

WHY UNDERGRADUATES SHOULD READ, WRITE AND DO RESEARCH: A TRIBUTE TO THE UNDERGRADUATE PHILOSOPHY MAJORS OF UST¹

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First of all, I would like to thank you for the honor of this invitation. I don't think I know of any college or university offering an undergraduate major's program in philosophy which has a publication like *Talisik*, exclusively philosophical, managed and edited by the student majors, and whose contributed articles are also exclusively written by undergraduate students. I should add, by way of commendation, that *Talisik* has now appeared quite regularly for the last three or four years; that, of course, is not yet long enough to gauge its survival power; we can perhaps decide that with more or less finality after 10 years of regular publication. You can make 10 years your magic number, and after that we can be more optimistic and claim for the journal its power to endure. Incidentally, I am also not aware if there is, at all, any other undergraduate class, in our school or elsewhere in the country, that has a similar professional journal as what you have. I know of journals produced on the graduate level, but hardly any by undergraduates of any discipline other than philosophy. I could be wrong, of course, and I wouldn't mind being corrected later, especially by our visitors from the other schools. May I take this opportunity to acknowledge the presence of the students from the other schools, especially those from the University of the Philippines, both of Los Baños and Diliman, St. Paul Seminary Foundation of Silang, Cavite (I suppose), and the Ateneo de Manila. I thank you, on behalf of our department, for your participation in today's academic event. It's quite exhilarating to observe that our activities are getting to be more national in scope; this is, for me, a new experience. This is one reason why I did not have second thoughts about accepting the honor of your invitation and I would like to congratulate you, the *Concilium Philosophiae*, especially your hard-working officers, for what you have been achieving thus far. This is proof that philosophy is very much alive today not only in our university, but indeed also in our country.

According to your invitation, you would like to hear my opinion on the status and direction of philosophy in the Philippines. On the whole, my attitude is, as you can see, optimistic, in fact not only locally but also globally. Other disciplines may come and go, but not philosophy. And when any discipline matures to the fullest, it will surely realize the value of understanding itself in its very foundations, which is what philosophy is about. This is why philosophy is presupposed by all disciplines, and no discipline is strong enough to hold itself without the justification that philosophy can provide at its very groundwork. The word 'groundwork' is therefore not a carelessly chosen word. For instance, the word is found in such unforgettable classic as Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. You won't mind my dallying a bit on this. Let me assure you that Kant is in this book interested not so much in formulating any theory of ethics, such as utilitarian, eudemonian, intuitionist or virtue ethics; his interest rests in the uncovering of that which lies at the bedrock of all ethics, whatever may be its theoretical superstructure. In other words, he wants to explore what ultimately supports and forms the basis of any concept or theory of good and evil, that is, its groundwork. Allow me to explain this further by means of a current example.

Recently, in connection with the question of what the media calls extra-judicial killings or EJKs and the endless criticisms that President Duterte has received as a consequence of it, whenever I am given the chance to articulate my stand on the issue publicly, I would first ask the question squarely: Where, in the first place, did we get the idea that killing is bad? Or are we just taking it for granted as something given, something which we must take for granted? Indeed, what is the reason for our sometimes passionate belief that killing is bad, that there is no way it could possibly be right? When we ask such question, we are inquiring into the fundamental reason of our belief, into the ground, or yes, the groundwork of even the most revered of our conventions. Then, we will recall that even the great St. Thomas Aquinas, the very patron of our university, has shown killing to be not really such an absolutely bad thing, for there are exceptions to the rule of it being an evil in itself, including self-defense.

What makes us, then, so sure that killing is bad? This is a question we all now have to face squarely. My suspicion is that most of us are coming from the ground of morality as established by our Christian, even biblical, interpretation of it; I mean, of course, the ten commandments. The ten commandments are (I imagine) the basis for our conventional thinking that killing is bad, something that belongs to the Old Testament tradition, to the Law of Moses as contained in the Torah. This was later simplified, in the New Testament, by Jesus himself, through what we may now refer to as the Commandment of Love. What is the Commandment of Love? First expressed in a twofold fashion (“Love God above all things, and love your neighbor as you love yourself”), this was then simplified even more by Jesus as “Love one another as I have loved you.” This commandment of love is equivalent to what Kant calls the groundwork or fundamental principle of all ethics, as hinted at in that ever-memorable opening line of his important work, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*: “Nothing in the world, nor outside of it, can be considered good without any qualification, except good will.” This is a philosophical, if you wish metaphysical, formulation of Christ’s commandment of love. Anything that is done out of the good will is good, and anything (even it looks good) that flows from a bad will is bad. This good will of Kant is, of course, inspired by the general will of Rousseau, which the latter describes, in the *Social Contract*, as always correct, never in error.

Why am I telling you this? Because it is the vocation of philosophy always to alert people of the fundamental ground of all our assertions, such as the stuff of the universe among the Greeks, the principle of knowledge among the moderns as exemplified by its father, René Descartes, and now, the groundwork of morals, among us who are politically split on the correctness of Duterte administration. I shall not discuss this issue further because that’s not my role today, but I would only like to impress on you the importance of philosophy in providing the ground for any issue that comes our way, personally or socially. Time was when there was only philosophy; whether they are aware of it or not, the different sciences are offshoots of philosophical thinking; then came the time when, mostly during the modern times, like prodigal sons, these sciences walked away from their source and sought their respective destinies, resulting in the incredible progress that each one has accomplished, especially by way of science and technology. This is the heritage of the West to the world and there is no more turning back; we can no longer go back to the past of typewriters and slow postal mails. Technology has certainly improved the lot of men and there is no more turning the clock of time to a past which is purely, or almost purely, manual exertion. Yet, the West has also reached the end of the line and produced the limits of growth. The paradigm shift to postmodernity has given a new voice to what used to be marginalized in the past – the voices of women, of the poor, of those who are weak, of the disabled, of the other genders, and even of the helpless environment which we have dominated without mercy, all for purposes of gain and profitability.

Ours are different times, times in which differences matter. And the first to recognize this paradigm shift are our philosophers who have ceaselessly toiled and reflected in order to advance the movement of the human spirit. This is why I make a lot about our shift to postmodernity. These, our times, are the postmodern times, what Martin Heidegger calls the second beginning, after the completion of that first beginning which commenced among the Greeks whose initial questions dictated the directions of the next two millennia of Western domination. With my students I would single out Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as the completion of the first beginning, at the same time the signal for the commencement of what Heidegger claims to be the second beginning, what I here refer to as postmodernity. The Church has officially joined it when Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council in 1963, and the Philippines had officially taken the same step when it mounted the justly famous EDSA Revolution through the People Power of 1986. Both the Second Vatican Council and the EDSA Revolution are unfinished and still ongoing. I dare say that any work, including any philosophical work, that is not according to the spirit of these momentous events could most likely not make any contribution to history-in-the-making.

I have no doubt that our Philippine society is in the process of its own self-creation. Just as, as Sartre tells us, man is what he makes himself to be, so also our country is what we collectively make of it. Existentialism, in particular, situates philosophy in the world, which is why you will recall Heidegger calling us *Dasein*, literally being-there, where? In the world. We can no longer philosophize in an ivory tower, as Marsilio Ficino used to do when he was doing his researches on the divine Plato. A disembodied philosophy makes no sense today; it, too, is in the world, that is, as Hannah Arendt would put, it is in action. This is the reason why Sartre correctly avers that the one system which all contemporary philosophy has to overcome is Marxism. What is philosophy today without Marx? Marx is grounded in an ever-recurring revolution that will never grow stale for as long as there are injustices and forces of oppression in our society. Philosophy, in short, contrary to what people are wont to say, is, perhaps the most universally useful preoccupation we can ever engage in. Again, as Sartre puts it, even the most abstruse of philosophies (such as, for example, Kant and Hegel) are truly most fundamentally radical and useful.

That brings us to the work before us. As in all other disciplines, we need experts, and for this we need students who will tirelessly work to master their craft, in our case in philosophy. In other words, as Confucius says, we need students who rectify their names. "Let the prince be as prince, let the minister be as a minister, let the father be as a father, let the son be as a son," says Confucius. We do not philosophize on top of our head. We do not become original overnight by simply thinking aloud whatever comes to our mind. We have to listen, and we have to read. And while you still have the time, you must read incessantly, because when you are no longer students, when you are already burdened with so much administrative, domestic and clerical things to do, you will have very little time, if at all you have time, to read. So, hone yourself to become the best that you can be, and the time to do that is not tomorrow but today.

So join me in my advocacy and let's encourage everybody to allow no day to pass without reading. Reading is the best exercise for you now, even as you are still mastering the craft of writing. Indeed, you cannot write well if you do not read, and read voraciously. I am not suggesting that you do not enjoy your life, because I want you to enjoy your life as much as I had enjoyed my life, but I think you will eventually see how much of life you might have failed to enjoy by not doing what you should be doing now as students – that is, study and read.

That's a *conditio sine qua non* for philosophy; I don't know of how else to do apprenticeship in philosophy other than by reading. In the beginning, reading would of course be a chore, as difficult as it is boring; but, as in all other pursuits, your enjoyment of it increases as you do more of it. As they

say, you don't learn swimming except by actually swimming, or biking except by actually biking. That goes, too, with basketball and boxing. So, those of us in philosophy cannot properly learn to appreciate what we have gotten ourselves into except by actually doing philosophy, and that is by reading – and then by writing.

It's not yet too late to learn how to write, and write well. But it is not possible in our discipline to write well if we don't read well; the two go together. Those of you who don't read and write well will never know what you are missing, and there's nothing we can do about it. If you really want to help build our country through philosophy, there's no shortcut to it. Learn to write by learning to read, and then you will see what I mean by enjoying life, and here I mean the life of philosophy.

Now I can tell you why I welcome the much talked about educational reform, better known as K to 12. Indeed, I welcome any genuine reform effort that will offer our much-decrepit system of education a chance to effect its own paradigm shift. So far, everybody is groping and playing it, so to speak, by ear. Nobody really knows what he or she is doing, and everybody simply moves on, as the wind blows, as they say, hoping that we will eventually learn what this is all about in the process. One thing is certain, that we hope to see the day when the line will finally be clearly drawn between basic education and higher education. College and university are supposed to belong to higher education whose essence is research. Basic education provides the fundamental knowledge and skills, product of original and innovative thinking, for the improvement not merely of existing knowledge and skills but of life in general – individual life as well as social life.

Research and writing is the stuff of which higher education is made, and we – in the Department of Philosophy UST – seem to be on front in this regard. I can only help you in the little way I can, while I still have the energy to do what I can, the least of which is to wish you the best and to pray to the Lord that what you have started already you will continue to pursue all earnestness as a contribution not only to your personal success but also to the wee-being of our people in the Philippines, especially the majority of us who are poor, weak, ignorant and speechless. Again, thank you for your invitation; this is, for me, an honor and privilege. God bless you all.

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