further clearing for the continuation of dialogue, a real possibility of synthesis.[iii] And this, I believe, is Mohanty's conviction — his vision of the unity of the world, that overcomes a logic of either/or and instead embraces a notion of 'both' without resorting to an extreme relativistic compromise or worse, a flimsy fusion.

In wrestling with the problem of the 'other', the challenge consists in whether the familiar self and the alien other will be able to converse. This essay argues that the philosophical quest of J. N. Mohanty has been to create the possibility of such an exchange. To this end, he develops a method that allows for the negotiation of differences to be situated within the horizons of commonality. This is the 'world beyond binaries' (Mohanty 2009b: 150). To go a step further, one may conceive of this dialectic directed at some form(s) of a *telos* towards which difference strives — potential 'truth(s)' that arise(s) out of a series of conflicts proceeding in the spirit of *aufheben* (sublation).[iv]

To outline the structure of the essay, *first*, I examine what justifies the interpretation of Mohanty as seeking a dialogue. *Next*, I probe the roots of his motivation to 'overcome' conflicts, neither by denying differences nor by reducing these to each other, but by concretely recognizing these and considering a form of negotiation. *Finally*, I illustrate the concerns that confronted him through *three sets* of schisms, taking the shape of three knotty crises.

Before the Trial: Circumstances

The unfolding of thought, history and life itself follows the pattern of strife and contradiction. However, it is this very strife or challenge that allows for the coming-into-being of something new, a harmonious meeting ground.[v] It breaks the *staticity* that is generated by the monopoly of sameness. Difference, manifested as processes in the history of civilizations, ruptures the existent structures of intelligibility and redefines them. It is the dialectic between sameness and difference that is at the root of this unfolding, and provides an alternative to both: the hegemony of sameness and to the chaos of difference.

In this section I intend to examine the legitimacy of attributing Mohanty with an interpretation of synthesis. To begin, let X and Y be two variables in a system of opposition. There may be four ways to negotiate an X versus Y problem:

(*a*) reduction to X (for instance, physicalism/matter/western culture)

(*b*) reduction to Y (for instance, psychologism/consciousness/Indian culture)

(*c*) neither X nor Y (either scepticism or suspension of judgement)

(*d*) both X and Y (mediation or synthesis)

Mohanty, quite clearly, is wary of (*a*) and (*b*), i.e., of reductionism in any form. He is definitely not a sceptic, but does occasionally suspend his judgement, especially when faced with having to choose the direction that metaphysics might take. (If not matter or consciousness, what then?) We are left with three premises:

(*i*) X ought not be reduced to Y

(*ii*) Y ought not be reduced to X

(*iii*) I am not a sceptic

What then is the conclusion?

The question is, whether Mohanty actually admits the 'both X *and* Y' sort of solution to an 'X *versus* Y' problem (where 'both X *and* Y' does not refer to insulated co-existence but to a real scope of dialogue). I shall enlist three points, selected from different moments of his life, that make the attribution of such an interpretation even remotely justifiable to begin with.

Mohanty's life-long pursuit is evinced by his concern to bring together, at the level of religion and politics (a) Sri Aurobindo and Gandhi, at the level of concepts (b) fact and value, (c) theory and practice, and at the level of the very modes of thinking (d) East and West.

I

A young Mohanty, situated in a period of turbulent Indian history fraught with the struggles of Indian freedom movement, began his philosophical journey with a set of two questions: (1.1) Gandhi or Marx? (1.2) Sri Aurobindo or Samkara? (Mohanty 2002: 107). In the first problem, Mohanty's natural inclination was towards Gandhi, for his thought provided a platform for the individual to voice oneself, while Marxism emphasized on the collective spirit, the force of *zeitgeist*. To Mohanty, that even an

individual could break systems of apparent *staticity*, was invigorating. As for the second problem, the choice was between an interpretation of *maya* as either (*i*) creative power or (*ii*) cosmic ignorance. Samkara's philosophy speaks of the world of plurality as an illusion, a false appearance that is to be negated through the acquisition of right knowledge, i.e., the essential unity of *Brahman*.[vi] Sri Aurobindo, however, sees the world as a *real* manifestation, rather than as erroneous (Sri Aurobindo 1990). Mohanty chooses the latter.

In these two instances, Mohanty's verdicts are of the nature of one over the other. Later, he seeks a space that could bring together both Sri Aurobindo and Gandhi (1.3):

> *What Aurobindo's writings made me believe is that by practicing meditation, I could let a cosmic spirit descend into my being, take hold of me, and use my resources for a cosmic transformation. The idea squared well with my Gandhian obsession to save and uplift humankind . . . My new search was for a religion which could bring Gandhi and Aurobindo together* (Mohanty 2002: 118).

The desire to combine Sri Aurobindo's spiritual insights with Gandhi's socio-political activism stemmed from his belief in the essential inseparability of the two strands. Both, for him, were founded upon the common desire for the betterment of humankind, thereby constituting a unity of purpose, and providing a cue for the possible integration of politics and religion. Even though Mohanty was to abandon this project in the later years of his life, the place of religion in the socio-political lives of individuals and communities in modern societies continues to be of immense relevance, and reinforces what Mohanty once envisaged.

II

> *There are two familiar pairs of opposites which I have sought all my thinking life to overcome. These opposites have arisen out of western thought, and have pervaded it. Indian thought is free from them, and so also is Chinese thought. If eastern thought is free from them, then why am I so concerned with overcoming them?* (Mohanty 2009b: 146)

It is difficult to ignore this candid admission which describes Mohanty's philosophical enterprise. We find him pointing towards two pairs of opposites that fervently engaged him: (2.1) fact and value, and (2.2) theory and practice. To these

we might add a third, namely (3) East and West, which forms the meta-binary of this discourse.

Concerning the *fact/value* distinction, Mohanty categorically posits the absence of this *division* in classical Indian thought, which sees facts as endowed with values and disvalue. In the pre-scientific world of experience, one's encounter with facts is never neutral. A 'fact' has come to be understood as the objective statement of the affairs of the world. Any attribution of value on the other hand is subjective, personal and therefore prone to differ. For this reason, the two have been torn apart. Mohanty contends that this ripping apart of fact from value is concomitant with the flawed dissociation of matter and consciousness — the impulse that nature is to be described in unbiased, dispassionate terms and the attribution of value is a mere subjective idiosyncrasy. The lived-world, however, is the moment of intermingling of both fact and value, where the two come together in their richness. Mohanty quotes an illustration from Kalidasa's poem *Meghadutam*: 'Monsoon clouds come piling one behind another, as though bringing messages from we know not where' (2009b: 148). The clouds do not refer to insipid formations in the atmosphere; they are messengers from afar whom the lovers await. Similarly, 'thunder and lightning are threatening, the first rain after a scorching summer is comforting' (ibid.). To posit the world as describable in matters of bare fact, is inconsistent with the concrete experiential world, and is at best only an artificial theoretical postulate.

The dilemma of choosing between *theory* and *practice* is founded on a more fundamental split between the body and mind, a division that may be faulty but is not unheard of in even some of the most sophisticated systems of understanding. Theory is the product of reflective thinking, and thus associated with the mind. Practice on the other hand, interpreted along the lines of action, is that which people 'do'. Life, however, is paradoxically the very union of what we have come to split, because both theory and practice inform our way of life, of our being-in-the-world.[vii] This is why the relationship between theory and practice is more original and intimate than we imagine it to be.

III

To take a step further, Mohanty attributes the source of tension in (2.1) and (2.2) to western modes of thinking, and professes its absence in Indian thought, thereby formulating problem (3). Does that imply that the East could provide a model of balance, transcendence, synthesis and integration?

> *Contemporary Indian philosophers find that their philosophical efforts have long been too much oriented to the West, and that what Indian philosophy now needs is less international influence and more rootedness in their own rich tradition. This is needed for a more balanced international dialogue* (Mohanty 1997: 346).

Clearly, Mohanty is in search for an alternative vocabulary that would emanate if only the East were to look closer into its roots, to discover or re-invent what has been distinctive about this civilization. His critique of an orientation towards the West is a legitimate caution against reduction to the logic of sameness. It would be unfortunate if the uniqueness of self (even if fragmented, after Lacan)[viii] were to be lost in emulating the other. The intention, however, is not to end up cocooned, for Mohanty retorts: *It is not as though the East is East and the West is West, and never shall the twain meet* (1980: 439). He envisages a real debate, or as he puts it, 'a more balanced international dialogue'.

Dialogue plays on two levels, *one* which admits a common ground where it is even possible to speak, be heard and understood and *two*, the admission of difference — a difference that is not lost either in reducing the East to the West or vice versa, or in a strategic indifference, non-involvement or isolation. This interpretation of dialogue is a positive movement that seeks the possibility of multiple voices to negotiate the common problems of human existence. To voice with Mohanty,

> *So, my attempt to overcome them does not imply following the simple path of retreating into isolation of eastern thinkers. It is an attempt to think from within global perspectives* (Mohanty 2009b: 146).

In the Court: Means and Motivation

It is evident that Mohanty strives to 'overcome'. The root of this desire may be traced to at least three traditions, separated by space and/or time, that influenced his philosophical career: *one*, phenomenology, *two*, Indian thought, and *three* the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo.

Three Motivations

Phenomenology is a method that gives precedence to phenomena as it *appears* to us, by suspending any presuppositions about the nature of reality. It takes the 'given' as valid and treats it as the starting point of philosophical inquiry. In a radical break from the divides of interior/exterior and visible/concealed, it resolves several dualisms. Unlike the Kantian noumena, there is no longer a projected reality and a really real realm of being that is beyond access. Also, phenomenology stresses a notion of unity in the perception of phenomena when phenomena are diverse, with multiple facets and innumerable perspectives.[ix] The merit of phenomenology therefore lies in (*a*) absolving the opposition of being and appearance and in (*b*) providing a way of negotiating unity and plurality. This is Mohanty's first motivation.

His second motivation derives itself from the fabric of Indian thought: the insistence on the synthesized character of things. This recalls the unity of fact/value and theory/practice discussed before. To cite another instance, we find that the contours of private and public self are blurred and non-constrained in Indian social systems. This is why the sacred seeps into the public in spite of the demand of the modern secular society to maintain, what may seem like, the schizophrenic life of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.

The pursuit to 'overcome' is not without parallels in the history of twentieth-century India. Perhaps nowhere, in modern Indian thought, is the quest for synthesis as evocative as in the writings of Sri Aurobindo. His prolific works grapple with the conflicts that shadow modern society and human existence: *For all problems of existence are essentially problems of harmony* (Sri Aurobindo 1990: 6). Replete with the idea of 'integration', these not only identify the crisis of discord (self/other, alien/familiar, occidental/oriental) but also provide a model for dialogical

intervention. Furthermore, his philosophical ingenuity lies in conceiving of the *possibility* of the coming-into-being, of something new, out of *actual* confrontation between apparent opposites. It may not be too far-fetched to say that Mohanty's attempt is spurred by a similar impulse.

By Means of Overlaps

To overcome conflict in the face of diversity, one must be prepared to confront the 'alien' and in so doing prepare the grounds for a mutual exchange, an exercise of give and take. This may bring forth a recognition of similarities and differences. A key method in this formulation of the interplay of identity and difference is the search for 'overlapping' spaces. This manifests, in Mohanty's thought, both at the level of (*a*) transcendental and (*b*) mundane philosophy. Transcendental philosophy is the realm of theories of world constitution, and of the structures of 'being'. Mundane philosophy on the other hand concerns itself with the rootedness of political, social, economic, cultural and scientific ambits of existence. Mohanty's method of tracing overlapping domains may be provoked by a vision of *possibility*, both a legacy of phenomenological tradition and an expression of philosophical optimism.

At the level of transcendental philosophy, Mohanty presents the concept of overlapping as a response to the opposition between matter and mind by proposing reality to be constituted of four orders: (i) material reality (ii) organic existence (iii) consciousness (iv) social existence. As one proceeds from material reality onwards, there is an intersecting cross-section. Also, with each new tier, there is the genesis of something new that is irreducible to what precedes it: a leap. Between any two layers, in his provisional sketch of reality, there is a portion that overlaps, or is the same; but there is also a section that is emergent, and therefore different. He says:

> *Metaphysics may proceed from here in two directions: one, by insisting that these provisional descriptions must yield to a final reduction either to matter or to consciousness. For the present, I am not yielding to these temptations* (Mohanty 2009a: 22).

This echoes his resistance against reductionism, while at the same time defending the cause, both of commonality between domains and of the genesis of something new.

In a parallel spirit, Mohanty formulates his theorization of mundane philosophy:

> *Unity in a rational society will emerge through 'overlapping' of 'worlds'*
> *rather than through a totalitarian imposition of the 'majority' will or of the*
> *'national' interest* (2009c: 145).

This could be interpreted as a warning against forms of cultural hegemony that must be combated by opening up and creating spaces that allow for negotiations. The faith in overlapping worlds reclaims the possibility of dialogue in a society with plural motives and responses to cultural, political, economic and philosophical concerns. Mohanty's understanding of cultures as numerous intersecting circles (as opposed to isolated units) therefore, is a crafted solution to the problem of intercultural understanding (2002: 133). Further, he evokes the concept of 'transculturality', that contends that nothing is really alien anymore. Everything is within reach (see also Welsch 1999: 197). This is because: *No tradition is a closed windowless monad* (Mohanty 2002: 117).

The Witness Box

It appears that the philosophy of J. N. Mohanty, and the problems that confronted it, can be demonstrated via a table of *three sets*. Each set consists of a number of schisms, with a rough intra-set correspondence. The three sets can be elaborated broadly into three kinds of problems. *Set I* represents the crisis that accompanies any theory that attempts to dissociate the body and the mind. *Set II,* is an acknowledgement of the tussle exemplified by attempts at unity in face of plural expressions. *Set III,* charts the effort of the self to formulate its own vocabulary vis-à-vis the language of the 'other'.

SET I	SET II	SET III
Subject / Object	One / Many	Self / Other
Ideal / Real	Structure / Process	East / West
Value / Fact	Nature / Culture	Familiar / Alien
Interior / Exterior	Unity / Plurality	Domestic / Foreign

Being / Appearance	Local / Global
Consciousness /	
Materiality	
Mind / Body	
Theory / Practice	
Transcendental / Mundane	
Religion / Science	
Private / Public	

Mohanty's inquiry into the first problem (*Set I*), draws from his assertion of the essential irreducibility of consciousness to physical reality, or matter. In his reservations against physicalism, he is wary of explaining consciousness in terms of brain cells, neurons, etc. His inclination towards anti-reductionism doesn't express itself as vehemently in the reverse, but this may be so because he does not fear the devouring of materiality by consciousness as much as he resists the attempted annihilation of consciousness by theories of pure materiality. In revisiting Mohanty's illustration of the four orders of reality, it becomes apparent that he was determined in the construal of a system that could preserve *both*. Concomitant with the mind are concepts of the internal, private realm of the subject who apprehends ideal entities, bestows values, constructs theories and practices religion. On the other hand, the model of the body is all too mundane and 'real', that can be objectified, expressed as a fact and predicted by the sciences. The problems discussed in 2.1 and 2.2 (i.e., fact/value, theory/practice) are examples of this very dichotomy. Mohanty's approach here is to assert that this tearing apart is contrived. In fact, if we were to reconsider the binaries in *Set I*, we would only discover, once again, the original harmony of these elements.

The second problem (*Set II*), finds its appropriate expression in the postmodern condition, breaking the serene picture of the unity of the world and beseeching the case for plurality. It questioned the place of any philosophy that attempted to comprehensively explain the totality of our worlds. Is it possible then to speak of

'unity' any longer, and can plurality accommodate the vision of unity? Mohanty struggles with this problem, and would wish again to preserve *both*. How far he triumphs in this enterprise may be judged by looking into *Set III*, an extension of *Set II*, for common to both the sets is an inquiry into similarities and differences.

Mohanty posits three essentials to resolve the third problem (*Set III*), which brings us back to where we began (the 'alien' and the 'familiar'). He makes a case for: (*a*) the proper formulation of distinctive vocabularies and voices (*b*) the detection of fundamental differences that characterize systems, and (*c*) belief in a horizon of commonality (Mohanty 1993: xxxiv). This is, however, more than just an abstract theoretical construction for him. Having led dual lives on a multiplicity of levels — between Indian philosophy and philosophies of the West, and between the cultural and geographical distance that separated his homeland from his life abroad — this was a relentless existential problem for Mohanty, which could be resolved only by a form of synthesis:

> *To aim at thinking from within two traditions is possible, although it has been a deeply disturbing experience. That this is possible, refutes the now all too common relativism, and establishes for me the unity of rational thinking, although that unity is not what one can begin with, but has to ceaselessly strive towards* (1993: xxxvi).

Notes

[i] The idea of 'embarrassment of dualisms' is an allusion to one that Jean-Paul Sartre developed in *Being and Nothingness,* in arguing that the method of phenomenology is a way out of dualisms (2003: 1).

[ii] 'The cultivation of tolerance as a political end implicitly constitutes a rejection of politics as a domain in which conflict can be productively articulated and addressed, a domain in which citizens can be transformed by their participation' (see Žižek 2008: 660; Brown 2006: 89).

[iii] This is different from mere 'tolerance' in so far as '[o]ne may tolerate the religion of another person even as one treats him as inferior (Bhargava 2010: 117), or with indifference, without leaving room for genuine dialogue.

[iv] For G. W. F. Hegel, *aufheben* 'there is a cancelling involved'; at the same time, 'there is also a picking up and preserving at each moment' (Singh and Mohapatra 2008: 8). For a detailed discussion, see Hegel (1977).

[v] To cite Heraclites, 'Opposition brings concord. Out of discord comes the fairest harmony', Fragment 98, trans. Philip Wheelwright.

ⁱ In Samkara, *maya* is described as 'superimposition' or *adhyasa*, which both conceals and distorts reality or the non-dual nature of Brahman. For an elaboration, see Sharma (1967).

ᵛⁱⁱ For Martin Heidegger, there is no meaning in speaking of 'being', 'substance', 'objects', 'matter' or the 'world' as static entities, isolated from the 'subject' or Dasein. The supposed division between 'I' and the 'world', is bridged by him in speaking of 'Being-in-the-world' (Heidegger 1962).

ᵛⁱⁱⁱ Jacques Lacan (1949) questioned the very coherence of 'self' and labelled its apparent unity as a construct.

ⁱˣ To take an example from Edmund Husserl, in the perception of a table, what we genuinely have is the view of the table 'from some particular side'. But obviously that is not all that there is to the table; the table has still other sides. It has 'a non-visible back side, it has a non-visible interior; and these are actually indexes for a variety of sides, a variety of complexes of possible visibility' (Husserl 2001).

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