

## The Advance of Indian Philosophy in the Work of J. N. Mohanty

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A goal, or dream, shared by specialists in classical Indian philosophies is that classical reflection influence contemporary philosophic endeavors, that the thought of Nāgārjuna, Vācaspati, Gaṅgeśa, et alia, become as universally available and as commonly drawn upon as that of Aristotle and Descartes, at least when the issues that occupied the great classical minds are addressed. Recently, however, the work of Jitendranath Mohanty has made me worry that the ideal may be flawed, that the advance of Indian philosophy may lie elsewhere than in providing resources for the discipline, the current and future philosophic discipline, globally conceived. Formerly, I viewed Mohanty's work as guided by the dream, or, indeed, as itself a paradigm of drawing on classical philosophies, a pattern to be many times duplicated by philosophers who would eventually be educated, as a matter of course, in the wealth of Indian as well as Western thought. Doubtless, the cognoscenti could see that Mohanty's understanding of Indian traditions informs even those explorations of his—in phenomenology and elsewhere—where he does not mention anything Indian. And the professor has often explicitly brought the philosophy of the Indian schools to bear on contemporary concerns. Of course, Mohanty is much too much one of us, I was fully aware, too much himself a specialist in classical Indian systems, for the rest of us to feel very satisfied in his example. Anyone who has produced the groundbreaking work he has,<sup>[1]</sup> and who is expert in several schools and debates across schools, could be expected to bring that learning to whatever he takes up. The real dream is that *non*-specialists, philosophers who know no Sanskrit, be taught by Indian traditions and influenced in

forming their views.

When I say that Mohanty has suggested to me that this ideal is flawed, I do not mean to refer to any frustration dreamers may encounter in looking for signs of fruition. Before doing some searching in journals and elsewhere for this paper, I was, it turns out, wishfully thinking that readily could it be reported that in epistemology the Nyāya reliabilism, in philosophy of language, the Mīmāṃsaka understanding of verbs, in aesthetics, the classical theory of suggestiveness or of *rasa*, in ontology, Vaiśeṣika views of natural kinds, in philosophy of religion, classical defenses of mystical experience, in ethics, the Jaina argument for non-injury, and so on, were becoming, if not common currency in these fields, pretty familiar. Research has disappointed me. One could hope that I have not been diligent enough. However, in epistemology, where my search has been fairly thorough, and where, because of the classical prominence of the *pramāṇa* issue—the issue of “justifiers” or “instruments of right cognition” (perception, inference, and so on)—no American who is prominent in the field seems to be aware of classical Indian theories.<sup>[2]</sup> And I have yet to find an epistemology textbook, even an anthology, that includes or indeed mentions an Indian author or view. In ontology, I have found only a single stray reference.<sup>[3]</sup> And in philosophy of religion, an area where, because of the accomplishments of religious studies scholars and other factors, one would especially expect awareness of at least the general-most intellectual dimensions of Eastern religions: fine philosophers make crude mistakes about the terrain of Indian theology and speculative spiritual theory.<sup>[4]</sup>

What’s the difficulty? Why haven’t we specialists been more successful in educating our philosophy peers?

Now, it is possible to read Mohanty as suggesting, by his own example, a strategy to help us do better, an example and strategy that do not challenge the dream. So let me first say a few words about how we specialists, on this interpretation of him, might, following Mohanty's example, work more effectively. Then I'll turn to the rejection of the dream by Mohanty.

Mohanty's work suggests that we specialists need to think more about topics and less about schools and individual thinkers. We expect too much if we expect, for example, a non-specialist philosopher of language to dig through a presentation of Kumārila, or of the vital points of Mīmāṃsā as a whole, or of the development of so seemingly specific a topic as the Mīmāṃsā understanding of the role of verbs in sentence meaning, to mine what we may rightly see as rich veins of philosophy. For, so long as the presentation is couched in historical terms, with lots of names spelled in diacritics, etc., the presentation will be too hard to understand. Mohanty, in contrast, especially in his recent book, *Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought*,<sup>[5]</sup> as well as in tens of articles, talks of views and arguments, not schools or people, using such indistinct phrases as "the Indian philosophers" and "the Indian theory of" whatever he is concerned with. Mohanty draws from interschool debates without regard for niceties of attribution, and flushes out positions for their intrinsic interest apart from historical setting. At the heart of philosophy are, after all, issues, views, and arguments, not persons. We specialists need to think more, to think *along with* the classical texts as well as to be more critical and evaluative and less detailed in our expositions, and original on the issues that the classical texts engage—at least this is what Mohanty's example would seem to advise, assuming the dream.

But Mohanty, I have recently surmised, rejects, or at least does not endorse, the dream. He has a different vision. In *Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought*, the philosopher does, to be sure, mount a globalist rebuttal of a cultural relativism that has as its most visible spokesperson Richard Rorty. Mohanty counters Rorty's thesis by alluding to earlier parts of the book: it is simply obvious that, despite lack of historical influence, classical Indian thinkers and Western philosophers of almost every period "have been doing the same or similar things—if not always or in all respects, certainly sometimes and in some respects."<sup>[6]</sup> Mohanty asks if the same relativism is to hold with respect to the Indian grammarian tradition, such that *vyākaraṇa* would not be grammar, as, so Rorty implies, *ānvīkṣikī* is not philosophy. It is embarrassingly obvious to us specialists that Rorty and company are wrong, that his position reveals an ignorance of non-Western philosophy. Mohanty writes, "It is indeed sickening to find philosophers argue a thesis about a field about which they know next to nothing—and so inevitably using arguments that follow a priori from their methodological premises, expecting that no empirical evidence could show them wrong."<sup>[7]</sup> All who promote the ideal of a future global philosophic discipline, where classical Indian systems are integrated into both undergraduate and graduate education, would doubtless see Mohanty doing yeoman's work in such refutation of Rorty, that is, see Mohanty preparing the way of the future by clearing away such willful ignorance. However, I repeat, Mohanty does not endorse the ideal; he rejects it, albeit subtly, and in favor of a distinct dream.

The rejection is deeply and intimately tied up with the advance of Indian philosophy in the work of J. N. Mohanty, my unwittingly fortunate title. The flaw in the dream, Mohanty implies, is its displacement of

Indian traditions, inevitable dismemberment of Indian systems for recombination in largely discontinuous theories, and the death of Indian philosophy in the enrichment of a global discipline. Mohanty's vision is, instead, the revitalization of Indian philosophy through continued work that accepts many uniquely classical Indian assumptions and much of an interlocking scheme of categories while making improvements and refinements. A careful reading of Mohanty's work in Indian philosophy shows that he brings his Western learning to the improvement of Indian systems, or, since he is very radical in his willingness to disassemble planks of traditional worldviews for contemporary use, for the making of new *darśana*-s—nothing is sacrosanct—let us say that he brings his Western learning to the advance of the whole of Indian philosophy. Mohanty advances Indian philosophy by showing how a needed distinction is implicit in some comment or other of a classical author (a time-honored procedure), or by undermining a view by elucidating its motivations in terms of rival Indian positions, by re-interpreting classical commitments, and in other ways that preserve broad lines of continuity. Throughout the history of philosophy, whether Eastern or Western, prior philosophic efforts live on through the evaluative responses of later generations, and Mohanty's selectivity as well as his enlivening and critical advocacy have made Indian philosophy not just bear on contemporary philosophic concerns, but live on its own. Western thought can inform modern Indian philosophy; providing resources is a two-way street.

What about the English medium that Mohanty and philosophy professionals in India today use? Is not the predominance of English a sign that philosophy in India belongs to a global discipline? Is not Indian

philosophy, as practiced in the classical civilization, inextricably tied to the Sanskrit language? Mohanty has worried out loud about these and similar questions. In an essay entitled, ‘‘The Future of Indian Philosophy,’’<sup>[8]</sup> he calls for Indian philosophers to recognize the enormous change in what he calls the life-world from classical times, change that includes replacement of Sanskrit with English as the medium of Indian philosophic discourse. This is hardly a call for abandoning Sanskrit studies, but rather a frank admission of the modern reality within Indian universities. It is in Indian colleges and universities, Mohanty assumes, doubtless rightly, that Indian philosophy, as he understands it, namely, philosophy broadly continuous with classical thought, will, if anywhere, be rooted and prosper. There are, to be sure, today in India pundits who, speaking and writing in Sanskrit, continue classical traditions in unbroken lines. But Mohanty is not sanguine about the prospects of further continuance, apparently because he sees that young people with the intelligence and ability to assume those mantels are going to the universities to become professors, or into professions that promise still greater financial rewards. Thus it is in the universities where the successors of the classical philosophies will, if anywhere, thrive.

The real possibility for this is connected with, in Mohanty’s view, thought’s ability to transcend culture, or, as he puts it, the life-world. Indian philosophy does not necessarily depend on Sanskrit nor on any life contingency, but is comprised of issues, views, and arguments that typically are not tied to a cultural space. And this, I may say, seems clearly right with the *pramāṇa* discussions, also with much in ontology and philosophy of language. We might well wonder, however, about ethics, and about classical Indian religious or spiritual views, whether they

are not irredeemably tied to cultural assumptions. Of course, this is much too large a topic for a proper airing here. Still, I should like to point out that Mohanty finds a way of engaging, for example, even the Mīmāṃsaka thesis of the ethical authority of *śabda*—usually rendered in the pertinent context as the moral authority of “scripture,” but which Mohanty interprets as “hearing moral precepts,” a cognitive act he defends as the proper means to ethical knowledge.<sup>[9]</sup> The Mīmāṃsaka thesis, like many other classical ideas, gets transformed in Mohanty’s hands. But he manages at the same time to achieve broad lines of continuity and thus to advance Indian philosophy.

It is difficult to find the right tone for assessing a vision, and at the risk of sounding offensive, let me offer a few words of criticism. There seems to me to be little merit in continuity for its own sake, that is, in aiming at continuity with classical thought. Education, learning what the classical philosophers have held and why, seems the extent of our duty. Perhaps it all depends on where, very literally, one is sitting, in New York or Chennai, for instance. But if philosophy transcends culture, then philosophers should be prepared to make sharp breaks with cultural determinations of the past. Furthermore, I am thoroughly confident that much in classical Indian philosophy would repay every modern effort of scholarship and reflection and that broad lines of continuity will naturally evolve. I am less confident, however, that this is true regarding traditional ethical and spiritual views.

On the other hand, it may be in these areas where Mohanty’s vision should hold sway. Regarding ethical and spiritual views, conservatism may be good in itself, and perhaps continuity should be consciously sought. In favor of this, a couple of considerations may be adduced

without, hopefully, conceding too much to the cultural relativists (who sometimes make similar points). First, it may be impossible to present a non-question-begging argument to establish ethical or spiritual positions, though if certain classical views are assumed, a significant, self-supporting case could be constructed. Second, Indian civilization flows in deep-hewn channels of ethical and spiritual positions, so deep, perhaps, as to rule out, as a practical matter, any major shift. Thus, in these areas, philosophers would have, from a practical point of view, a duty to address beliefs and practices closer to home. But where is home? For some, this has no obvious answer.

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1. *Gaṅgeśa's Theory of Truth* (New Delhi, 1966), which is a translation and interpretation of Gaṅgeśa and the New Logic, helped renew interest in this important area of Indian thought, and set a high standard for philosophic scholarship.
2. Authors some of whose works I have checked include John Pollock, Alvin Goldman, Laurence Bonjour, Fred Dretske, Gilbert Harmon, and Keith Lehrer.
3. By David Armstrong, to a paper by Kisor Chakrabarti on the Nyāya theory of universals: David M. Armstrong, *Nominalism and Realism* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 109.
4. Such an otherwise stellar light as William Alston, for example, in addressing the very problem of religious pluralism, identifies Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the only theistic religions, and treats Hinduism as though it totally lacked a theistic strand: *Perceiving God* (Cornell, 1992).
5. Oxford, 1992.
6. op. cit., p. 287.
7. ibid., p. 288.
8. Published in *Essays on Indian Philosophy, Traditional and Modern*, ed. Purushottama Bilimoria (Delhi: 1993).