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'I take, and I am taken, by what belongs to philosophy': Philosophy and the redemption of democracy

This Structured Conversation is between Dr Shaj Mohan and Dr Rachel Adams. Dr Adams interviewed Dr Mohan – a leading and radical philosopher of the subaltern continent – on his work on anastasis and a world after critique, as part of the Conversations with Global Thinkers series of Science Forum South Africa 2020.

Rachel Adams: For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the philosopher is the inventor of concepts.[1] The concepts of the philosopher do not just name and describe the conditions of the world, but give them coherence such that they are available to others to be worked with and explored. You, together with Divya Dwivedi, have formulated new conceptual apparatus by which to give shape to the world and its futures. Beyond analytic or continental philosophy, new materialism or metaphysics, the vocabulary of concepts you offer is remarkably original, certainly in the history of modern philosophical thought.

Part of what I find so compelling about your work is the vast breadth of knowledge from which you build your thought. You draw from, amongst many others, mathematics, physics, computer science, systems theory, zoology and music. You speak of the regularities of systems, their tempos, ratios and scales. You name from mathematics the possibilities inherent in all things to be other than what they are: polynomia. You align with biology in crafting the notion of 'homology' as the presence of one thing in another. And you call the perception of a coterminal relation between nature and morality, which Gandhi markedly followed, hypophysics.

In doing so, you reformulate the traditionally terse relationship between science, which seeks to discover and know the conditions and forms of what you might call the regularities of the world, and philosophy, which soars these regularities[2] to their ends to reveal their limits.

Can you speak about your relationship to these other domains of knowledge in your philosophical thought?

Shaj Mohan: You ask the essential and a complex question. In a way you already answered it when you noted the difference between philosophy and everything else. You spoke about philosophy as soaring over the regularities. The sciences, arts, and all other domains of activities have specificities, and the regularities of their activities can be given in a specific field. I say 'field' analogously here. Let me give an example. The mathematical concept, and even the physical concept, of field involves at least three things: laws which identify objects as the members of the field; laws which specify the operations possible among the members of the field, including identity relations; and the assumption that these objects after their transformations through relations always remain within the field. These disciplines have boundaries which were erected out of their respective histories and the determination of what is essential to each of these specific fields. The explosive productivity of these speciations of philosophy makes up most of our civilisation, unquestionably.

But philosophy has no specificity, no outside, because philosophy is the concern with everything, something, and nothing because it is the relation to the obscure. In the same text you cited Deleuze and Guattari, who stressed that philosophy must create the very sense of each term of the expression 'philosophy creates X' for this same reason. Their example of Plato – philosophy is the contemplation of Ideas – shows that a philosopher had to create Ideas and a domain for them such that there could be the invention of the activity called contemplation. Philosophy cannot ever receive something from the given, whether they come from the sciences or the arts.

The classical way to show this difference between philosophy and the other disciplines is to speak about special metaphysics, which indicates physics, for example, rather than what is called philosophy of physics. That is, physics is the 'metaphysics' of the region marked out as nature and biology is the metaphysics of the region determined as life. Philosophy is concerned with general metaphysics, that is, that genera of which the regional metaphysics are speciations. Analogously, the sciences are regional ontologies and philosophy takes care of the fundamental ontology. The classical division follows from the historical experience that the regionalisation of thought and activities was the active contribution of philosophy itself. That is, philosophy sacrificed itself to regions or specialties and it created the sciences.

This classical model itself is implicated in the mass-produced delusion that the sciences are free of the 'sickness' of philosophy. That is, they have become free of metaphysics. Instead, what we find is that, beyond the historicised empiricisms – there is no one true model of empiricism – and the technological contributions of the sciences, they remain rooted in metaphysics. Often, though not always, this metaphysics is naïve while it pretends that it is something else. The sciences with a naïve metaphysics, by arrogantly declaring their departure from philosophy and pretending to gaze at it from a great distance, were often standing on the grounds that philosophy had left behind a long time ago. This arrogance and shabby metaphysics are steadily surrendering the sciences to data businesses and AI.

There is another kind of practice of metaphysics that is prominent today which is equally naïve. We have the universalised American phenomenon of people following a popular film series or book series and then creating communities around it. They imitate the characters of these works of fiction by dressing up in unusual costumes, and sometimes playing the social roles of these works. People are also imitating the works of fiction by writing fan fictions, which are imitations of these popular works. Metaphysics, which has come to an end due to reasons that

are rigorous, is today practised as naïve fan fiction. Sometimes, what is called fan fiction can emerge as an experimental space from which interesting ideas may arise, as it did with interaction between *Lord of the Rings* and computer programming culture. But it can equally be a ground for reactionary developments. At the moment, metaphysics as fan fiction is neither.

My relation to these other disciplines is not of borrowing or hollowing out something from the sciences for philosophical deployment, as opposed to what Deleuze would say; nor is it of receiving as axioms or fundamental principles the achievements of the sciences, which was once common in what is called analytic philosophy. Instead, I find another principle: What is proper to philosophy in the sciences is always awaiting the seizure of philosophy, like the old lovers of a prohibited love awaiting their tryst in the middle of the night. I take, and I am taken, by what belongs to philosophy when I engage with the sciences, while knowing that philosophy exceeds this exchange through the relation to the inexchangeable, the obscure.

Rachel Adams: Science and philosophy hold a differential relationship to the unknown. Where science seeks to capture and subject it to scientific reason and experiment, philosophy (and your philosophy particularly here) will cooperate in the game of the obscure.[3] There is something in the function of the philosopher to stand (maybe you would say here to take or hold a stance) at the edge of now and of time and, through their concepts, bear witness to the immeasurably beauty of all that is not yet known. What is the task, as you see it, of the philosopher today, and particularly in relation to that peculiar realm of the obscure which seems just outside our grasp and holds the promise of all we need to know?

Shaj Mohan: The most apparent difference between the sciences and philosophy is in the way in which something is said to be known. As you say the sciences need to bring their ideas – such as singularity in physics which appeared at first as a mathematical limit – to a formally specified material system where the scientific idea is now the content of something repeatable, and repeatable in principle by anyone. Scientific regularity follows from it and so does the technicity of the sciences. This is the key to the socio-political success of the sciences. It is another matter that now the technological domain is absorbing the sciences while interesting challenges to this idea of science, which existed for a long time, are gaining importance.[4,5]

Philosophy too has its games, as you said, with the regular, the irregular, and the confused, and the obscure. But they concern, not a region, but everything. Since you mentioned Deleuze at the beginning who was referring to Plato in that section of his text, let's look at a Platonic question of regularity.

If we set aside the myths of Plato, in the ambiguity of the genitive, his early questions were about the ability we have in order to recognise a thing as that which exists and varies within a series of things while retaining its essence as that thing; that is, the invariant which allows a thing to be recognised in a series in which it belongs and also as a thing apart from another series. In other words, all trees are trees, and not clouds. In order to answer this question Plato constructed his theory of Ideas. Idea is not the concept of the thing, but Idea is the Thing without ever being one of those things you recognise; the Idea is that of which all the other things are variations and deviations. Now, if the Idea itself were another thing in the series, which you could recognise, that would complicate the whole series, which would now require yet another Idea to ground it. So, the Idea has another domain which is not the world. Once Plato took this step nearly all the questions of metaphysics appeared—space, time, difference, Being, One.

That is, philosophy can begin with the distinct and the clear and then still inevitably arrive at the obscure, which for Plato was the One, if we take the dialogue Parmenides, which complicated the entire doctrine of Ideas. One way or another, the philosopher ends up thinking about everything and then falls in the seizure of the obscure, that which is at the limit of thought which is still a thought, and an experience of what must be thought for thought to be. As we know Heraclitus was the first thinker who explicitly thought of the obscure and he received the sobriquet 'The Obscure'.

Philosophy thinks the everything by *keeping* everything *in the attention of* the obscuree, which doesn't mean it is gloom metal! One of the stories about Heraclitus was that he was often found playing games with children and that he abused those adults who found it comical.

Philosophy's task then is to be philosophy first. Then to see in its present crisis a ruin, and in the world a ruin, in such a way that a world can be raised again with faculties appropriate for it, while remaining *in the attention of the obscure*.

But the more intriguing game is to know which is the mask of the philosopher for this hour. Nietzsche was the one who realised that the philosopher needed masks appropriate to epochs in order to exist safely – the madman, the prophet, the seer, the priest, the scientist.

Rachel Adams: We are concerned here in South Africa, as elsewhere, with the notion of decolonisation and how we live with and undo the legacies of colonialism and the logics of race, instituted by colonialism and later apartheid, that continue to hold immense structural and symbolic weight in society, delimiting much of what is possible for our shared freedom. There is a sense, which may be little admitted, that despite its political potency, decolonisation is 'philosophically poor': it too easily and instrumentally imagines its own realisation and the arrival of a truly postcolonial society. What the society after decolonisation-proper looks like, what its form is, and what we take with us into the next world, is not fully canvassed or imagined by the concept of decoloniality.

In your work, you give sense to the imagination of a future world wherein the tyrannies and sicknesses of our present have been overcome through a process of criticalisation. You call the birth of this new world anastasis.

You have shown that critique as the system which determines the possibilities of a region or domain is an anticipatory system. For this reason, that critique holds all the possibilities of the future – you called it 'memories of the future'. If critique exorcises *memories of the future* and decolonisation seeks to reckon with the still-present histories and future conditions of coloniality – and it does so with some sense of finality, that this should be the final reckoning of the colonial past, could decolonisation be the last critique of this epoch that engenders the criticalisation of imperial and racialised forms of power-over, and which allows for the arrival of new forms of humanity unconstrained by Western humanism?

Shaj Mohan: This question is too complicated and too risky. As a gesture of caution we should note that not all colonialisms are the same, due to the external and internal conditions, and more importantly all that is now being called 'colonial' is not colonial. It is both the necessity of a geo-political and lazy theorising that makes one see 'colonies' everywhere. Here we should remember Derrida who said that all cultures are colonising. We should try to understand it. A culture is a system of regularities which seek greater integration with other kinds of regularities in order to ensure endurance and range. To ensure its dominance, a particular culture – say the culture of *de-postcolonialism* – will eliminate other cultures. The co-existence of many cultures depends on the comprehending law of cultures. For example, the museum-art-finance-capital complex is invested in capturing as many distinct cultures as inert artefacts. The supermarket is interested in capturing as many brands as possible on display. But cultures are not inert, they jostle, struggle and battle for more room. A kind of liberalism misunderstood 'multiculturalism' on the basis of an analogy of the shelves of the supermarkets. De-postcolonialism is now a culture with geo-political ambitions.

I had touched on this question about the postcolonial, colonial, decolonial previously; for me, the text 'Hindu Hoax' is sufficient to understand what is wrong with de-postcolonial.[6] The de-postcolonial theory is constructed out of the resources and the political intention of the auto-critique which appeared in philosophy in the 20th century which examined the fundamental concepts of metaphysics, politics, and history critically. Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, Foucault and many others participated in this critical praxis.

The lesson taken from it by postcolonial theory, especially the Indian kind, suppressed the auto-critique and used the concepts and insights as instruments to construct what is properly a geo-political discourse of

which the Nazi style organisation RSS and its prime minister Modi are beneficiaries. That is, postcolonial theory of the Indian kind masks the fact of auto-critique to create an accusatory discourse which prohibits the critique of upper caste theories. Therefore, it is not a 'theory', whatever it means, and certainly not an adequate theory of the epoch of colonialism.

You mentioned there that 'logic of race' was instituted through colonialism. It is certainly not true in the case of India, of which I can speak about freely. India was divided into 10% upper castes who ruled over and enslaved the 90% lower caste people and the tribal people for millennia. I will repeat what many lower caste intellectuals from the 19th century have said: colonialism was great for the lower caste people, because it allowed, up to varying degrees, freedom, education, rights, dignity, and power to the lower caste people. Most importantly, the very theoretical conditions, educational conditions for emancipatory politics became available to the lower caste people through colonialism. Colonialism was also not terrible for the upper caste people in India because they quickly integrated into the colonial economy and a new kind of upper caste elite was created who would later receive the transferred power from Britain.

But it was also the time the upper castes were forced to share courtrooms and trains with the lower caste people, and accept the fact that some people, the colonialists, thought that the lower caste majority deserved equal rights and political power. It destroyed the illusion that racialised oppression of millennia was God's will. It was the threat of a reversal of power through colonial electoral reforms that forced India's upper caste leaders to intensify their agitation to remove the British from India.

In the Indian context, de-postcolonial academics are upper caste people trying to recover their lost pride, create obfuscations which can dominate the universities, and prevent a lower caste uprising. By directing attention to a past which has no influence on its present, de-postcolonial intellectuals allowed India to avoid any scrutiny of its own society and of international society. India was racialised for millennia, long before colonial powers arrived, and in fact colonialism was the interruption of the caste order. That is, the caste system is religiously sanctioned oppression and enslavement of the majority population of India, the lower caste people, on the basis of their birth.

Let me say this, India is being colonised by a de-postcolonial project which goes by the name 'Hindu'. India is in need of more attention from the world than that which was given to apartheid in South Africa. This attention is being prevented by the de-postcolonial. This is why Divya Dwivedi, I assume with some humour, called for thinking that is 'sans-colonial', without colonial.

For the other regions of the world where the de-postcolonial is perhaps colonising, of which I should not speak except in general terms, there are a few enquiries one can make. For example, when we were watching the football World Cup in Brazil, where I was rooting for Argentina and then Brazil, one couldn't avoid observing that there was a colour difference between the seats closer to the field and those furthest from the field. Who speaks de-post-colonial in Brazil? Are they sitting near field or in the great beyond of the galleries? Each society should first examine who benefitted from colonialism and who speaks de-postcolonial today. This is a moral necessity. Of political necessities another time…

What should be done instead? Once we recognise that de-postcolonial has the potential to become as dangerous a geo-political doctrine as the Aryan doctrine or 'War on Terror' and then set it aside to consider the realities of the world, a different reality appears. The world cannot afford to be isolated in any sense anymore. It requires a political thinking and construction of institutions which can take care of the challenges we face as the world. Some of these challenges are obvious, such as the climatic. But not so obvious are the technological and the transformation of capitalism through technology.

Rachel Adams: Carl Schmitt famously wrote of the liberal democratic state as the 'machine that runs itself'. In *Gandhi and Philosophy* and in reference to the work of Irvin J. Good, you speak of man's last legislation: the last instantiation of a man-made regulatory before the take-over of intelligent machines. What new course in the direction of history does the advancement of computer technologies pose? Is it a threat to the finality decoloniality imagines itself producing? With the state as a machine that runs itself, and a networked technological apparatus that keeps to its own self-imposed regularity, is anastasis still possible?

Shaj Mohan: The Schmitt business itself is a machine, an even simpler machine than the so-called 'liberal democratic state', and that is its continuing appeal. So is fascism appealing, because it is so simple. In fact, Schmitt's Nazi theories do not work in the zones which extend beyond its theoretical field. Power is never held by one man through charisma nor through the pitting of one community against another. As Hannah Arendt showed, it is through the cooperation and collaborations of many people and institutions, which form components of a power-system, that power appears. In order to draw attention from the realities of these arrangements, power always conducts theatres, which we are forced to watch, even if we don't believe it. It is the hoax of power.

In the Indian example, the de-postcolonials, the 'Hindu' nationalists, and their 'liberal' friends are trying to sell the hoax that politics is the contestation between a 'Hindu' majority and religious minorities who are Muslim, Christian, and Sikh. They never speak about the real division and the oldest division in the subcontinent which is the racial partition of caste. The price religious minorities pay from decade to decade in order to sustain this hoax is horrific. Whenever caste contestations arise, religious pogroms are created. This draws the national and international attention into the hoax. So, Nazi theory is the abstract form of the hoax which is only a component of power.

Now to come to Irwin J. Good's idea, which became the more popular version called 'technological singularity', there are two essential directions suggested in it. First, is that man was conceived as the made, an automata made of some kind of matter, clay for example, into which breath or spirit was given by a supernatural being. Then, due to the presence of this breath man would also make machines, but man will have to remain a less proficient machine maker than the supernatural being who made man, as Descartes would note. The final step in this process is to arrive at a scenario where the machine which was made by man begins to make better machines, which are beyond the capability of man to understand. From there on machines will begin to govern man. In this direction, there are several metaphysical questions including the meaning of creation. But what is amusing is something else: Did the supernatural being get displaced by what it created and is it in that analogy that humans will be displaced by what they have created?

The second direction should open the meaning of 'creation' to a new sense; we are yet to fully understand it. We know that the stories and fantasies about automata were common in the ancient Greek milieu, and so were complex mechanisms. The awareness that man could create something, anything, which could overwhelm man or overcome man is an old theme in philosophy. One has to look at Plato. This threatening man-made thing was not a machine for him but a political order founded on erroneous principles which would from there on persist like a stubborn automaton. The realisation that machines invented by man could not be discarded because they were in a determining relation within the comprehending law of societies was known by the 17th century. In the 19th century we find the proliferation of literature which expresses this terror that something man made could turn on man or take control of the domain of man. So, we had been alert to this possibility for a long time, and not just that, we knew that we were already the functions and components of the systems of our creation. In fact, if that is the case, the phrase 'our creation' lacks sufficient sense, doesn't it? Marx was the first thinker of this new sense of creation, who also observed that man was serving the machines which were not strictly of his 'creation'. If we read Grundrisse properly, the proletariat is a component at best of the machine system, to whom the latter appears confusing and imposing. At worst the proletariat on the peripheries of the machine system, say those who wipe and clean the machines, are denied access to the component systems.

Now, behind the 'novelty' of these questions generated by the Nietzschean 'active forgetting' through which we get new wisdoms, new pop songs, and cinema, there is a different order of a problem. What is reason? What is knowledge? What is philosophy? As you know, in the epoch of

the prophets, soothsayers, holy men, oracles, magicians, omens, and auguries we had an unquestioning relation to the essential knowledge, we were supplicants of the pronouncements. This is the danger today with AI; we are beginning to assume that if the machine says it, then it must be true. The black box problem in machine learning – we don't know how it comes up with the answers it comes up with, much like the old oracle – shows that this danger is real. In relation to it all the other dangers present themselves. As all systems, including kitchens and kindergartens, are being integrated into massive computational architectures we come to be the components of something we cannot understand in principle. This will of course be stasis! In this scenario, as we will see, philosophy will appear as the enemy, the final possibility of error in the system to be cast out.

But let me say this quickly: anastasis is inevitable as it is the essential feature of all complex systems. Systems leak their polynomial powers and secrete homologies to what develops as their exteriority. Instead of awaiting it to happen somehow, miraculously, it is our responsibility and the responsibility of reason to approach it, anastasis, together. What is a liveable life? What is evil? What is the responsibility of the being that is forsaken of transcendent ends? What does it mean to bear our relation to the obscure in the act of politics? As long as we don't discard the faculties of classical metaphysics, which includes nearly all forms of logic, we will not be able to ask these questions except as empty gestures. Therefore, for anastasis to have the character implied by the double genitive of the phrase, 'the redemption of man', or better, 'the redemption of democracy', we must approach a revolution in our faculties.

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