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Book Review

Bolaños, Paolo A., *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition: Essays on Critical Theory*[1]

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Perhaps a shared experience among philosophy students—most especially at the undergraduate level—is the once-in-a-while joke about the "uselessness" of a philosophy degree in the real world.[2] While a lighthearted comment meant to cope with the stress of going through dense readings written in obscure jargon (that is, if students today still bother to go through the readings), the joke is symptomatic of society's relationship with philosophy and its allied disciplines in the arts and humanities. Recently, the Department of Education (DepEd) stirred controversy and strong opposition from various sectors when it proposed to remove Ethics and a host of other general education (GE) courses from the tertiary level to streamline college education.[3] For our current educational administrators today, especially those in national government agencies, philosophy is nothing but an additional burden affecting the efficiency of the education system to produce employment-ready individuals.

The neoliberal onslaught faced by higher education today continues as these institutions are affected by market-oriented policies. It is within this context that Paolo Bolaños' latest book, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition: Essays on Critical Theory*, intervenes, reminding us of the possibility of a better world. Spread across eight chapters with an Afterword, the author shows us that philosophy, far from simply being reflections on abstract ideas, is important in allowing us to grasp our bearings in a world that constantly confuses metrics with morals, quantity with quality, and reality with the laws of the market. Undergirding this is Bolaños' emphasis of philosophy's materialist

[1] (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2025), 146pp.

[2] Jeffry Ocay further highlights this misconception of philosophy and elaborates its origins from the speculative and theoretical aspects of philosophy. Jeffy Ocay, "Foreword," in Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition*, xi.

[3] See Bella Cariaso, "DepEd proposal to remove Ethics from curriculum bucked," *Philstar.com* (5 June 2025), <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/06/05/2448347/deped-proposal-remove-ethics-curriculum-bucked>.

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self-critique. His book, of course, is marked by a critical approach to philosophizing made possible by his reading of the works of the Frankfurt School. The main thrust of this book, as I see it, is making philosophy self-aware of its own aporias for it to critically engage with the social reality in which it is entangled.

The first chapter lays the groundwork for how the book presents its arguments. The core of this chapter is the author's elaboration of critical theory based on three normative claims. These claims—namely, the anthropological turn, the emancipation from slavery and the abolition of social injustice, and the decentralization of the proletariat—are derived from Bolaños' engagement with Max Horkheimer's essay "Traditional and Critical Theory." The strength of this chapter is its ability to go beyond the historical context of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* and speak of the relevance of critical theory for philosophy in the Philippines. Critical theory, as the author argues, could be an "appropriate theoretico-diagnostic tool in appraising social pathologies in the Philippines."[4] The theme of appropriation is to be further elaborated in the later chapters of the book.

Chapters two, three, and four, meanwhile deal with Adorno's musings on ethics and aesthetics. I think it is fitting to unofficially regard this as the "Adorno section" of the work under review. In chapter two, Bolaños presents the ethical character of Adorno's thinking in the face of a damaged life and the wrong state of things. The author maintains that Adorno's philosophical engagement is "far from being a pessimistic stance," but rather "an emphatic rethinking of the role of philosophy in a life that is seemingly devoid of hope."[5] Adorno's philosophy cannot be reduced to philosophical pessimism. What the author successfully does is to turn our gaze to the utopian character of Adorno's thought founded on his ethical turn to the historical and the material. Bolaños reinforces Adorno's utopian vision vis-à-vis Ernst Bloch's notion of anticipatory consciousness and the "not yet."[6] The chapter underscores the "vague notion of the good life" which inspires the utopian imagination of the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno.[7] Ultimately, Bolaños' reading of Adorno in this chapter reminds us of something similar in Marx's letter to Arnold Ruge:

> If we have no business with the construction of the future or with organizing it for all time there can still be no doubt about the task confronting us at present: *the ruthless criticism of the existing order*, ruthless in that it will shrink

[4] Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition*, 11.
[5] *Ibid.*, 16.
[6] *Ibid.*, 25.
[7] *Ibid.*, 26.

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> neither from its own discoveries nor from conflict with the powers that be.[8]

Rather than providing concrete images of utopia, what philosophy can do is criticize and always believe that life could always be otherwise, that is, different from the status quo. Meanwhile, chapter three deals with Adorno's aesthetic theory. In true Hegelian fashion, this chapter highlights the contradictory, and therefore, dialectical nature of art. On one hand, art can become an instrument of the wrong state of things by being commodified and standardized by the culture industry.[9] On the other, art has the capability to conjure utopian possibilities. For Bolaños, art must be "consistent with Adorno's negative dialectics" if it is to act as a "counter-pressure to society."[10] "Art," as the author writes, "creates a dimension of imagined freedom."[11] Through its negative relation to society, art allows the imagination to a future different from the present dystopia.

Still dealing with aesthetics, the book's fourth chapter puts Adorno in dialogue with another post-War thinker, Emmanuel Levinas. For any individual who managed to encounter both Adorno and Levinas, one may be amazed with the similarities between their ideas, which unfortunately was a result of the trauma of Auschwitz. Yet, despite the similarity between the two, there was never a direct confrontation between them. This, I opine, is the strength of this chapter as it adds to the Adorno-Levinas dialogue. As the author highlights, Levinas' insights on art are "ambivalent."[12] On this note, I strongly agree with Bolaños' observation, especially if one takes the time to go through and compare Levinas' opinions in *Existence and Existents* and "Reality and its Shadow."[13] In solving this ambivalence, the chapter turns to Adorno's aesthetics. For Bolaños, art is able to propound an "ethics of thinking," which we may think of as a form of receptivity to the non-identical. He points out the parallels of Adorno and Levinasian ethics as a form of receptivity and responsibility to the totally Other.[14] Beginning with the challenge of ethics in chapter two, followed by the utopian possibility in art

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[8] Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 207.

[9] Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition,* 33.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*, 40.

[13] In *Existence and Existents,* Levinas argues that art makes objects "stand-out" and "extracts them [the object] from this belongingness to a subject." Meanwhile, in "Reality and its Shadow," Levinas talks about art turning the subject "passive," incapable of responding to the Other's plea. See Emmanuel Levinas, Existence and Existents, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 52 and Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Sean Hand (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 132.

[14] Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition,* 44.

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in chapter three, chapter four fittingly ends the Adorno section of the book (although, even in the other sections Adorno is still a strong undercurrent for the various discussions at hand) by looking at the ethical import of art.

Following the chapters which focus on Adorno are those which highlight Honneth's work on recognition and the idea of justice. Just as there is an Adorno section, it also appears appropriate to regard chapters five to eight as the "Honneth section." The section begins with Bolaños introducing Honneth's recognition theory and "materialist" philosophical anthropology. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of this chapter is how it introduces readers to Honneth. While mentioning the Frankfurt School, the author critically examines what he considers a "social deficit" in our local philosophical tradition. This, of course, he relates to the history of colonialism and the predominance of Church-influenced Scholastic metaphysics. These factors, as Bolaños sees it, led to essentialist and abstract ways of talking about the human person.[15] Contra these essentialist readings of the human person, the author emphasizes how Honneth's philosophical anthropology grounds subjectivity on "socially or materially constituted reality."[16] He follows this up with an elaboration of Honneth's theorization of the three spheres/patterns of intersubjective recognition: care, rights, and esteem. The author's method of introducing Honneth via a critique of the Philippine philosophical tradition is unconventional, yet effective. This effectivity lies in demonstrating how local scholarship can flourish through a dialectical interaction with history and the material world.

The sixth chapter grounds critical theory's conception of social justice on the idea of freedom. To put it differently, social justice, as a normative claim of critical theory, finds itself in the "potentiality of persons to create and recreate themselves" rooted in the idea of freedom.[17] In this chapter, Bolaños emphasizes the descriptive and normative assumptions of critical theory, something which Joel Anderson notes in Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition*.[18] As a social ontology, critical theory becomes a tool in explaining society. The important point that the author raises to the reader is a reminder that while critical theory has descriptive aims, its "normative goal" must not be overlooked.[19] Bolaños' puts further emphasis on this with reiterating his reading of Honneth and the idea of the moral grammar of a struggle for recognition, arguing that "This moral grammar … refers to something more cardinal, that is, human dignity grounded in the ability to develop and

[15] *Ibid.*, 48.

[16] *Ibid.*, 49.

[17] *Ibid.*, 61.

[18] Joel Anderson, "Translator's Preface," in Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), x.

[19] See Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition,* 66.

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maintain individual and cultural identity."[20] Perhaps something not explicit in this chapter is its rootedness in Marx's description of communist society in *The German Ideology*, wherein emancipation entails the freedom to explore identities and interests.[21]

Chapter seven leads the reader to another encounter between the German and French traditions, this time with Honneth meeting Paul Ricoeur. Described as an "overture," the author looks at the perspectives on recognition provided by the two philosophers. The author sheds light on Ricoeur's criticism of Honneth's theory of recognition. As the author elaborates, Ricoeur is hesitant to accept the Hegelian notion of "struggle" in the act of recognition. The reason for this is the possibility of an unresolvable struggle which may simply generate an endless stream of unhappy consciousnesses.[22] In other words, the problem of a Hegelian-inspired struggle for recognition is the possibility of unsatisfiable demands from those groups seeking recognition. The chapter proceeds to highlight the alternative presented by Ricoeur, primarily through the "economy of the gift" as an "invitation to engage within dialogue" or a "continuous and generous interaction."[23] The move Ricoeur makes is regarded by Bolaños as a "depoliticization" of recognition. At the end, while the author acknowledges the merits of Ricoeur's ideas on recognition, he asserts that it "misses the point" of the goal of the struggle for recognition and the moral grammar which motivates it. Chapter seven invites us to read Honneth carefully, as his recognition theory presents nuances that we may easily dismiss or overlook.

In an interview with Gonçalo Marcelo, Honneth responds to Ricoeur's criticism, stating that struggles for recognition will always have a "normative surplus … that we will never really be able to fully realize."[24] Here, Honneth admits what Ricoeur fears in the struggle for recognition, namely, the possibility of leaving space for further demands. However, Honneth does not take this as something negative. Rather, he considers this to be important as it allows us to "demand to make things better."[25] These insights—provided by Honneth himself—further substantiates Bolaños' remarks on Ricoeur's depoliticization of recognition, and furthermore, presents a line of continuity between Honneth and Adorno's utopian thinking.

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[20] *Ibid.*, 65.

[21] See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 52.

[22] Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition,* 72.

[23] *Ibid.*, 83.

[24] Gonçalo Marcelo, "Recognition and Critical Theory: An Interview with Axel Honneth," *Philosophy and Social Criticism,* 39:2 (2013), 217.

[25] *Ibid.*

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The eighth and final chapter presents a creative reading Honneth's recognition theory in conjunction with thinkers such as C. Douglas Lummis, Jürgen Habermas, and Chantal Mouffe. This chapter is Bolaños' own contribution to the growing local discourse and appropriation of radical democracy in the Philippines. Following Lummis, the author emphasizes that democracy is in itself radical, and the term "radical democracy" is only a way to "intensify" its meaning.[26] He presents Honneth's "dialectics of social freedom" as a distinct model from Habermas' deliberative discourse and Mouffe's agonistic discourse.[27] The author underscores how Honneth conceptualizes justice "in the context of freedom."[28] This demonstrates the intertwined nature of these two ideas, and how our understanding of one is incomplete without the other. Bolaños points out that, in "Honneth's theory of democracy … democracy is legitimate" when it is able to account for the spheres of personal relations and the economy.[29] The insights presented here remind us that struggles for justice and freedom are never one-dimensional. Thus, democracy, as an idea, should never simply be reduced to the economy or proceduralist/deliberative models. The novelty of this chapter is, surprisingly, its ability to rearticulate an established critical and emancipatory tradition rooted in Marx.[30] By holistically understanding democracy, Bolaños shows the reader that democracy would remain a hollow concept, and more importantly, lose its radical nature, if it forgets to incorporate themes of justice and freedom in its different societal articulations.

The book ends with an afterword titled "Education as an Ethics of Thinking." True to his Adornoian background, the author challenges us to reevaluate the role of education, especially in light of "the obsession with standardized metrics of quality assurance."[31] Bolaños elucidates the goal of education for Adorno, which educates citizens to prepare them for democratic and social life. Education also arouses the individual's "capacity to think ethically" and act autonomously and "defy tyranny."[32] What could be picked up from Bolaños' reading of Adorno is the stress on education's role in realizing the possibility of a "good life." This, however, can only be possible if, like critical theory, we constantly advocate social justice and engage in emancipatory thinking. Circling back to the initial point of the uselessness of philosophy, we may boldly claim that philosophy is indeed

[26] Bolaños, *Ethics, Justice, and Recognition,* 94.
[27] *Ibid.,* 106.
[28] *Ibid.,* 101.
[29] *Ibid.,* 104.
[30] *Ibid.*
[31] *Ibid.,*
[32] *Ibid.,* 116.

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useless—that is, it is useless for a society that glorifies efficiency over values and a life devoid of reflection.

Overall, the book offers readers a sobering reminder of society's direction. The question for us now is whether or not we allow ourselves to head straight towards the abyss.

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