

Teaching Philosophy in Manila¹

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Abstract

In this talk, Fr. Roque J. Ferriols, S.J. shares some reflections from his experiences in teaching philosophy for almost fifty years in what he describes as a “small corner of Manila”. Teaching philosophy, for him, involves creating an atmosphere, an environment which allows students to see things they could not see before--things that the teacher may not even have seen before. That is why a teacher must have the courage to learn from the students and the patience to cultivate a kind of silence enabling them to move from the world of pure ideas to the world of what is really happening. In this world of the real, what is most important cannot be said but lived. Viewing philosophy as a search for the truth, Fr. Ferriols stresses that a person looking for the truth must admit there is a true answer. This answer might be difficult and

¹ A Plenary Lecture presented during the International Conference on “Teaching Philosophy in Asian Contexts” sponsored by Missio Aachen, Germany on February 19, 2005 held at Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines. This version was edited with the kind assistance of Dr. Leovino Ma. Garcia. The abstract was also prepared by Dr. Garcia.

may take long to find but there is a true answer. In looking for the truth, it is best to use the language of the place where you are philosophizing. For Fr. Ferriols, this would be the language of “the people outside cleaning the streets, driving the jeepneys, driving the buses, going to their work”.

Key words: *meditation, teaching, insight, truth, reality*

Taking philosophy as it is commonly understood in academic circles, the Philippines does not have a tradition of philosophy. However, as in all human beings, there is an experience of self within the horizon of reality and the urge to understand and to shape this experience. This can be called the drive toward wisdom. It comes from an innate desire to discover and to create meaning. It is never ending. It is helped by dialogue with outside influences, with other cultures and peoples.

This dialogue becomes problematic when there are colonizers bent on owning and directing the innate drive toward wisdom. The colonized can choose between complete surrender and complete rejection. Or the colonized can develop the art of seeing the colonizers as just one more outside influence: to be shunned in so far as it blocks insight, to be used in so far as it helps insight.

This then is the horizon within which the drive toward wisdom unfolds. It unfolds in meditation. In the classroom, it unfolds in the interaction between the meditation of the professor and the meditation of the students. The professor strives to create an environment that awakens the students to the realization that they have an innate drive toward wisdom, that they can think, enter into

insight, seek truth, and shape their lives. Through philosophical meditation, profound thinkers of the past become companions and helpers in the present drive toward wisdom.

Companions in this drive are also the crowds of anonymous people who have created and left us an abundance of Philippine languages. The philosophical attitudes embodied in these languages contain a rich potential for philosophical meditation. One can mention the philosophical attitude that created a multitude of suffixes that call attention to the constantly recurring mutuality between people, between things, between people and things, the distinct way of referring to persons as different from things, the referring to people as human beings without discriminating between male and female.

I would just like to explain the title of my talk: "Teaching Philosophy in Manila." The one whose place I took was supposed to give a talk about teaching philosophy in Cuba, so I thought, why not have a talk about teaching philosophy in Manila? I don't mean to give a survey of the way philosophy is taught in Manila, which is a rather big city, but just the small corner of the Manila where I have been teaching philosophy for some time. I just wish to give some thoughts on teaching philosophy within that given space.

The next word that needs some meditation is "teaching." If by teaching you mean being able to give instructions on every thought to be thought of, every gesture to be made, every creative thing to be done, then philosophy cannot be taught. It cannot be taught as if the human beings being taught are robots.

How can philosophy then be taught? By teaching, you must mean creating a surrounding, creating an environment, creating a climate, where insight is possible. If the teacher can create some surrounding, some environment where the students entering the

environment are enabled to see things they could not see before, that person is a teacher. So, it takes a certain amount of courage to be a teacher because one has to take the students' lives into one's own hands and tell them, "If you do this, enter into this surroundings, into this climate, then you will be able to see things."

The students might see things that this teacher has not seen. So the teacher must have the courage to learn from the students, to trust the students that they can really look, and that they can really see. However, many students want to be taught according to the first definition of teaching: that they are taught what to do every step of the way and what to think every step of the way. A teacher has to destroy that expectation and help the student to enter into the world of insight.

How does one do it? As for me, I have a little exercise. I say, "Some of you move in the world of concepts, of pure ideas." Think of a unicorn or think of a talking frog, or think of a friend, but don't think of him as a friend. Think of him as the idea of a friend. Think of your father and mother, but do not think of your father and mother as they are, but think of them as ideas. So you have a world of ideas, a world where you have an idea of a talking frog, an idea of a unicorn, an idea of a friend, an idea of a father and mother. And then you ask, "Is it really happening?" "Is it reality?" And the talking frog and the unicorn disappear. But what appears, what remains is not your idea of a friend, but your living friend. Not an idea of your father and mother, but your living father and your living mother.

How did that happen? Did you add an idea so that what used to be pure ideas became living realities? You did not add an idea. What did you do? Perhaps you do not know. If you ask me what you did, I could not give a standard answer. I do not know it

either. But I know one thing: You did a certain movement of your mind, a certain movement of your heart, that from a world of pure ideas, you stepped into the world of what was really happening.

You did not do it by adding a concept, you did it by adding what? You did not add anything. You entered into the world of the real without adding any concept. To be able to do that, you need silence. You need solitude. This reminds me of a story of Chuang Tzu, a story which I often use in class. There was once a man who was making a wheel. He was an old man, who was 70 years old. When I began teaching, I said “The man is 70 years old, he is very old,” but now I am 79 so I say, “The man was very young, he was only 70.” He was only 70 and he was making a wheel when a king reading a book passed by. And the wheel maker asked the king, “Oh king, what are you reading?” And the king said, “I am reading the works of wise men.” “Oh that is not important,” said the wheel maker. The king said, “But these are great wise men. If you cannot prove that they are not important, I am going to cut off your head.” So the wheel maker said, “Look at me, I am old now, I am 70 years old, and my son is very young and I told my son how to make a wheel. I told him everything I know. I told him everything I could tell him and until now he cannot make a wheel. I still have to be the one making wheels because in making wheels, when all that can be said has been said, the most important thing cannot be said. And so, Oh king, you are reading the works of wise men. They have written down all that they can say, but the most important thing cannot be said. And so what they have written down is not important. What is important is what they could not say but lived in their lives.” And so that is also what it means to enter into the world of the real. One has to be committed to live in the real.

What is philosophy? There are many definitions. But a definition that a student of mine gave years ago has stuck in my mind and I think it is a good definition: it is a search for the truth. What do you mean by the truth? That was the question of Pontius Pilate, and it can be the beginning of a long discussion. But for a working definition, truth has some connection with what is actually happening, with what is real. “Is it true that February 25th has been proclaimed a holiday?” “Yes, it is true.” “Is it true that I know how to use PowerPoint?” “That is not true.” “Is it true that the anniversary on February 25 is meaningful?” There can be a discussion whether it is meaningful or not. But I think if a person is looking for the truth, you have to admit that there is a true answer. It might be hard to find. It might be found only after a long discussion, but there is a true answer. There is an answer of a meaning which is actually taking place, the meaning of what is actually happening. And so philosophy is looking for the truth, being able to enter into the world of what is.

This reminds me of a story of which Dr. Manny Dy reminded me a few days ago. It’s from Chuang Tzu and is about the man who was afraid of his shadow. There was a man who was afraid of his shadow. So he began to run away from his shadow, but that made things worse because then he began to hear footsteps. As he was running away from his shadow so too was he running away from the footsteps. But the more he ran away, the more his shadow caught up with him and the more the footsteps followed him. Out of exhaustion, the man finally died. He could have lived if he just sat under the shadow of a tree and quietly meditated in silence. Dr. Dy reminded me that the Visayan word for meditation is *pamalandong*, which means to sit in the shadow of a tree because it is there that you can meditate under the silence of the

shadow of a tree. And it was there where a convergence with the forest hermits of the Indians, the aranyakas who, under the shade of the forest trees, in silence, awaited and searched for enlightenment.

There are some interesting convergences, perhaps unintentional, which one sometimes finds. Somebody asked me, “Are you trying to create a Filipino philosophy?” I’m not out to create a Filipino anything. Filipino philosophy is like Filipino food. If I like the food and I am Filipino, then that is Filipino food. If I look for the truth and I am aided to find the truth, and I happen to be a Filipino, so that can be called Filipino philosophy. But I am not anxious that it should be called that. It’s more important that I found the truth, or I was helped to look for the truth. Anything that helps me find the truth is important to me.

Now, what about this convergence? This serendipitous convergence. What is the meaning of evolution? I am under the impression from watching television shows where evolution is mentioned that in popular culture, evolution is a process of tumbling atoms and molecules that by chance develop first of all into life and into all other forms of life. By sheer chance, the human being emerged not knowing exactly the purpose for his emergence in the world. With the exception of one television sound byte that says, “the human being is the only one that can worry about the other forms of life. Think about it.” So I think about it. Did I evolve just to be able to worry about the snakes and the crocodiles and the dinosaurs? That’s a noble thing to do, to worry. But is that all there is to it?

Now there was a French Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin, who said that if you look at the data of evolution, not just the data which can be measured, but even the data which cannot be measured,

you might see some wonderful things. The important thing is to see. And so he looked and he helps us to see that evolution is the ongoing personalization of life in the universe. It has a direction toward life, living personal life. So, what are we here for? We are here because we are being attracted by a hyper-person, which he calls the Omega point—One which is more than us, greater than us, and yet the One in whom we want to meet each other. In whom we want to know and love each other. His book is much more complex, but that seems to me to be a fair summation of the way he looks at evolution.

What about Aurobindo?² In Aurobindo's interpretation of the Upanishads, Brahman is absolute but in his absoluteness, he can create limited centers of concentrations in himself. In the human consciousness, it is the psychic entity—one of the limited concentrations of Brahman. And why did Brahman limit himself into that concentration of the psychic entity? He limited himself because he wanted to send the psychic entity to a mission into the world of matter in order to make the world of matter more and more conscious. And the process of evolution is the process of the psychic entity making the world of matter more and more conscious until the consciousness of the world of matter interpenetrates with the absolute consciousness of Brahman. A very different philosophy from that of Teilhard de Chardin, but they converge. Evolution is not an accidental tumbling of atoms and molecules. It's not a mere accident of life emerging, but consciousness; truth is involved. The human being is not just there

² Fr. Ferriols' doctoral dissertation, written under Fr. Norris Clarke of Fordham University, is entitled "The Psychic Entity in Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*" (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1966).

to worry about other forms of life, but to look for the truth and be one with the truth which transcends all limited human truths. And what does that mean for the student? I would like to ask the student, “When you’re watching television, what do you see when there’s a program on evolution? Do you see an accident? Or do you wonder whether this seeming accident leads to something which is not accidental, but a fulfillment beyond all expectations. What do you see?”

Now there’s the matter of language. I think in a sense it doesn’t matter what language you use. If you’re looking for the truth, any language which helps you find the truth is a good language. But what is the truth? For example, if I am here philosophizing, looking for the truth and there are people outside cleaning the streets, driving the jeepneys, driving the taxicabs, driving the buses, going to their work and they’re all talking in a language which is not English. And I’m looking for the truth in the English language, am I moving in a true situation? Is the environment with which I surround myself in my search for the truth a true environment? Another thing, languages are like plants in the rainforest. There are some plants in the rainforest which have not yet been explored, but which they say can be the source of all kinds of medicine for all kinds of diseases. Now, languages are sources of insight—insight toward the truth. And if a language has not yet been used for philosophy, then that language is like a plant in the rainforest waiting to be discovered and to be used. It is a source of insight into truth waiting to be able to exercise its ability to be aroused to search for the truth.

So then, returning to the matter of teaching philosophy in Manila. I think, I’m trying to summarize what I’ve said but I’m afraid I am not very good at summarizing it because quite frankly,

the talk I gave is a little bit different from the talk I prepared. But teaching philosophy is not telling students how to move their minds, how to go through a certain amount of motions. And after going through those motions they are philosophers. But teaching philosophy means to create an atmosphere, to create a surrounding, to create an environment in which a student might be able to have insight. But if a student expects to be told everything, the teacher has to destroy that expectation. One way of doing this is by having an exercise of having them think of ideas, make everything into an idea and ask, "Is it?" And watch the pure, mere ideas disappear and then not the ideas but the realities walk alive against the horizon of the student's consciousness. He has entered into the world of "is," into the world of reality. And he has to look, and the teacher has to be willing to learn from him because when the students look, just like the teacher looking, just like anybody looking, we don't know what we are going to see, but we might see the truth. So we are helped by Chuang Tzu . . . to move in silence . . . when all that can be said has been said, the most important thing cannot be said. We might find some converging serendipities as for example the treatment of evolution by Teilhard de Chardin and by Sri Aurobindo. Two very different treatments, but both alike in that they were able to arouse in the readers an expectation of deeper and more sublime meanings in evolution than mere accidental tumblings of electrons and atoms and molecules. Finally, using the language of the place where one is trying to find the truth is also important because a language is a capacity for arousing insight into the people using that language. One has to respect the language of the people among whom one is living. So I think that sums it up.

Open Forum:

Dr. David Kwang-sun Suh: Thank you very much! Thank you for your lecture that you have not prepared. Now, I'd like to hear the lecture that you have prepared in summary.

Fr. Ferrriols: Well, I had a complicated discussion of truth and had some examples of truth. For example: "Is it true that February 25th has been proclaimed as a holiday?" "It is true." "Is it true that I know how to use the PowerPoint?" "That's not true." And a number of other examples besides that, especially in terms of the meaning. The meaning is not just something that I invent. But the meaning is a meaning which is in reality. For example, that one example I gave, "Is the event commemorated on February 25th a really important event?" It is a question of meaning and a certain type of philosopher would answer it, "Well meaning just depends on what is meaningful for you." But I would say that no, there are certain things that are meaningful whether I want them to be meaningful or not. Like for example, the dignity of the human person. When I meet a person, I meet an original act of existence, which is irreduplicable, so that if this person disappears nothing can take his place. That is the meaning of the human person for me. And when I meet a human person, I hear an imperative which says, "Honor this man, or honor this woman." And the imperative is not something that's just for me, but in reality. It is. It is part of the world of what is actually taking place. It's not just meaning in the sense of what is meaningful for me. But it is a meaning which is meaningful in itself. And if I say it's just a matter of belief, of personal belief, I am not speaking the truth. That's part of what I was supposed to say but now I've said it.

And then when it came to Filipino languages, I was going to say that there are many Filipino languages and people look at it as a source of confusion. But I think it is a source of richness. But then we cannot learn everything. Well that's true. Learn to speak the language of the people among whom you live and if you were transferred to different places you'd learn different languages and that makes life very exciting. What I noticed in our Filipino languages, there is an awareness of mutuality. For example, in Tagalog, the word for friend is *kaibigan* which means, "I love you and you love me." And enemy which in Tagalog is *kaaway*, meaning we are companions in hatred. So those are among the seeds which can awaken me to insight. If I have an enemy I must realize that he's not just somebody I hate but we are companions and we must start loving each other because we are companions.

And the other thing which I had not given is that if I have a concept and then I ask, "Is it?" If it's just a concept, it's a very neat concept that I have. If I have a concept of a friend it's a very neat concept. But if I have a living friend my concept of him becomes a question. It becomes, "I know him but I also don't know him." Or, "I know her but I also don't know her." The life of a person who tries to live in insight into reality lives a complicated question very often but it is not a question of despair but a question of hope. I can't think of anything else in the talk which I had not given.

Mr. Danton Remoto: I'm not from the Philosophy Department. I'm Danton Remoto from the English Department. It's not really a question but more of a comment, Father, because what I gather from your unprepared lecture is that you tell stories in philosophy class that could create a clearing in the student's mind so they can arrive at "truths" from where they're coming from. Is that more or

less correct? Because that's what we try to do in our literature classes. We give stories that speak to the students.

Fr. Ferriols: Yes, I think literature and philosophy are *kaibigan*. I think there are two kinds of philosophy students. One kind of philosophy student is the type who also loves literature and the other one is the one who also loves mathematics. But I think the real genius is the one who loves literature, mathematics and philosophy. I am the type who loves literature and philosophy. I don't love mathematics.

Edward from EAPI: In your talk, you emphasized truth as a fundamental aspect of philosophy. And my question is "What are some of the criteria that need to be emphasized in finding about truth in all aspects?"

Fr. Ferriols: Well, you're asking for the criteria to be emphasized? Well I have just one criterion, which is to look for the truth and the truth is very rich so I suppose if one is looking for the truth, it depends on what aspect of the truth attracts him most. But there are certain aspects of truth which attract us all but I'd rather not set up the criteria. I'd rather leave it open so that we can be surprised.