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Academia's Dialectical Dharma: How a Key Strategy from India's Cultural History Inspires Stronger Classroom Thinking

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“in politics as well as private life, the surest method for resolving conflicts, however slowly, is dialogue.”

-Octavio Paz, *In Light of India*

No doubt you have noticed: in the twenty-first century, we have become acclimated to self-righteous thinking. We are used to aggressive assertions of opinion – and outrage at being questioned. In playgrounds, pulpits, and political arenas, non-compromise is cast as a virtue, intractability as heroism. And we are righteous ourselves – about everything from what is best to consume, to how the globe is run.

In America, this shift toward polarity is largely of our own making. Bill Bishop's political study *The Big Sort* (2009) surveys how over the past forty years, Americans have self-sorted themselves into communities of sameness – deliberately moving to zip codes more ideologically and politically similar than ever before. With odd predictability, for example, American liberals cluster in densely populated locations, while conservatives prefer to distribute themselves in lower-population areas. Such physical separation nurtures ideological separation. And we find a parallel phenomenon appearing in the *virtual* real-estate of social media, our newest gated community, where our limited online spans of attention hold us together with only those we continue to Like.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt finds such tribalism unsurprising, given the wiring of our brains. In his book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Haidt argues that righteousness – acting “moralistic, critical, and judgmental” to the point of self-righteousness – is the “normal human condition” (2012, xix-xx). As the mind relies on intuition far more than reason, we bind ourselves instantly with those who merely share our moral narratives. Haidt explains that the evolutionary advantage lies in the intense human bonding that righteous thinking cultivates. But our tight in-groups come at the expense of those who think differently, leaving vast holes in our understanding. As a remedy to this default way of thinking, Haidt calls for more self-consciousness about our reactions, our bondings, and our attendant blindnesses. If we cannot avoid being righteous, we can at least be more aware (xxiv).

The question I wish to address is *how* to cultivate this awareness – in ourselves and in our students. Across a decade of teaching literature at a small university in Portland, I have found that dialectical thinking may be our best hope. This involves trusting the power of cognitive oscillation to help resolve disagreement. Dialectical thinking has been developed across millennia by various traditions. It can be found in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, in Heraclitus's belief that justice arises from the struggle of opposites, and in Plato's deliberative teacher Socrates. It can be found in the

scholars of the Talmud, in Rome's sixth-century Boethius, in Hegel, Fichte, Marx, and other continental philosophers. Even today's online discourse, where blogs and articles are followed by space for feedback, offers a dialectical invitation (though participants often choose venom rather than Socratic skill).

While these thinkers, traditions, and platforms differ in their method, Hegelian dialectics offers a common and simplified version. Hegel's belief that learning happens best through tension became popularized by the equation **thesis + antithesis = synthesis**. That is, an argument, set for a time in explicit conflict with its opposite, can result in a more precise synthesis. Entertaining the opposite of what we believe is deeply counterintuitive, for rather than defending our beliefs, it has us walk around in those of our enemy. Cultivating ambivalence may seem to betray our cause, and even invite a Hamlet-like paralysis, but it is a necessary part of the process that leads to good choices. Through pondering the antithesis, we understand *why* people believe differently, and therefore we can perceive better strategies to change their minds – and maybe ours too. It offers the chance to set aside pride and concede to anything we secretly agree with. And it gives the leisure to hammer out an even stronger framework for our belief. F. Scott Fitzgerald notes the genius in the dialectical mind when he claims that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (1956, 69).

Such counterforces act like the opposing blades of scissors shearing together, for the dialectic is a tool that works by combining its aim with its opposite. Like a hammer, with its nail driver chased with its nail remover, or a pencil with an eraser crimped to the end of its marking side, it is a tool that does not keep you from doing the good work of hammering or writing – but one still capable of de-nailing or erasing.

Dialectical thinking does not mean giving in, or trying to achieve a 50/50 synthesis between your belief and its opposite. A synthesis can still be 99% of your original belief – but it will be better and truer thanks to the 1% concession you have made amid the process of dialectical ferment. It comes down to the difference between holding a belief so entrenched that it is beyond debate – and having one that is courageously open to discussion. It moves us from a culture of “I think you're totally wrong,” to a culture of “I think you're right about *this* part . . . but what about the problem of *that* part?”

The dialectic provides an interactive framework for thinking – as opposed to an ossified one – but it demands we for a time prioritize equality rather than hierarchy. It trains us to take sympathy with conflicting points of view, and feel circumspection – rather than visceral pleasure – in passing judgment. After all, while we think of ourselves arguing with others, much of the time we are really arguing with ourselves. Neuroscientist David Eagleman suggests the brain is “best understood as a team of rivals” (2011, 109). With its competing impulses and desires, the brain has to achieve immense cooperation with itself just to function. Dialectical thinking offers an alternative to weightlessly opinionated, dreary self-righteousness. It equips our discourses with something other than mere acid rebuttal, offering instead *beautiful* evidence. Without it, we get only the usual dialogue of the deaf.

Early in college, I was drawn to literature as a discipline because it embraced complexity, ambiguity, nuance – qualities so different from the corrosive, polarizing discourses I found elsewhere in life. Good literature, as William Faulkner observed,

involves “the human heart in conflict with itself” (1977, 723). Imaginative writing thus can be said to stage vivid models of dialectical thinking for readers.

But literature is only one possible source – for *every* field in the liberal arts has roots in the dialectical process. Similarly, such thinking has a place (however large or small) in every cultural tradition across the world – not just those of Hegel or the Western intellectual past.

This dialectical presence is especially salient in the case of India’s cultural history. I am grateful to the Fulbright-Nehru program for five-month fellowships that brought my family to a university in South India in Fall 2014 to teach and learn. The immersion allowed me to explore how the dialectical process flourished across the Subcontinent’s 5,000 years of cultural history, shaping a foundation to one of the world’s oldest civilizations.

History museums in Delhi and Mumbai curate the material remains of the Indus Valley’s Harappa culture, which thrived at the same time as the Fertile Crescent, forming an alternative cradle of civilization for human cooperation in its complexly planned cities, waterworks, and creations of metal and stone. The Mauryas, who at the time of the Ancient Greeks shaped India into its first empire, produced its minister Kautilya and his *Arthashastra*, the great early work of political science and social incorporation. Across its entire history, never once did India invade and conquer neighboring nations; instead, it evolved through a dialogue with other invading cultures, from the second-millennium Aryans who swept down from the north, to the various colonial powers arriving by ship, with India usually able to adapt and incorporate the incursions and changes to its own advantage.

While there, I read about India’s tradition of religious pluralism, of how the Subcontinent *created* four world religions, starting with the early forms of Hinduism brought by the Aryans. As Wendy Doniger (2009) has argued, Hinduism has allowed itself to evolve and change radically across the millennia (in a far more flexible fashion than today’s Hindu nationalist movements would care to recognize). With its 33 million gods and its un-dogmatically plural forms of personal worship, Hinduism is deemed by many to be the most open-ended of religions. Its many dialectical figures include the male god Shiva or the female goddess Kali, who each embody *both* the forces of destruction and creation. A long legacy of tolerating heterodox teachers, such as Buddha, or schools of atheism, fostered the formation of Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh religions, all of which arose out of a dialogue with Hinduism, and philosophical debates about the varying primacy of sensuality, asceticism, the material, or the spiritual. In contrast to most Western religions, the belief of many Indian religions in reincarnation, or *samsara*, puts the individual in relation with a much longer perspective of time across the generations.

As a literature scholar, I was particularly drawn to how India’s polyvocal epics are famous for staging and sparking debates. The *Mahabharata* – a work four times as long as the Bible – is wildly diverse in its content and range as it presents encounters between differing forces of thought. Its centerpiece section, for example – known as *The Bhagavad Gita* – famously stages a battlefield debate between the great archer Arjuna and his charioteer (the god Krishna, incognito), where they debate the philosophies of war and peace. Turning to another epic text, A.K. Ramanujan (1999) has shown how the 300+ versions of the *Ramayana*, as told across several thousand years and miles, keep its

aims and interpretation open-ended – much to the frustration of those who want a simple, stable text for their culture. Contemporary Indian works continue a dialogue with these founding narratives, in such postmodern fiction as Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* or Atul Koushik's play *Draupadi*.

I learned about India's many humanist legacies across the ages: leaders like Ashoka, who after converting to Buddhism, advanced a system of ethics and toleration across his empire in the 4th century BCE. Or the Mughal Emperor Akbar, who in the late 16th century famously sponsored dialogues between different faiths, promoted the idea of solving disputes through reasoned dialogues rather than tradition, and fostered the separation of mosque and state (Sen 2005, 18). I learned how India was the birthplace of the idea of the university (Nalanda, 400-1200 CE, in present-day Bihar), of open-minded schools of thought (such as the Medieval Bhakti school that produced such thinkers as Kabir and Nanak), and of major innovations in mathematical systems, astronomy, and architecture.¹

The book that traces India's dialectical commitment most emphatically is *The Argumentative Indian*, by the Nobel-winning economist Amartya Sen (2005). Pushing back against recent partisan attempts to simplify Indian history, Sen shows that the dialectical impulse has been the genius of Indian culture, communication, politics, philosophy, and intellect across the ages. Far from being a culture of respectful servitude, India, Sen argues, has a legacy of heterodoxy that "is remarkably extensive and ubiquitous" (ix).

Now, as the writer and politician Shashi Tharoor quips, "Any truism about India can immediately be contradicted by another truism about India" (2007, 8). Humans being what they are, no culture is consistently dialectical. Thus, anyone keeping up with news about the Subcontinent in recent decades can think of moments when the country chose against dialectical thinking: for example, its catastrophic 1947 Partition into multiple countries, Indira Gandhi's temporary switch to autocracy in the 1970s, deadly religious riots in recent decades, the rise of nationalist movements aiming to limit intellectual debate about India's past and present, and so on. Many elements I encountered in the South India of 2014 seem to work against dialectical thought: libraries left in neglectful decay, local bookstores offering mostly test-prep works rather than diverse reading for its own sake, an educational tradition that favors rote memorization, university classes lacking in opportunities for discussion, and social conversation that still tends to self-segregate along lines of gender and age.

In other words, today's India is like everywhere else: a mixed set of impulses. But it is deeply enriched by its inspiring cultural legacy of dialectical thinking. This is vital for what has become the world's largest democracy, with its 1.3 billion people, a figure that by 2030 is set to surpass even China's population. India is arguably the world's most diverse country, with its 650 different tribes, 350 languages, 1,600 dialects. Its recent economic rise keeps its longstanding traditions in dialogue with forces of modernity, its robust newspaper culture keep ideas in motion, and its superlatively massive film industry stretches the imagination's sites. The explosive spread of cell phone availability across India in the past decade alone allows people across the

¹ A good overview of India's cultural history can be found in the essays in A. L. Basham's (2007) edited collection *The Illustrated Cultural History of India*.

economic spectrum to broaden the range of connection. India's dialectical spaces remain alive, with characteristically heavy socializing in cars, campuses, eateries, riverside ghats, and India's throbbing temples.

Researching India's past and present for its dialectical components energized my sense of it being the most important structure for productive humanist thought and exchange. I have offered this overview to spark our thinking on how we might prioritize such cognitive oscillation in the teaching of our disciplines, whatever those happen to be. For I have come to feel that academia worldwide has what my Indian colleagues might call a *dharma* – a transcendent duty – to teach students the skill of challenging their private orthodoxies, of cultivating their ability to stage internalized debates, so as to more honestly and successfully interact with the diverse publics of our 21st century future. For if they do not get this kind of cognitive training by the time they leave college, given the tone of public discourse today, I am doubtful their adult lives will give them much opportunity.

In her book *Cultivating Humanity*, Martha Nussbaum writes: “Our campuses are producing citizens, and this means that we must ask what a good citizen of the present day should be and should know” (1997, 8). I would answer her call by saying that our citizen-students should be dialectical thinkers. That on the issues that matter most, they should develop the lifelong impulse to counter every conviction with time spent pondering its antithesis, in order to reach a synthesis that is truer, fairer, and broader-minded than the original conviction. Social cooperation, and resistance to the siren-call of righteousness, depends so much upon this habit of mind.

As for the *How* of this aim, a few ideas could get us thinking about our individual classes. As a start, we should recall how across his life, Mohandas Gandhi maintained that the true struggle for democracy involves the struggle within *ourselves*. So, too, the aim to teach dialectical thinking must begin with our own cognitive struggles. As professors, we could re-learn the skill of *achieving* uncertainty. We could recognize that while outrage has an important place in life, it is not the most effective strategy for discourse. As Michael Berube has argued, we could resist pledging unyielding allegiances to certain politics, theories, concepts, or teams (2012, 128). As Gerald Graff has long maintained, we could commit to teaching the conflicts, rather than telling students what to decide about those conflicts, so as to equip them “with the intellectual tools for forming their own conclusions” (2012, 137). For as he notes, just as all our motivations are prompted by a response to something, so courses should be organized around debates and controversies, instead of the passive consumption of statements (139). We could do more team-taught courses with odd-couple pairings. And we could have the courage to invite controversial speakers to our campus.

Specifically in the classroom, I have found it fertile to build curriculum around the friction generated by paradoxes. For example, I chalk various quotations on the day's subject at the start of each meeting. And while many of them serve as wisdom I would like the students to absorb, the statements are often ones I disagree with, or that disagree with one another. Time devoted to informal writing and discussion at various scales are the means by which students decide for themselves the degree to which they accept each statement. Similarly, when assignments require students to generate some kind of an argument (in the case of literature courses, these involve an interpretation of the text and the stakes involved in that claim), students spend time not only developing their argument

but also entertaining the diametric opposite of their hunch. The classroom presence of deliberate ambiguity as to where the teacher stands on certain statements, as well as the exercise of oppositional thinking as part of the process of completing assignments, are ways toward which students might adopt such habits of thought outside the classroom.

As India's cultural past exemplifies for us, dialectical thinking has been developed for millennia by thinkers worldwide. But I would argue for its fresh urgency in the present century, given our newly digitized platforms, given our geographical self-sorting along lines of belonging and the shrinking of public space, and given our increased necessity to engage with difference at expanding, planet-sized scales. The university setting, within each of its disciplines, is an ideal place to cultivate this metacognitive strategy among the citizens we teach. If we are weary of the righteousness tone of our world, we might think creatively about the ways we could carry out our dialectical duty in the upcoming semester.

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