

Becoming Useless as a Measure of Success

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During an open forum on Environmental Ethics held at Ateneo de Manila University in honor of the late Ramon Castillo Reyes last February 18, 2020, a student remarked that “Philosophy is the most useless subject.” Since he identified himself as a freshman, I responded with the story about Thales and the olive presses, the first philosophical tale that sophomore students usually encounter on the first day of their philosophy classes. Aristotle reports in the *Politics* that

When they reproached him [Thales] because of his poverty as though Philosophy were no use, it is said that, having observed through his study of the heavenly bodies that there would be a large olive crop, he raised a little capital while it was still winter and paid deposits on all the olive presses in Meletus and Chios, hiring them cheaply because no one bid against him. When the appropriate time came there was a sudden rush of requests for the

presses. He then hired them out on his own terms and so made a large profit, thus demonstrating that it is easy for philosophers to be rich, if they wish, but that is not in this that they are interested.¹

In our day and age when utilitarianism governs the practices of everyday life, it is important to be mindful of nobler norms that lie beyond utility. As Max Scheler argued in his monumental work on ethics, utility is for the sake of a better quality of life.²

From the perspective of the Global South, the story of Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, is also instructive on this point. As a prince, Siddhartha was forbidden to wander beyond their kingdom. But this prohibition did not prevent the young heir to encounter the reality of poverty, sickness, old-age, and death. These encounters made him concede that life is *dukkha* (suffering). He then searched for a solution to address this predicament. For weeks, he sat undisturbed under a Bodhi tree, appearing to be useless and unkempt. He was tempted to rise to meet his desires, wants, and needs. But he stayed under the tree mindful of his surroundings, emotions, and thoughts. This led him to realize that the objects of his desires were mere passing whims to be noted but not taken seriously.

¹ *Politics* 1259a 9 as cited from *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle*, ed. by Reginald Allen (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 27.

² Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values*, trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 94.

From the center of this unproductive receptivity where nothing seems to happen, the art and science of mindfulness was born. Avowed gurus of Buddhist practices are now making a living by applying the apparently useless practices of meditation to the fields of psychology, business management, martial arts, theatre and the fine arts, and other endeavours.

In our first article, “The Crisis of the Humanities? Reflections on the Role of the Humanities in the Global University,” Scott Doidge, John Doyle, and Rhonda Siu defend the “inherent value” of a liberal arts education against narrow forms of specialization “by encouraging students to critically reflect on the kind of person that they want to become.” They proposed to achieve this end by participating in the collaboration of various disciplines and institutions, by highlighting the evaluative frameworks presumed by these collaborations, and by humanizing public discourses in terms of the higher values that lie beyond the norms of utility.

The second article, Damien Roiland’s “Blue Bahay: More than a Place to Play,” articulates the relevance of playing “useless” games for underprivileged children. He shows that the games that children play are more essential in the long run. By simply playing games, children learn to follow rules, cooperate with others, and care for their shared goods. He argues that playing is an end-in-itself and concludes that the opportunity to play offers children, especially those coming from disadvantaged communities, “this invaluable opportunity to break out of the cycle of production and utility; to enter a sphere of creation and empowerment.”

Our third article, Aurelio Agcaoili's "*Saan a Maymaysat' Aldaw: Education in Democracy, Social Justice, and Inclusion in Ilokano Life*," highlights the Ilokano notion of "*sursuro*" (learning) as the broader context of education that is "born of mindfulness of the limitless possibilities of life and of cultivating the earth." His essay highlights the substantive aspects of Ilokano life, while assiduously sorting out the nuances offered by Amianan languages and indigenous cultures. The products of these efforts could very well serve as learning materials for our students' formal *adal* (lessons) in schools and universities.

Agcaoili reminds those who are creating digital Learning Management Systems "that someone's hands must be soiled to feed those working from home." After many days of living under quarantine (somewhat like the Buddha), we have learned that the most relevant persons are not the popular entertainers who merely distract us from our real concerns. The ones who can save us from this pandemic are the health, food, maintenance, and security personnel who keep us free from the dreaded virus.

Anton Sevilla-Liu's article, "Japanese Philosophy of Moral Education: From Watsuji Tetsurô to Mori Akira," brings us to an appreciation of the development of Watsuji Tetsurô's tensional view of the "human being" to Mori Akira's developmental notion of "human becoming." Sevilla reports that according to Mori, "education cannot be narrowly reduced to schooling." He cites Immanuel Kant to support his claim: "The human being can only become human through

education.” However, this kind of education is a process of awakening, a “self-awareness of self-awareness,” the kind of reflective activity indulged in by academics whenever they step outside the confines of their specializations to evaluate their disciplines.

Finally, Von Karl M. Katindoy reviews Johnny C. Go, SJ and Rita J. Atienza’s *Learning by Refraction: A Practitioner’s Guide to 21st Century Ignatian Pedagogy*. He subtitles his review with the phrase “Reinventing ‘Sages on Stage’ to ‘Sages on the Side’.” He claims that learners are the real actors in the drama of education. Teachers must humbly shift their roles from being dispensers of knowledge and wisdom to mere designers, facilitators, and coaches of learning. These seemingly useless roles are meant to foreground the learning process and to return the responsibility of education to the learners themselves.

Becoming “useless” has always been the crowning glory of teachers. At the commencement of an academic course, students should no longer need their educators. They have become educated by educating themselves. They can already live well without asking their teachers about the hows and whys of living. Becoming useless, therefore, can be a noble measure of success.