

# **The Relevance of Critical Thinking in Contemporary Philippine Society**

Romualdo E. Abulad, SVD, Ph.D.  
*University of Santo Tomas*  
*Christ the King Mission Seminary*

**W**hat is this thing called critical thinking? Why the focus on it? What is so important about it that we need to give it focus? Why learn correct and critical thinking? For generations now we have been offering Logic to our Filipino students, and yet has the Filipino learned how to think correctly? If the extent of graft and corruption in our culture is any indication, one might be tempted to say that we have learned more of the opposite, which is, crooked thinking. Before the end of this paper we hope to be able to see the connection between correct, critical and ethical thinking. Which all boils down to one thing – thinking. It is therefore crucial that our students are properly trained in thinking – in correct and critical thinking which should issue in moral and ethical thinking as well. The beneficiaries of such a training will be the individual student, yes, but also and inevitably the rest of our society. There is no denying the importance not just of thinking but of correct thinking, not just of correct thinking but of critical thinking, and not just of critical thinking but of ethical thinking. In fact, they should be taken together and treated as one, and so genuine thinking ought to be simultaneously correct, critical and ethical. Thinking of them separately will be costly for us and for the others as well, as you will see, if you have not already seen it.

## **Critical Thinking**

What is critical thinking? Instead of answering this question directly, allow me to give you samples of critical thinking in the history of philosophy, in the process of which we will learn something crucial too about the development not only of philosophy but also of all human history. Perhaps by its very nature philosophy involves critical thinking. Had Thales, for example, insisted on calling table ‘table’ and man ‘man,’ there

would be nothing today for us to remember him by. But because he said that table is not table but water, the house maids of Ionia laughed and we still hear their laughter today. This is the first significant thing that we should remember about critical thinking, that it does not mean to leave prevailing opinions and judgments standing; rather, it unsettles ordinary knowledge and tends to shake our convictions. Hence, we should be ready to hear opinions other than those we hold dear if we are to engage earnestly in critical thought.

We owe this attitude to the Greeks, who were aggressive enough to invent theory or θεωρία. They dared to think differently. They theorized about the universe and the nature of things (de rerum natura) and in the process initiated the movement which would ultimately change the face of the earth. They were the first scientists, the first theoretical physicists, the first to conceive of the atom as the minutest element of matter, the first to wonder whether this element should not rather be Mind or νοῦς. They did not mind disagreeing with each other and probably did not find it an offense that others have opinions opposed to theirs.

There's one, though, who would differ profoundly with them all, even at the cost of his life. The young Socrates is known to be a frequent guest at the agora, by then probably also a marketplace, supposedly in search of the knowledgeable man. I cannot help comparing the agora of Socrates' days to the Plaza Miranda of my own college days, which was the place where all sorts of inquisitive minds would gather especially at sunset in order to discuss all sorts of things, mostly opinions on politics, religion and philosophy. Here the young Socrates would listen to the eloquent wisecracks of Athens. A cursory inspection of the dialogues of Plato would show how many of these dialogues could each be said to occupy itself with the question: τι το ον What is? Questions such as, What is love? What is virtue? What is justice? What is beauty? What is knowledge? What is good? Commonplace questions, you would say. These are words we use everyday without even wondering about their meaning. They are familiar words, known even to street sweepers and laundry women, people who have not seen the university corridors. But, as Hegel will say later, what is familiarly known is not properly known, just for the reason that

it is familiar.<sup>1</sup> The great St. Augustine is famously remembered for what he said about time, that “I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled.”<sup>2</sup>

In the Dialogues, it is not unusual that Plato gives the sophist, he who thinks he knows, the first opportunity to say his piece. For example, in the Republic, it is the sophist Thrasymachus for whom, one might say, the great ideas of Socrates on justice have been advanced. Thrasymachus defines justice as that which is in the interest of the strong party,<sup>3</sup> a position which is further strengthened by arguments from Glaucon and Adeimantus. The response of Socrates does not take the same form as the harangue of Thrasymachus, who would like a debate, not an inquiry into the truth. The Socratic Method is a search which does not know the conclusion in advance, and that’s why it asks questions and considers the initial answers tentative. Socrates engages not so much in a debate as in a dialogue. The goal of a debate is victory at whatever cost, right or wrong, true or untrue. A dialogue aims at more than victory; consensus about the truth, even if not always absolute, is of essence here. That is why the Socratic method does not hurry to the conclusion and presupposes, as much as possible, nothing.

This constitutes a part of the strength of the philosophically trained mind, that it is capable of criticizing itself. “Know thyself,”<sup>4</sup> is the all-important dictum of Socrates that continues to be heard all over the world. Only one who knows oneself well enough knows that one does not know. This is precisely why Socrates is declared by the Oracle of Delphi as the wisest man of Athens, because he alone of all men knows that he does not know.<sup>5</sup> This ‘learned ignorance’<sup>6</sup> is a mark of the wise man and a *conditio sine qua non* for critical thinking. It would be unwise for one to criticize others without oneself undergoing a rigorous self-critique. To be

<sup>1</sup>G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), p. 92.

<sup>2</sup>St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.14, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 264.

<sup>3</sup>Plato, *Republic* 339a, trans. Paul Shorey, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, BollingenSeries LXXI, 1973), p. 589

<sup>4</sup>Plato, *Charmides* 164d; *Laws* II.923a; *Phaedrus* 230a; *Philebus* 48c; and *Protagoras* 343b

<sup>5</sup>Plato, *Apology* 21.

<sup>6</sup>The term is borrowed from the title of Nicholas Cusanus’ book, *De Docta Ignorantia*.

critical implies to be self-critical. One might say that the history of philosophy is a string of relentless and continuous criticism and self-criticism, even to the point where the very identity and existence of philosophy are brought into jeopardy. No other discipline is as rigorous as philosophy in the matter of self-critique. Let me just mention here a few major examples.

René Descartes (1596-1650) is considered the Father of Modern Thought on account of his unforgettable principle of Universal Doubt: “That in order to examine into the truth, it is necessary once in one’s life to doubt of all things, so far as this is possible.”<sup>7</sup> The scope of Cartesian doubt is all-encompassing, covering things both outside and inside the mind, things of sense and things of the intellect. Descartes tried to cleanse the mind of all its contents and start from scratch. The age, the Renaissance, also called for it. It was an age of doubt, coming as it was from the darkness of the Medieval Age. After its zenith in the 13th century, the Medieval or Middle Age started its steep decline and eventually gave way to the new age, the Modern Age. The transition to modernity was a rejection of the immediate past and a return to the remote past, a return to the Ancients – the glory that was Greece. This is what is meant by Renaissance or, literally, rebirth, re-nascere (“to be born again”). What the Renaissance is giving birth to is a New Greece, with all the exciting intellectual ferment of the Old Greece. This is also why modernity is also called the Age of Reason or, which amounts to almost the same thing, Enlightenment. Had not the moderns become critical of the Medieval Age, the Age of Belief, they would not have trekked the path of science. The scientific consciousness became possible only on the condition that faith gave way to reason. This is the background behind the tension between faith and reason. At the start of modernity, however, it was necessary that, in order to make science and thus also technology possible, the authority of the Church and the articles of faith were to pass through the crucible of doubt. Voltaire was therefore a man of his time, the epitome of the secular man whose trust in reason made of him a free-thinker. “Dare to think! Sapere aude!” was the slogan of the

---

<sup>7</sup> This is the first principle of the Principles of Philosophy, see René Descartes, *Key Philosophical Writings*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, 1997), p. 277

Enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> To a man who thinks, it behooves to doubt.

The “first modern thinker”, says Ernst Cassirer, is Nicholas of Cusa.<sup>9</sup> While God is still uppermost in his mind, he questions our ability to know Him. He thus puts man, not God, at the center of things. Is it reasonable for man to claim knowledge of God, that God exists? By what right do we make this claim? The very question shakes the foundations of belief, and Nicholas of Cusa is able to show how inadequate is human logic in grappling with it. Our logic, the logic of syllogism which we inherit from Aristotle and the Medieval scholastics such as St. Thomas Aquinas, is appropriate for finite things, but not for the Infinite Being who is God. God cannot be reached by a logic that is based on the principle of non-contradiction, precisely because contradiction belongs to the very nature of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the coincidence of opposites.

The logic of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas is the very same logic that is still largely taught in the Philippine schools of today. Though it is advisable to continue teaching it, it would be a mistake to confine logic to it. Even after at least a hundred years of offering it to our university students, it does seem to have made little dent in the way we Filipinos think. If logic is meant to train our people to think correctly, it looks like we have not really succeeded much in this regard. What has gone wrong? Do we perhaps need another logic?

Nicholas of Cusa certainly thinks so, but only if the object of our thought is the Infinite God. We would need, he says, a logic which is more intellectually intuitive, not based on the principle of non-contradiction but one that directly ‘sees’ the God who is the fusion of all contradictions.<sup>10</sup>

Francis Bacon goes even further. He considers the logic we teach in school inadequate in dealing even with everyday things, with empirical matters. The deductive logic of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, which builds on general premises and draws

<sup>8</sup> “*Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own reason! – that is the motto of the Enlightenment.” Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” in *Kant on History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1975), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> “This position towards the problem of knowledge makes of Cusanus the first modern thinker. His first step consists in asking not about God, but about the possibility of knowledge about God.” Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> “The true organ of its apprehension is the intellectual vision, the *visio intellectualis*, wherein all the oppositions of logical genres and species are resolved.” Ernst Cassirer, *ibid.*

from them particular conclusions, breeds biases and prejudices, what he calls the idols of the mind.

*There are four classes of Idols which beset men's minds. To these for distinction's sake I have assigned names, calling the first class Idols of the Tribe; the second, Idols of the Cave; the third, Idols of the Market Place; the fourth, Idols of the Theater.*<sup>11</sup>

What Bacon would like us to do with these idols of the mind is that we renounce and put away all of them "with a fixed and solemn determination," so that the understanding is "thoroughly freed and cleansed." This he calls "the entrance into the kingdom of man, founded on the sciences."<sup>12</sup> In place of the deductive method of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, Bacon founds a *novum organum*, the new logic of induction, which is the foundation of the scientific method. The one now in use in physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology and the other hard sciences, as well as those in the social sciences that include psychology, anthropology, sociology, politics and economics must have more or less come from the influence of Bacon. We should not forget, too, the other science, mathematics, which provides the quantitative basis for these sciences and, in fact, became a science ahead of the others.

Cleansing the mind of its idols, however, is not yet good enough, and there is still a need for a final demolition work, this time in the hands of the Frenchman we have earlier mentioned, René Descartes, whose Universal Doubt qualified for him the title of Father of Modern Thought. You should not forget his first principle: "That in order to examine into the truth, it is necessary once in one's life to doubt of all things, so far as this is possible." In the *Discourse on Method* he puts it this way: "The first of these (rules) was to accept nothing as true which I did not clearly recognise to be so; that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitation and prejudice in judgments, and to accept in them nothing more than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I could have no occasion to doubt it."<sup>13</sup> This is the spirit – the spirit

<sup>11</sup> Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 39. In *Classics of the Western World: The Modern World*, ed. Charles Hirschfeld and Edgar E. Knoebel (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1980), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 68. *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>13</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, Part 2.18, in *Key Philosophical Writings*, p.

of criticism, the critical spirit - that permeated modernity, the spirit which ended the absolutism of faith, the kind of faith which demands unbending obedience and which becomes the source of dogmatism and superstition.

By now many should have already read a book which makes one feel like we were still in these early days of modernity, battling against the pernicious consequences of uncritical faith.

*Our past is not sacred for being past, and there is much that is behind us that we are struggling to keep behind us, and to which, it is to be hoped, we could never return with a clear conscience: the divine right of kings, feudalism, the caste system, slavery, political executions, forced castration, vivisection, bearbaiting, honorable duels, chastity belts, trial by ordeal, child labor, human and animal sacrifice, the stoning of heretics, cannibalism, sodomy laws, taboos against contraception, human radiation experiments – the list is nearly endless . . . Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity – a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible.<sup>14</sup>*

The author is Sam Harris and his book, “The End of Faith,” first appeared in 2004. Like an early modern thinker, he argues for “respect for evidence and rational argument” which, he hopes, will make “peaceful cooperation possible.”<sup>15</sup> In the 18th century this would issue in, say, the French Revolution with its slogan of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” the culmination of the dream of Enlightenment. History has its peaks and falls; it is full of trials and errors, but also of measures of progress and success. The culmination of modernity is the world we have now of science and technology, with all its wonders and blunders.

How perfect can reason be? By cleansing the mental state of all its prejudices and applying methodically the universal doubt, Descartes hopes to arrive at nothing but apodictic certitude. Accepting nothing as true which can in the least be doubted, he is able to liberate the mind from all influences, both external and internal, both of sense and of intellect. Nothing can be more thorough than this Cartesian cleansing of the mind, for which

<sup>14</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

he richly deserves the title of Father of Modernity. He doubts everything and leaves standing only that which he can no longer doubt. "But immediately afterwards I noticed that whilst I thus wished to think all things false, it was absolutely essential that the 'I' who thought this should be somewhat, and remarking that this truth 'I think, therefore I am' was so certain and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions brought forward by the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I came to the conclusion that I could receive it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy for which I was seeking."<sup>16</sup>

*Cogito ergo sum.* I think, therefore I am. This became the first principle not only of Descartes' philosophy but of all modern philosophy, not only of modern philosophy but of modernity as a whole. The residue of the universal doubt is the Cogito, the I think or the *res cogitans*, the thinking I, the I whose nature is to think, the thinking substance. The I that thinks – who can doubt that? Descartes is correct, "we cannot doubt our existence without existing while we doubt."<sup>17</sup> Try doubting that you exist, and you cannot deny that there must be that something (which here I call 'you' but which you call 'I') which is doing the doubting. That 'I' which doubts must exist if there is to take place any doubting at all. Descartes is correct about the 'I' as indubitably certain, and indeed nobody after him argues with him here. The 'I' or self or cogito (or transcendental ego or apperception, to name only a few equivalents in later history), has become the basic assumption of modernity. And that's why we often describe modernity as anthropocentric or man-centered, to differentiate it from the medieval which is theocentric or God-centered and the ancient which is cosmocentric or world-centered.

It will be too much for us to discuss here what comes after the first certitude, *cogito ergo sum*. But suppose I ask you, simply by way of a thought experiment, what to you would be the second certitude, remembering however that, with Descartes, we have already doubted everything either inside or outside our thoughts. In other words, we have already doubted the existence even of the world. All we know now is that the 'I' exists. What would be our second certitude, the next thing we can claim to know for sure?

<sup>16</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part 4.32. In *Key Philosophical Writings*, p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> Descartes, *Principle 17*, in *Key Philosophical Writings*, p. 279.



(Pause here.) I'll tell you what Descartes did for his next move. Since it would be impossible for him to go horizontally and claim knowledge of the world, what he did is go vertically. As a kind of *deus ex machina*, he resorts to God. His second certitude is that God exists, and once the existence of God is assured he then no longer have any difficulty about the existence of other things. But are you in favor of that second move of Descartes? Do you agree that the existence of God is the next sure thing after the existence of the 'I'? I'll tell you what – the successors of Descartes were not impressed. So, you see, not even the disciples of Descartes take everything the master said hook line and sinker. The moderns are a critical lot; they don't take things, so they say, lying down. They are after knowledge, sure and certain knowledge; they go for science, and science is in fact what they have bequeathed to us.

Indeed, there is nothing either sure, certain or scientific about Descartes' proof for God's existence. One after the other, the young philosophers exploded the assumptions which remained unnoticed by Descartes, notably the concepts of innate ideas, substance, and causality. The first (innate ideas) was demolished by John Locke, the second (substance) by George Berkeley, and the third (causality) by David Hume, all English philosophers who constitute the triumvirate of empiricism . The three ideas have been taken for granted for more than a millennium, with Plato at the head of the innatists and Aristotle as the official installer of being as 'substance' and 'cause' as the goal of every inquiry. As they say, habits die hard and all three unrecognized assumptions only show that Descartes' universal doubt actually fails to live up to its name; it is not yet completely universal, after all. Let's try to prove this, as briefly as possible, if we can.

What could be more natural than to think of the *cogito* as a substance, a substance whose nature is to think, thus a thinking substance? Every being, says Aristotle, is something, that is, a thing, which is just another word for substance. Even now, we can hardly think of anything except as something, as a substance. So, like you and me, Descartes simply takes it for granted that the *cogito* whose existence we cannot doubt is a 'something,' meaning a substance.

But here comes Bishop Berkeley asking "What substance?" What I see or perceive are merely impressions or what Aristotle

calls accidents – “brown” “hot” “bitter” “aroma” etc. “Coffee” is nothing but all these impressions or accidents, and if these impressions are done away with, what else is left? Is there still “coffee”? A thing is just a bundle of impressions and there’s no thing or substance that underlies them. What holds them together is not an unperceivable something but the mind itself; it is the mind that perceives these impressions. “Coffee” is what is perceived by us as coffee; to be is to be perceived, *esse es percipi*. Without us, there won’t be coffee. Berkeley gives the example of a basin of water, which feels hot to a hand which is cold but which feels cold to a hand that is warm.<sup>18</sup> Is the water hot or cold? That depends on the mind that perceives and where the perceiver is coming from. This stance of Berkeley is quite radical; it explodes the concept of a substance, so that the cogito or ‘I think’ conceived as a thinking substance thus gets exploded, too.

And what about God, which is Descartes’ second certitude? What for does the cogito need God anyway? Because the cogito is doubting, then it is not perfect and thus have no reason to exist. It needs a being greater than itself to account for its existence. In other words, there must be a reason or a cause why it exists, and that cause cannot be less than the perfect being, which is of course God. There must, then, be a God who is the cause of my existence. What more normal tendency is there in us than to think of everything and every event as necessitating a cause? The first question we ask when we see something is, Why is it there? We cannot imagine anything happening without a cause, so if I am here, there must be a cause of my existence. And that’s God.

But here comes David Hume. “What cause are we talking about?” he asks. What we experience is only the succession of events, and we are not privy to any cause. When Adam first saw water, he could not have imagined that it could drown him. The thought would not have dawned on him even after the first or even the second experience of drowning in water. There is a need for a multiple repetition of the same experience in order for him to be able to connect water with drowning. The same is true

---

<sup>18</sup> “Suppose now one of your hands hot, and the other cold, and that they are both at once put into the same vessel of water, to an intermediate state; will not the water seem cold to one hand and warm to the other? . . . Ought we not therefore by your principles to conclude, it is really both cold and warm at the same time . . .?” George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous, First Dialogue* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 14-15.

with the rising of the sun every morning. It is only because we experience the same thing everyday that, sooner or later, we begin to connect them and then we get used to saying that “the sun rises every morning.” But is that necessarily the case? Isn’t it possible that the sun will not rise tomorrow, that therefore there will be no more tomorrow? “The contrary of every matter of act,” says Hume, “is still possible.”<sup>19</sup> It is always possible that tomorrow the sun will not rise, possible that a heavy object suspended in the air will not fall to the ground but proceed continuously upward, that instead of sinking a man begins to walk on water. And when that happens, we immediately conclude that there’s a violation of the law of nature and we panic and call it a miracle.

What Hume is trying to say is that experience does not disclose any causality. No matter how hard we try, there is no way we can be privy to the nature hidden in the nature of things that account for its power to cause a certain effect. ‘Cause,’ then, is only a concept which we call upon when we experience two events successively repetitively until we get accustomed to this succession and connect the two events as if by necessity. It is thus only custom or habit which accounts for causality; it is a mistake to claim knowledge for something that has grown merely from such a custom or habit. The end result is that Hume advises us always to exercise skepticism in relation to all things. There is nothing we can be certain about.

The completion of this grand demolition job of the West is done by one of the greatest philosophers of all times, the German Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), whom Moses Mendelssohn describes as an all-destroyer.<sup>20</sup> His Critique of Pure Reason is also the completion of the Cartesian Universal Doubt. I suggest that we do not forget this term from now on – Critique of Pure Reason. This is not just the title of the book, but the procedure or method

<sup>19</sup> David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Section IV, Part I* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Library of Liberal Arts, 1955), p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> Allan Arkush has this to say: “Far from regarding Mendelssohn as a traitor to reason, Kant commends him for continuing to treat reason as the ultimate authority. The only thing that really disturbs Kant is Mendelssohn’s tendency to credit speculation with too much power. He upbraids him for continuing to believe that it could ‘straighten everything out by means of demonstrations.’ This is, in effect, Kant’s answer to Mendelssohn’s appeal to him in the Preface to *Morning Hours*. Mendelssohn, it will be recalled, spoke there rather ruefully, of the ‘all-crushing Kant,’ the destroyer of traditional metaphysics.” Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 85. Mendelssohn’s reference to the “all-crushing Kant” is found in the *Moses Mendelssohn Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumausgabe*, vol. 3, 2, pp. 3-4 (as cited by Arkush, p. 93 Notes).

itself which we all need to undergo if we are to attain certainty, as far as humans like you and me are capable of. It is a thorough and relentless critique of whatever powers we might have by which to know things. It is, therefore, truly an authentic contribution to the Socratic appeal for us to “Know thyself!”<sup>21</sup> He does not mean by critique of pure reason “a criticism of books and systems, but of the faculty of reason in general.”<sup>22</sup> It is very much like the experience of an earlier philosopher, none other than John Locke, who, one evening, got into endless debate with some friends on questions probably of morality and religion, making him reflect on this experience and finally coming to this conclusion, that perhaps they had been all along doing it the wrong way. In his words: “After we had awhile puzzled ourselves, without coming any nearer a resolution of those doubts which perplexed us, it came into my thoughts that we took a wrong course; and that before we set ourselves upon inquiries of that nature, it was necessary to examine our own abilities, and see what objects our understandings were, or were not, fitted to deal with.”<sup>23</sup>

Locke is the first name of a philosopher actually mentioned by Kant in the Critique of Pure Reason, as follows: “Not long ago one might have thought, indeed, that all these quarrels were to have been settled and the legitimacy of her claims decided once for all through a certain physiology of the human understanding, the work of the celebrated Locke.”<sup>24</sup> Kant correctly diagnosed the work of Locke to have somewhat failed, and yet he could not forget the initial motive of it, which has to do with “a certain physiology of the human understanding.” It is necessary, first of all, to “examine our own abilities” before we can even claim to know anything. The critique of pure reason is thus an examination of our own rational powers and faculties, determining what tools the mind has, the so-called a priori forms, according to which we are able to understand anything at all. This is why the endeavor amounts to

---

<sup>21</sup> Kant explains the critique of pure reason as “a powerful appeal to reason to undertake anew the most difficult of its duties, namely, self-knowledge, and to institute a court of appeal which should protect the just rights of reason, but dismiss all groundless claims, and should do this not by means of irresponsible decrees, but according to the eternal and unalterable laws of reason.” Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. F. Max Müller (New York: Doubleday & Company, Anchor Books edition, 1966), p. xxiv.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> John Locke, “The Epistle to the Reader,” in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), p. 27.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. xxiii.

self-knowledge, Kant's response to the Socratic injunction, "Know thyself."

The conclusion of Kant's critique of pure reason is well known, that we can never know the things as they are in themselves (noumena) but only as they appear to us (phenomena).<sup>25</sup> Not to be missed is the summary of his theory of knowledge, according to which "Thoughts without contents are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."<sup>26</sup> Logical thinking is important, but it is not enough. To think logically, we must pay attention to the principle of non-contradiction. In a debate, for instance, you must take care not to contradict yourself, or you lose the game. A debate, however, is not interested in the truth but only in the victory, so it would be enough in this case to convince the other side by whatever means. The truth, however, is more than what is not contradictory, more than what is logical. "Thoughts without contents are empty," is how Kant puts it. Although the principle of contradiction is a *conditio sine qua non* or a negative condition for thinking, this does not suffice if we are after knowledge or truth. We have learned from logic that our syllogism may be valid but not true. For example: "The moon is made of cheese. Cheese is something to eat. Therefore, the moon is something to eat." This syllogism is valid, but not true. The major premise, that "the moon is made of cheese," is, in Kant's lingo, a thought without content. It is as good as saying "x is y," where neither x nor y mean anything.

<sup>25</sup> This conclusion is expressed in several ways, at various stages of the critique of pure reason. At the end of the Transcendental Aesthetic, Kant writes: "What we meant to say was this, that all our intuition is nothing but the representation of phenomena; that things which we see are not by themselves what we see, nor their relations by themselves such as they appear to us . . . They cannot, as phenomena, exist by themselves, but in us only. It remains completely unknown to us what objects may be by themselves and apart from the receptivity of our senses . . . Even if we could impart the highest degree of clearness to our intuition, we should not come one step nearer to the nature of objects by themselves . . . What the objects are by themselves would never become known to us, even through the clearest knowledge of that which alone is given us, the phenomenon." *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 36. At the end of the Transcendental Analytic, Kant says: "Transcendental Analytic has therefore yielded us this important result, that the understanding a priori can never do more than anticipate the form of a possible experience; and as nothing can be the object of experience except the phenomenon, it follows that the understanding can never go beyond the limits of sensibility, within which alone objects are given to us. Its principles are principles for the exhibition of phenomena only; and the proud name of Ontology, which presumes to supply in a systematic form different kinds of synthetical knowledge a priori of things by themselves (for instance the principle of causality), must be replaced by the more modest name of a mere Analytic of the pure understanding." *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 193. At the end of the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant concludes: "Thus we find that pure reason, which at first seemed to promise nothing less than extension of our knowledge beyond all limits of experience, contains, if properly understood, nothing but regulative principles . . . No doubt, the critical examination of all propositions which seemed to be able to enlarge our knowledge beyond real experience, as given in the Transcendental Analytic, has fully convinced us that they could never lead to anything more than to a possible experience . . ." *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 455-456.

<sup>26</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 45.

For me to say that “the moon is made of cheese” may be a correct sentence or proposition, complete with subject, predicate and a copula or linking verb (here, is). But for a proposition to be true, I should be able to actually experience the moon and see for myself if it tastes like cheese. Without this experience, this intuition, of the moon as cheese, my proposition remains empty. That’s why evidence is required, say, in legal cases. It is not enough to say that so-and-so is the murderer; proof beyond reasonable doubt is necessary before judgment can be meted out, so that many times the process is prolonged beyond our patience, as in the case of the assassination of Ninoy Aquino.

Not too long ago, a group of philosophers in Vienna formed a Circle and became known for the school of Logical Positivism. Very famous is its slogan: “The meaning of a proposition is its method of verification.”<sup>27</sup> Simply, it teaches that what cannot be verified should be considered senseless and meaningless. A.J. Ayer is correct in attributing this attitude to the parting paragraph of Hume’s *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

*When we run over libraries . . . what havoc must we make? If we take into our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”<sup>28</sup>*

This makes of what we call ‘metaphysics’ meaningless, for its objects are beyond verification, namely, God, freedom and immortality. The proofs for their existence are merely logical and thus “thoughts without contents.” Thus, the ‘doubting Thomas’ was being reasonable when he refused to accept that Jesus rose from the dead and was alive again, saying “Unless I see the holes that the nails made in his hands and can put my finger into the holes they made, and unless I can put my hand into his side, I refuse to believe.” (John 20:25) In this John is just being an empiricist or a positivist who accepts nothing as true which cannot be proved by experience.

<sup>27</sup> A.J. Ayer, *Editor’s Introduction to Logical Positivism* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Library of Liberal Arts, 1955), p. 173. Quoted by Ayer, *ibid.*, p. 10.

But what is experience? While ‘thoughts without contents are empty,’ Kant also insists that ‘intuitions without concepts are blind.’ It is not enough that one has good eyes and is awake. Right now, for example, you may be looking at me, but if your mind is wandering elsewhere you won’t see me, nor will you hear me if your thoughts are busy about other things. That’s what we normally call being physically present and mentally absent. And so you won’t be able to catch what the teacher is trying to say and you will miss the day’s lesson if, as they say, you are not paying attention; you are, therefore, as good as absent even if you are not marked absent on that day. The senses alone won’t see, as in the case of a corpse whose eyes are perfectly in order and even ready for transplant donation, as recently happened to a popular young actor who lost his life in an accident. As George Berkeley says, “To be is to be perceived.” One sees not just with the eyes but also with the mind, with both the eyes and the mind together. Without the mind one does not see. It is the mind, says Berkeley, that perceives.<sup>29</sup>

What we here call experience is always human experience, for which reason, mind or consciousness is essential. Human knowledge always presupposes the consciousness whose knowledge it is. That is why knowledge is always only a phenomenon, an appearance, the way something appears to us, to our consciousness, and the manner it is thought by us, by our understanding. This is what constitutes experience, and this is also what constitutes human knowledge. Thus, we cannot know what falls outside the scope of human experience, even if we can think of it, such as God, freedom or immortality. We can think of it, but we have to admit we cannot know it. And so, Kant says that in these matters “knowledge must give way to belief.”<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, belief is not knowledge. It is the very lack of knowledge that makes belief or faith possible. If we already know, we don’t anymore have to believe. We believe because we don’t know. Is it the case that we can know everything? If we can, we

<sup>29</sup> At the end of the first dialogue, Philonous says to Hylas, “Consider therefore, and then tell me if there be anything in them which can exist without the mind: or if you can conceive anything like them existing without the mind.” To which Hylas answers, “Upon inquiry, I find it is impossible for me to conceive or understand how anything but an idea can be like an idea. And it is most evident, that no idea can exist without the mind.” George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 41-42.

<sup>30</sup> “I had to remove knowledge in order to give room to belief.” Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. xxxix.

don't need to believe. Faith would make no sense. This has once been the dream of the West – a state of human affairs where we have transcended the stage of myth, superstition, legend and even religion. Scientism is precisely that – the belief in the supremacy of scientific knowledge, where science is all. We have, in fact, reached an age where life seems no longer possible without reliance on science and technology. This is the great Western heritage, started by the Greeks and perfected by the moderns. And yet, has everything been known? Or is everything knowable? Why, then, is Einstein's theory called 'theory of relativity'? And that of Heisenberg's called 'theory of indeterminacy'? One might very well say that the great scientists are convinced that there's nothing about science that could claim for the absolute character of its knowledge. Kant's conclusion is therefore correct and is being vindicated as the sciences mature. All our knowledge, indeed, is only phenomenal, only of things as they appear to us, and never can it arrogate unto itself a knowledge of things as they are in themselves, as noumena. No matter how scientific, our knowledge is always only as far as we, humans, can see and theorize about it. If, at all, there is any consciousness that is capable of absolute knowledge, an exact understanding of things themselves, that consciousness could only be attributed to someone like God. This is what Kant means in the following paragraph added to the chapter on "The Distinction of Phenomena and Noumena" in the second edition of the Critique of Pure Reason:

*If by noumenon we mean a thing so far as it is not an object of our sensuous intuition, and make abstraction of our mode of intuition, it may be called a noumenon in a negative sense. If, however, we mean by it an object of a non-sensuous intuition, we admit thereby a peculiar mode of intuition, namely, the intellectual, which, however, is not our own, nor one of which we can understand even the possibility. This would be the noumenon in a positive sense.<sup>31</sup>*

This, Kant assures us, is not meant to prove that there is God, but only to show that only such a being like God, if there is one such, could claim to absolute knowledge of things exactly as they are. Human knowledge, In contrast, is always only that – human. No matter how clearly we look into the bottom of things, we

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 198.



cannot go beyond what we can manage by our natural faculties, and so our knowledge is always contextualized broadly as human and specifically according to our peculiar geography, culture, and education or formation. Michael Polanyi refers to it as ‘personal knowledge,’ referring to the inevitable “personal participation of the knower in all acts of understanding.”<sup>32</sup> “For, as human beings, we must inevitably see the universe from a centre lying within ourselves and speak about it in terms of a human language shaped by the exigencies of human intercourse. Any attempt rigorously to eliminate our human perspective from our picture of the world must lead to absurdity.”<sup>33</sup>

This is a confirmation in our times of what Kant was struggling to communicate in his own time, couching his conclusion in the end in the technical language of philosophy, that all knowledge are possible only on the assumption of the pure a priori forms of sensibility and understanding, or the pure intuitions of space and time as well as the pure concepts of the understanding or categories. This is what is meant by his conclusion that all our knowledge is only phenomenal, never noumenal, that we can never know the things themselves (or noumena) but only the things as they appear (or phenomena). In the language of Polanyi, all knowledge is personal.

But Polanyi is quick to add that “this does not make our understanding subjective.”<sup>34</sup> Purely subjective knowledge is perhaps what you call opinion (Gr. *doxa*), which includes idle everyday prattle such informal talks and gossips. Opinion is not necessarily what you would earnestly call knowledge (Gr. *episteme*). There continues to be a world of difference between loose and scientific statements. As Polanyi says, “Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity.”<sup>35</sup> He describes such knowledge as objective, which goes to show that objectivity does not have to come into conflict with the personal characteristic of knowledge. Scientific knowledge is what Kant would call synthetic a priori knowledge, which amounts to saying that even the objectivity of

---

<sup>32</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. vii.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

science cannot be without a priori conditions, that is, conditions coming from the human situation.

“What is the true lesson of the Copernican revolution?” asks Polanyi, “Why did Copernicus exchange his actual terrestrial station for an imaginary solar standpoint?” He answers his question as follows: “The only justification for this lay in the greater intellectual satisfaction he derived from the celestial panorama as seen from the sun instead of the earth. Copernicus gave preference to man’s delight in abstract theory, at the price of rejecting the evidence of our senses, which present us with the irresistible fact of the sun, the moon, and the stars rising daily in the east to travel across the sky towards their setting in the west. In a literal sense, therefore, the new Copernican system was as anthropocentric as the Ptolemaic view, the difference being merely that it preferred to satisfy human affection.”<sup>36</sup>

Had Copernicus been satisfied with facts of common sense, our point of view would not have been radically altered and things would have remained as usual. Today, however, we take it as a matter of fact the opposite of that which, centuries ago, was taken as common sense. Even the ordinary man on the street is now a Copernican, not Ptolemaic. But was Ptolemy wrong? Ask the average fifteenth-century human and he would find your question ridiculously foolish. Who could doubt that the earth was flat and that we were in fact the ones moving as the sun stood still? Critical thinking can so radically shift our points of view that before we know it things are already seen and understood differently, and such a transformed intellect issues inevitably in behavioral and ethical changes, too. This is why, as early as the Greeks, Socrates considers education a transformative tool of society. No knowledge is harmless; the scope of one’s understanding determines one’s manner and quality of life. As you know, so you respond to life’s situations. As my teacher would say, one is as good or as evil as one’s ideas; ideas are what rule the world.

And so it is a mistake to take ideas for granted, to take them with a grain of salt. It makes a difference what and how you think, and it is important that you learn not only how to think but also how to think critically. Two things, at least, we already know: First, that critical thinking does not mean to leave prevailing

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.

opinions and judgments standing; rather, it unsettles ordinary knowledge and tends to shake our convictions. And second, that a certain 'learned ignorance' is a mark of the wise man others without oneself undergoing a rigorous self-critique; therefore, to be critical implies to be self-critical. This self-criticism is what Kant's critique of pure reason is all about. It is a relentless criticism of the very faculties we have by which we are able to make our claims; it makes us understand whether and why we can justify these claims or not. The criticism we speak of is not a selective criticism, a criticism which finds fault in others while being lax with one's own preferred opinions. We do not criticize others in order merely to protect our own interests, because the truth is that our own interests are equally subject to critique; we should play no favorites, not even if our favorite turns out to be our own self. This is what objectivity is all about. It is not possible to be objective if we are striving to demolish others only to the extent that we favor our selves. In that case, we would be coming from our own personal preferences, all of which are biases and prejudices which stand in the way of scientific objectivity. Time and again, as we have shown already, the history of philosophy is replete with great personalities who have endeavored to rigorously criticize our favored worldviews, standpoints and lifestyles, in fact even to the point of self-destruction, but always with a view to greater and higher objectivity and a clearer understanding of the true state of things.

## **Nietzsche and Marx**

Allow me to give you two more examples of critical thinking, whose earth-shaking consequences bear heavily on society's practical affairs. I mean Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx, the one having a profound effect on religion and the other on our socio-political life.

One might say that Kant's critique of pure reason is heavily epistemological in intent and at first blush does not have any practical contribution to make. On second thought, however, this is a critique that should precede all other critiques. It is inevitable, for example, that the critique of pure reason should engender the all-pervasive critique of culture that one finds in the iconoclastic

philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Some of you might not have heard yet of the story of the Madman, and so for their sake you will please allow me to read a somewhat edited version of it.<sup>37</sup>

*Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!" - As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Emigrated? - Thus they yelled and laughed.*

*The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him - you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? . . . Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him . . .*

*Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men . . . and yet they have done it themselves.*

*It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his requiem aeternam deo. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: "What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God."*

What is Nietzsche trying to say? The death of God strikes at the very ground on which, one might say, the whole European culture is built. Although it has the Middle East for its birthplace, Christianity was adopted by the gentile West and here it became so strong as to make it one of the world's major religions. The Church has also become in itself a power to contend with. (The Philippines, as everybody knows, got its Christianity from the Spaniards in the sixteenth century and thence became the only Christian country

<sup>37</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Madman," in *The Gay Science*, III.125, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 181-182; Nietzsche's italics.

in the Far East.) The Greeks, especially Plato and Aristotle, have provided Christianity with the profound intellectual foothold that it needs, so much so that the Catholic clergy is generally compelled to go through philosophical formation before doing theology as a preparation for the priesthood. (If you are wondering why this is the case, you may want to trace the roots of theology in the metaphysics of Aristotle which inquires into the ultimate principles and causes of things, which ultimately identifies the first cause with God; so that in the end metaphysics can be made synonymous to theodicy, or theodicy to metaphysics.) The culture of the West is unthinkable without its Christian underpinning. And so, when Nietzsche drives his hammer against the God which underlies Christianity, he is doing no less than shake the foundations of the Western, especially European, culture.

And yet, as Nietzsche himself points out, it is the people themselves – which here refer to the Christians themselves – who have killed God, who have created this civilization in which God is dead, what is frequently described as the secular culture. Secularization has become the favorite whipping boy of those jealous and unwilling to let go of the medieval trappings. The truth, however, is that the progressive secularization of society is, in a significant way, the inevitable consequence of the very dream of the West since the days of the Greeks, the dream of the perfection of reason through science, which is itself the source of technology and invention. The so-called commercialization of today's culture is the offshoot of this secular mentality asserting itself in the midst of a continuing Christian environment. Their fusion, or perhaps collision, is sometimes explosive, creating irreconcilable interests which tear humans apart. A case in point in the Philippines is the brouhaha over the so-called art of Mideo Cruz a few years ago.

But there is more to Nietzsche's death of God than the overturning of the Christian culture and its reduction to a secular city. "I bring men a gift," he says in the Prologue to another important work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>38</sup> This gift is the *Übermensch*, literally Overman, but more popularly known as Superman. Although the likelihood is that your comic hero is a creation by an artist inspired by the philosopher Nietzsche,

---

<sup>38</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Prologue 2*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 11.

Nietzsche does not intend his Übermensch to be like your wonder hero, Superman, much less the good late actor, Christopher Reeves. The Übermensch is “the meaning of the earth.”<sup>39</sup> Man is not the meaning of the earth, but is “something that must be overcome.”<sup>40</sup>

*Verily, a polluted stream is man. One must be a sea to be able to receive a polluted stream without becoming unclean. Behold, I teach you the overman: he is this sea; in him your great contempt can go under.*<sup>41</sup>

*Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman – a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping.*<sup>42</sup>

*All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the bests rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. You have made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now, too, man is more ape than any ape.*<sup>43</sup>

It is clear that Nietzsche’s *via negativa*, his critique of the Christian culture that is, at least for a millennium, the basis of Western civilization, is not an end in itself. This critique of religion, of Christianity in particular, is meant to augur the coming of the new man. This transformed human reality he calls the Übermensch, the Overman, a higher species than man, the free spirit (not the same as the ‘free thinker’ of the eighteenth century) who is “the meaning of the earth.”

If you are quite incredulous about the reality of Nietzsche’s Übermensch, let me make mention of a later, even greater philosopher, Martin Heidegger, who expressly points to “an essential transformation of the human from ‘rational animal’ (animal rationale) to *Da-sein*.”<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche’s Übermensch is Heidegger’s *Dasein*. Indeed, it is on the assumption of this transformed human reality that we can properly speak of the

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Prologue 3, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., Prologue 4, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., Prologue 3, p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Preview to Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 3.

paradigm shift from the two thousand years of Western history to what we now call postmodernity. “The time of systems is over,” says Heidegger.<sup>45</sup> Those words signal the task of creation, which (in Nietzsche) may be likened to the third of the metaphases of the spirit: “how the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel, a lion; and the lion, finally, a child.”<sup>46</sup>

Now you see a third component of critical thinking. Like the other great critics who have made indelible dents in the course of human history, such as Descartes and Kant, Nietzsche is not criticizing for its own sake; he does not criticize civilization for mere love of criticism. There is a *via positive*, a positive content, in authentic critical thinking, and in Nietzsche’s case he has in mind to tell mankind of the need to create the new human, the free spirit, which he calls the *Übermensch*. In this he echoes the primordial desire that continues to be alive in the hearts of the world’s greatest teachers, such as Confucius in China who, as early as the Greeks, was already speaking of the “man of jen.”<sup>47</sup>

*The superior man is broadminded but not partisan; the inferior man is partisan but not broadminded. (Analects, 2:14)*

*If you set your mind on humanity, you will be free from evil. (Analects, 4:4)*

*One who is not a man of humanity cannot endure adversity for long, nor can he enjoy prosperity for long. The man of humanity is naturally at ease with humanity. The man of wisdom cultivates humanity for its advantage. (Analects, 4:2)*

*A superior man in dealing with the world is not for anything or against anything. He follows righteousness as the standard. (Analects, 4:10)*

And so on. The point is that one does not do critical thinking for its own sake. The ‘smart aleck’ is not necessarily smart but in fact annoys by his self-indulgence. The critical thinker that we are striving to form out of our students is focused on higher things, on excellence of mind and heart, on the reconstruction of our society and what, in biblical terms, we call “the new heavens and a new earth.”<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 25.

<sup>47</sup>The texts from the Analects of Confucius are taken from *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973).

<sup>48</sup>Isaiah 66:22; Revelation 21:1. St. Paul speaks of a “new creation” or a “new self” (Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 2:15, 4:23, 4:24).

At this point, let me go to the next example of a critical thinker so as to illustrate this more positive direction of our theme: Karl Marx (1818-1883).

Marx's major work, *Das Kapital*, is subtitled *A Critique of Political Economy*. The presence of the word 'critique' in the subtitle is not an accident, and it is this which makes Marx a genuine specimen of a critical thinker. I suggest that the key to understanding this fact is to be found in the opening paragraph of the book itself:

*The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an 'immense collection of commodities'; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity.*<sup>49</sup>

It is an acute mind that can look at the vast chaotic world of capitalism and find in it its element, its atomic constituent which, through analysis, can disclose the nature of society. It requires a trained mind to be able to see through the maze of the entire economy and discover in it that very item whose examination will disclose the source of social oppression, the key to the poverty of the masses, and even the solution to all that. Critical thinking requires, then, a profound understanding of the nature of things, an intense immersion in all that comprises it, but also a contemplative spirit that is willing to see beneath the skin and dissect what it sees there.

Marx's critique of economy through an analysis of the structure of the commodity is similar to Kant's own critique of pure reason and the disclosure of its a priori forms. What Marx discovers is the commodity's true value measured in terms of the quantity of labor that is congealed in it, stored there through its production by the muscular exertion of the unsuspecting laborer. It is work which constitutes the warp and woof of the commodity, and the amount of money paid for it when a consumer buys it mystically goes for the most part not to the worker but to the general fund that is grabbed by the owner of production and whose quantity increases as more commodities are bought. Buying a commodity is thus tantamount to buying the human being whose labor has

<sup>49</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 125.



shaped it into that commodity. Marx very smartly quantifies the amount of oppression suffered by the proletariat, the class of workingmen that is forced to incessantly grind day in and day out just so that it may survive. Man, woman and child, working through huge hours of the day and night produce value that is translated into profits through sales of merchandise. Labor is producing not only value but also surplus-value, and all this Marx is able smartly to quantify. That's what's scientific about the whole enterprise of this economic philosopher, and this makes of his critique not a mere mouthful of romantic and sentimental invectives against the hands that feed them.

When Marx deplores the state of things and decries the injustice of the social system, he knows exactly what he means. "Capital," he says, "asks no questions about the length of life of labour-power. What interests it is purely and simply the maximum of labour-power that can be set in motion in a working day. It attains this objective by shortening the life of labour-power, in the same way as a greedy farmer snatches more produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility."<sup>50</sup> No wonder Marx describes capital as "dead labor which, vampire-like, lives the more, the more labour it sucks."<sup>51</sup> He continues: "The time during which the worker works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has bought from him. If the worker consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist."<sup>52</sup>

Because Marx's critique of capitalism is made in a dispassionately scientific way, even if one may question the gaps in its analysis, it nonetheless leaves much for the marginalized class of laborers ideologically to hold on to. The *Das Kapital* is, by right, the Bible of the working man, irrefutable in what it claims to do and immortalized by men and women who tend to be pushed at the margins of society. All liberation movements in every corner of the world today owe their inspiration to the great work of Marx, a work which the author himself produced at no small personal sacrifice. Marx's critique is one that liberates in much the same way that Wittgenstein considers philosophy's task as that of "shewing the fly the way out of the fly-bottle."<sup>53</sup> Alienation,

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 376.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 342.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 304, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe

dehumanization, oppression, injustice, reification, mechanization, commercialism, poverty, gender bias, racial discrimination, neo-colonialism, planetary destruction, human degradation of any form – this is the target of every Marxist critique, whether in the first, second or third world, whether North or South, East or West. Critical Theory is one of its best legacies, always asserting itself in a world that is shrewd and unconscionable, always self-seeking and mindless of the rest of creation.

### **Critical Thinking and Contemporary Filipino Society**

So, anyone who thinks that criticism is like a walk in the park might as well think again. Acquiring the attitude of critical thinking is far from easy. The first to cultivate is Its *conditio sine qua non* is logical thinking, the discipline that teaches one not to contradict oneself. That's what we usually learn in a class of logic, whether it is the syllogistic logic of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas or the symbolic logic initiated by Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein. But having mastered the formal rules of logic is not sufficient for critical thinking; truth is not always to be measured solely by whether or not it accords with the principles of contradiction and sufficient reason. This formal criterion of truth can be ruthlessly unjust if applied to many concerns of life; this cold standard does not have the warmth and passion that characterize most of our earthly affairs, whether of love or work, despair or hope. This is, of course, not to mean that a training in formal logic does not have a practical value in itself; its mastery is a tool and even a weapon one can carry as one engages in the activities of daily life. But that alone is a cruel judge of our thoughts and actions, for justice entails that we look at all the aspects of our human condition before we make any judgment. Today's philosophers, the postmodern philosophers, are striving faithfully to keep the torch of the critique of pure reason alive. Witness, for example, the device of deconstruction now very popular among audiences even outside of philosophy. Derrida, with whose name deconstruction is normally identified, is, strictly speaking, actually not the first of the deconstructionists. Martin Heidegger, whom I dub the father of postmodernity in an earlier work, expresses it even more technically as the destruction

(Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), p. 103.

of the history of ontology, a harmlessly sounding project whose implication is actually as pervasively devastating as Kant's own critique of pure reason. Moses Mendelssohn's appellation of an "all-destroyer" can very well be attributed to Heidegger as much as to Kant. If Kant brings us to the brink, Heidegger leads us to the 'other shore.'

Critical thinking demands not only the mastery of the logical rules of thought; it also needs a highly educated mind, a literate consciousness, whose scope of understanding is as broad and wide as it is deep and profound. That cannot be attained without diligence in study, something which the hermeneutes of today are actually telling us. Hans-Georg Gadamer calls it *Bildung*, meaning two things simultaneously: education and culture. An educated mind is a cultivated mind. This is the *raison d'être* of your four to five years of college. You are in school not only in order that you may land on a job and earn good money in the future; you are here, above all, to be adequately formed as a human being, so that you may be useful citizens of your country and the world, having a positive influence on the ethico-historical and progressive movement of things. That's why you will notice that the first two years of your college education are spent largely in general, liberal courses; unfortunately, these have been more popularly referred to as service courses or, worse, minor courses. The very name smacks of inferiority, which is quite the opposite of the spirit by which these courses have originally been conceived as requirements of a well-rounded education. Logic and ethics, for example, are not minor courses in the sense of being merely an additional burden to an already heavy academic semestral load of, say, an engineering or business student. Logic has to do with correct thinking and ethics with moral behavior: how could these be 'minor' courses? There must have been some misunderstanding lurking in our midst somewhere. Indeed, we now know that the source of this misunderstanding is no small thing, for it has to do with the whole educational system in our country which needs a radical shaking of foundations, a paradigm shift.

Some of you might have fumed or might still be fuming on account of what you have read from the papers that plans are underway to add two more years to basic education, the so-called K+12. That means one year of compulsory Kindergarten, which is

already in effect this year, followed by 12 years of basic education, that is, something like our 6 years of grade school and 4 years of high school (tentatively call it junior high) and now with an additional 2 years of high school (tentatively call it senior high). The first impression is that this means two more years not only of dreaded school but also of heavy expenses. What could be more unwelcome than this news in an age of mounting inflation and slow economy? That, of course, is an understandable initial response of common sense. But common sense, though popular, is not necessarily correctly interpreting the facts. Here, for example, the opposite could actually be true, that K+12 will shorten the years of studies for purposes of employability. The goal of this emerging curriculum is to make the student employable at the end of K12. Nay, in some cases, one may already find an exit after K9 or 10 and start to do gainful work. Whereas, in the present system of K+6+4+4(or 5), one needs to finish at least 14 years of school before finding a decent job. Moreover, K12 will encourage more enrollees in vocational and technological courses, which is not a bad idea at all. That everybody today goes to college after high school is anomalous.

Why the need for a radical change in our educational system? Let me quote from the column of Tony Lopez, "Virtual Reality," published in the June 12, 2007 issue of The Manila Times.<sup>54</sup> I do not mean to take this as gospel truth, since newspaper columns are really only opinions and may not be taken as scientific. My aim in quoting Tony Lopez is merely to give us a picture of how things might be in the country.

*In the last 100 years since Filipinos began electing their representatives, the Philippines degenerated from being the No. 1 economy, trading and commercial power in Asia to No. 73 least competitive country in the world. Today, the Philippines is less free than it was a century ago. Did you know that the Philippines used to be Asia's industrial power?*

*As late as the 19th century, the Philippines was already one of Asia's premier industrialized countries and was the center of culture and education. The country was producing iron-ore sheets, refined iron ore, liquor from molasses using then unheard-of boilers, fine textiles for export, and was using steam engines and steamships. It*

---

<sup>54</sup>The writer apologizes for the use of dated newspaper articles, hoping that they may still be relevant.

*established the first bank in Asia, made the first typhoon forecast in Asia, and set up the first European-style universities in Asia.*

*Manila had a street car system, just like San Francisco; and had a ferrocarril line from the city to Dagupan in the north and from Manila to Batangas and Bicol in the south. By 1895, Manila had an electric light system. The first taxi fleet, the first airline, the first modern newspapers, the first conglomerate were established by Filipino tycoons. What happened after that?*

*During the last 100 years, Japan became a military power and the world's No. 2 economic power next to the United States.*

*During the last 50 years, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore became economic miracles. Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore became nation states (they used to be unknown islands while Filipinos were already conducting diplomatic relations with Europe and China). In fact, at one time, the Sultan of Sulu was a frequent visitor in China because he liked it there. He stayed there for three months, but died of syphilis. The Chinese erected a monument in his honor.*

*In the last 30 years, the Philippines became the slowest growing economy per capita in Asia, bar none. During that time, Congress produced 15,000 laws and law schools 30,000 lawyers, half of whom are active. So two lawyers for every one law. Yet, the Philippines has a very poor human rights and economic rights record.*

*We got our priorities wrong. We gave the people the power to vote even before the people and those they elect learned how to govern properly, or at the very least, prepare or educate themselves to have a modicum of competency and honesty.*

*These days, people kill people just to be able to serve the people. People bribe people just to be able to serve the people. That is the meaning of a heated electoral contest. And of fraudulent elections.*

Tony Lopez's target of criticism is politics and our politicians. That may be true, but in the first place there must have been something so wrong with our educational system that we produce supposedly public servants like most of what we have. The fact is that mediocrity is prevalent in all areas of our social life, not least in the area of education. It is interesting that two of the great founders of human civilization, Confucius in the East and Socrates/Plato in the West, have placed much premium on education as a foundation of society. Rousseau is not far from right and his suggestion needs still to be heeded when he says, in *Emile*, the following: "If you wish to know what is meant by public education, read Plato's *Republic*. Those who merely judge books by their titles take this for a treatise on politics, but it is the finest

treatise on education ever written.”<sup>55</sup> The same can be said of the Confucian Analects as well as that shortest of classics, The Great Learning. Listen to this:

*The Way of learning to be great (or education) consists in manifesting the clear character, loving the people, and abiding in the highest.*

*The ancients who wished to manifest their clear character to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to rectify their minds would first make their wills sincere.*

*Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things. When things are investigated, knowledge is extended; when knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere; when the will is sincere, the mind is rectified; when the mind is rectified, the personal life is cultivated; when the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated; when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; and when the state is in order there will be peace throughout the world.*<sup>56</sup>

For purposes of this paper, I deleted only the short second paragraph and the remaining three sentences of the last, which is the third, paragraph. And what is here present as second and third paragraphs are actually just one paragraph. Otherwise, this is the complete Confucian classic called The Great Learning. It shows everything connected; in order for order and peace to be established throughout the world, each personal life needs to be cultivated. It is not difficult to show how corruption and poverty are rooted in a damaged culture whose culprit is the miseducation of the youth, not only in the Marxist sense of Renato Constantino but even more so in the classical sense of Confucius and Socrates/Plato.

We need a type of critical thinking in our society which is not slanted or manipulated by either a rigidly traditional Church or a dogmatic political ideology. “The time of systems are over,” correctly

<sup>55</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Everyman’s Library, 1976), p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan (trans., comp.), *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 86-87.

says Martin Heidegger.<sup>57</sup> To be trapped in systems, schools of thought, ideologies, cults, dogmatic definitions and formulas, and the like no longer belong to our time. We now belong to an age which is borderless, inclusive, dialogical, multidisciplinary, open to the clearing, or, in the language of saints, all-encompassing in love, charity, justice and compassion. Such a critical mind is not only destructive and negative, but endlessly creative, constructive and forgiving. It is, in short, an ethical mind. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, critical thinking is thinking that is not only correct but also ethical. If thinking is crooked and corrupt, how could it be correct and truly critical? That's why critical thinking involves, as we insisted above, not only the criticism of others but first and foremost the criticism of our own selves. "Know thyself!" is the unforgettable first step in critical thinking, "An unexamined life is not worth living." And where this has taken place, we can train the young man in the rubrics of logic and be rest assured that he will use the rules of thinking in ways that are truly gainful and correct, for both the individual and his society. This type of critical thinking, then, is what we need to build our country from the rubbles of a corrupt and crooked culture that has produced widespread mediocrity and folly in a society that used to be the envy of our neighboring Asian countries.

Allow me to quote lengthily, at this point, Boo Chanco's column, "Demand and Supply," in the Philippine Star of September 5, 2011. Here he is actually quoting the 80-year-old Gen. Jose Almonte, saying:

*Though we were the first nation in Asia to recover its independence, we have yet to come to terms with ourselves. We have yet to settle the basic issue of nationhood: Who are we?*

*"We are supposed to be what our forebears fought and died for: a people of honor, dignity, freedom, justice, tolerance, compassion, hard work, discipline, caring – a people at peace with itself and the world. And when our people called for it, we did continue the struggle for dignity and freedom. During the 1986 People Power revolution, the world recognized our country as a leader in the global democratic movement.*

*But the core values we won in blood, we did not use to truly define who we are – we did not use to build our nation – we did not use to*

---

<sup>57</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Preview to Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 3.

*build our national identity, our Pilipino identity . . .*

*And we do ourselves a grave disservice whenever, individually, we focus on serving our personal fortunes, without regard for what happens to the nation – because individual success becomes meaningless in a failing – or a failed State.*

It's about time we reconstruct our reputation through earnest quest of excellence, not just by demanding it on others but by demanding it even more strictly on our selves. The existentialist is correct, "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself." About time that we do not rely on short-cuts, on whom we know, on our padrinos and connections, in order to advance our personal goals, get a job and attain success. Cheap success is in the end costly for the whole society, our society which has already been devastated by our indolent ways. It's time now not to cheat our way to an imagined glory, but to work hard and honestly to achieve our personal and collective goals; such industry and love of hard and honest work is what authentic critical thinking will bring about. This is our mission and contemporary task.

## Bibliography

- A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Arkush, Allan. *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Ayer, A.J. Editor's Introduction to *Logical Positivism*. New York: The Free Press, 1959.
- Bacon, Francis. "Novum Organum" in *Classics of the Western World: The Modern World*, ed. Charles Hirschfeld and Edgar E. Knoebel. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1980.
- Berkeley, George. *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous, First Dialogue*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1984.
- Cassirer, Ernst. *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.
- Descartes, René. *Key Philosophical Writings*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, 1997.



- Harris, Sam. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967.
- Heidegger, Martin. Preview to *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Hume, David. *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Library of Liberal Arts, 1955.
- Kant, Immanuel. "What is Enlightenment?," in *Kant on History*, ed. Lewis White Beck. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1975.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. F. Max Müller. New York: Doubleday & Company, Anchor Books edition, 1966.
- Locke, John. "The Epistle to the Reader," in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. New York: Dover Publications, 1959.
- Marx, Karl *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Madman," in *The Gay Science*, III.125, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prologue 2, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books, 1978.
- Plato. Republic 339a, trans. Paul Shorey, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series LXXI, 1973.
- Polanyi, Michael. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley. London: Everyman's Library, 1976.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann. Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1968.
- St. Augustine. *Confessions XI.14*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin. London: Penguin Books, 1988.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968.