

A Tribute to Romualdo Abulad

Abulad: A Reflection of Kant's Good Will and Duty

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Abstract: In this short tribute piece, I recount some memorable experiences with Br. Romualdo E. Abulad, S.V.D. From the time I was his undergraduate student until we became colleagues at the Department of Philosophy of the University of San Carlos, Cebu City. In the course of the piece, I will say something about Kant, postmodernism, and also discuss some aspects of Emerita Quito's works that proved pivotal in shaping Abulad as a scholar and philosopher.

Keywords: Abulad, Quito, Kant, postmodernism

Before I begin, allow me to refer to Br. Romualdo E. Abulad, S.V.D., Ph.D., as Br. Romy—as I prefer, and has always been the case since I knew him almost three decades ago. When I was first invited to offer a tribute on Br. Romy, on the one hand, there was a part of me that was excited because I wanted to share with others the weight and responsibility, as well as the fascination and awe of being a student and later colleague of Br. Romy. On the other hand, there was also some hint of reservation as I was hesitant to even begin to describe his philosophizing in fear that I may not be able to fully articulate the immensity of his work and the monumental contribution his presence, writing, and teaching has given to philosophy. I fear I may not be able to do justice to my teacher or should I say, one of the country's premier philosophers. And so, it took a long time for me to start and when I actually began to write I had to stop and again start from scratch, because the fact is that since his passing there have already been exemplary articles and commentaries on the scholar that he was. I wanted something different, that is, something meaningful as though coming from a keen observer using the lenses of a student and a colleague. I also was aware that I need to use the right amount of scholarship that in no way limits the immensity of the person, but at the very least, shows what Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) calls the good will, which, to my knowledge, was Br. Romy's duty and legacy.

In this tribute, I will share a number of memorable encounters with Br. Romy, when he was my teacher while I was an undergraduate student and when we were colleagues in the Department. In the process I will mention a little of Kant, postmodernism, and a bit of Dr. Quito's works that were pivotal in shaping Br. Romy as the scholar and philosopher that we know him to be. I will start though by mentioning as a preamble that it was Immanuel Kant whose philosophy led Br. Romy into the life he lived. Kant's work challenged Br. Romy to withdraw from his pre-med studies and instead major in philosophy. Specifically, it was Br. Romy's Jesuit professor, whose name I could no longer recall, who once mentioned the difficulty in understanding Kant, which triggered and challenged Br. Romy to not only embark but dedicate his whole life to faithfully studying the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Once, over a cup of coffee, Br. Romy shared that he was never really fond of the laboratories and being in the medical field. So—began his journey in philosophy where he diligently devoted all his time reading, writing, understanding, and teaching the predictable yet brilliant little man from Königsberg. And perhaps we could already hear Br. Romy saying in his slightly high-pitched tone, *we may never agree with Kant, but we can never do philosophy without Kant!*

As a Teacher

It was back in 1997, attending College at the University of San Carlos in Cebu, when I first encountered Br. Romy. He was then my teacher in Indian Philosophy and Course Integration. I remember our first day of class well, he entered with his backpack in tow filled with books and maybe even a manuscript or two of a thesis advisee. The first thing that he showed us were some of the books that we would be using as references for class. He would then continue to begin his lecture. He would always come to class prepared. His lectures gave us grounding on the philosopher and at the same time give room for thought, to ponder about the implications of the lessons, not just in context of the philosopher but about life in general. He always had a book with him whenever he lectured, not because he was "bookish", in fact far from that, rather because he knows the importance of the primary source in imparting philosophical thoughts. I remember when we had an oral exam once, and a classmate clearly did not come prepared, Br. Romy casually asked him, *are you trying to put words into Heidegger's mouth?* At that moment, the remark sent chills down our spines even for those of us who had prepared—or thought we had prepared.

Although Br. Romy is often remembered as being strict in class, he was always coming from a good place. His method of teaching was never meant to intimidate or terrorize students, rather, he was simply coming from

duty. To some people, the thought of having Br. Romy as their teacher just scares the lights out of them, but that is only because they listen to stories they have picked up here and there, but in truth, being in a class under his tutelage is one of the greatest events that could happen in an otherwise seemingly monotonous and mute study of philosophy. Listening to his lectures always opened up a panoramic view of the endless potentialities of what one can be. Yes, the reading can be tough, and the oral participation can be grueling, but one is almost always assured of a class well spent. You are either left stunned because you know you have not read enough or you are fueled with the well-springs of inspiration that make you want to be more and do more.

Br. Romy lived by example and applied what Aristotle calls self-actualization. He dedicated himself to a life of contemplation in the pursuit of truth and wisdom. Like many others who with full conviction stood by what they believed in, Br. Romy followed Kant's good will and took it upon himself as his duty even if it became unpopular and seemingly unfavorable to some. After all, doing one's duty is not so much about enjoyment; it becomes even more compelling if it runs counter to our inclinations and motives. As Kant claims, "It is the motive of duty, not the motive of inclination, that gives moral worth to an action."¹ Thus, it is hard work behind our duties and not our preferences and motives that give an action its moral worth. Whether Br. Romy was the professor in the classroom, editing manuscripts in coffee shops, or serving as the Chair of the Department, he was always coming from Kant's good will and duty.

There was a time in class when Br. Romy discussed Kant's good will. He was quick to point that in this life there are many goods—money, power, wealth, to a certain extent they can help us, but they are also easily corrupted especially if paired by a bad will. And that clears the way of the good will as that which is the only thing that is good in all circumstances. "The only thing that is good without qualification or restriction is a good will ... good in all circumstances, an absolute and an unconditioned good."²

Focusing on Kant's good will, ultimately we are led to these three questions that make us reflect on what it means to be truly human. Br. Romy almost always made us come face to face with Kant's three questions:

*What can I know?
What ought I to do?
What may I hope for?*³

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by H.J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1956), 19.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 735.

Reflecting on these important questions in view of our current circumstances, indeed, what can we know? In the face of fake news, accessibility, and the clutches of artificial intelligence, is knowledge enough? What ought I to do given the demands of accountability in a decadently corrupt government and a society torn by a rigged conscience and an outcry for justice? What may I hope for?

If Kant's three questions sum up to an inquiry into *what it means to be human*, then, happiness or at least the quest for it is not farfetched. But after reflecting on our present malaise, the words of Kant in *The Groundwork* become even more relevant—"We have a right to seek our own happiness in so far as this is compatible with moral law; but to be happy is one thing and to be good is another; and to confuse the two is to abolish the specific distinction between virtue and vices."⁴ Kant was astute in his formulation of the moral law and Br. Romy was always dedicated in showing and demonstrating duty and good will reminding us that it is not just about being happy but we must also be worthy of that happiness.

In the process of thought, it always reminds us of the two-fold stem of knowledge that always makes us of both reason and experience. And it is here where we remember one of Br. Romy's favorite line, *the test of the pudding is in the eating*.

In 2000, Br. Romy published an article in *Karunungan* entitled, "What is Postmodernism?" he begins by saying upfront that, "Ours is no longer the modern age, ours is already the post-modern age, that is, the age after modernity..."⁵ Perhaps anticipating the immediate curiosity he right away clarifies his position by echoing possible questions that may have already been shaped and are lurking in the minds of his readers. "What do I mean? What do I mean by Post-modernity? Indeed, it is true that modernity is no more and that it has already given way to post-modernity?"⁶ Looking back, the ease I experience in reading Br. Romy's published articles is the same ease I experience attending his classes. He always managed to make what is otherwise difficult and complicated into something at least approachable and eventually doable.

And only after making sure that everyone is in the same boat would he continue to explain further. And by saying this, I do not mean to downplay the rigor that is involved in doing philosophy—such as the ardent reading and re-reading, a familiar struggle with the text. But there was something in the way Br. Romy handled his classes, his discussions, his fluidity with words

⁴ Kant, *Groundwork*, 38.

⁵ Romualdo Abulad, "What is Postmodernism?," in *Karunungan: A Journal of Philosophy*, 17, (2000), 34.

⁶ *Ibid.*

and thoughts, such that one will always have, if not an understanding of the text, at least a firm conviction of an afternoon well spent trying to engage in the wonders of doing philosophy.

When he was my thesis supervisor for both my Master's thesis and my PhD dissertation, it always took longer to write the draft of the chapter, not because there were delays in my submissions, nor was he remiss in his comments and remarks, they were even like clockwork, ready in my inbox or through courier, after just a day or two of my submission, with my manuscript having been combed and edited with red marks and pointed questions. Perhaps, many misunderstood the process as the supervisor being difficult, but in my case, I trusted the process, and that I worked even harder, until its completion.

As a teacher, Br. Romy always took us on a journey and enabled our minds to be fascinated by the different philosophical enterprise from the East as well as in the West. He may have been popular with the philosophy of Kant for most of his life but his dissertation in 1978 was a comparative study on Links Between East & West in the Philosophies of Shankara and Kant, and he also wrote and presented a few comparative papers on Buddhism and Christianity.

I remember how he begins his classes in Philosophy by starting with three attempts to define philosophy, etymology, *Aristotelico-Thomistic* definition, and finally, the one by Jaspers where questions are more important than the answers. From there, he will continue to discuss the different approaches to the study of philosophy, the historical and systematic, and it is in these discussions that I have become in awe of the unfolding of ideas that only the study and rigor of philosophy provides.

As a Colleague

After being assigned in Davao, Br. Romy returned to the Department of Philosophy in the University of San Carlos and eventually became Chair from 2008-2013. Each month we would have our department meetings, as well as round table discussions within the faculty, and book review sessions with a close-knit group. When Br. Romy became Chair, we could already sense the gravity of the task upon us under his leadership. His mere presence in that position was a reminder to be diligent in our work as faculty, as he was. I must admit there were a couple of times when I would cower from the thought of the work in front of us "as philosophers" according to Br. Romy. For Br. Romy, the task of philosophy does not end in classrooms and when one gets the paycheck, one must live it at all times and be open to continuous learning. Kant, in the conclusion of his second Critique, mentions the significance of philosophy as the guardian of science that is the *narrow gate*

that leads to wisdom. "Science (critically sought and methodically directed) is the narrow gate that leads to the *doctrine of wisdom*, if by this is understood not merely what one ought *to do* but what ought to serve *teachers* as a guide to prepare well and clearly the path to wisdom which everyone should travel, and to secure others against taking the wrong path; philosophy must always remain the guardian of this science"⁷ Everyday, during his tenure, Br. Romy never failed to remind us of the crucial role we have as teachers. One time, when we were having coffee (yes, almost every afternoon after work, there was always time for coffee) with a few other colleagues from the Department, he strongly told us not to be a deadwood and that obtaining the PhD is not the end nor is it enough. We must continue to do philosophy and that means to read, to write, to publish, better yet to think, to reason, to have a voice, to be heard.

One of the main reasons for his sustained interest in philosophy was being a student of Dr. Quito. In an autograph signed by Dr. Quito herself dedicated to Br. Romy on her festschrift dated March 5th 1990, she writes, "To Romy Abulad, the path to philosophy should be clear to you by now" Br. Romy happened to be the one who wrote the introduction of the Festschrift, and its opening paragraph says:

Emerita S. Quito is no doubt the most important philosopher in the Philippines today. She will most likely be remembered in the future as the Filipino Socrates. Standing at a crucial threshold, she marks the end of the infantile gropings of earlier philosophers and provides ample direction to future thinkers.⁸

It was a pronouncement from a student to his teacher in awe of her monumental work in honor of philosophy. As Quito explains in her article on *Lectures on Comparative Philosophy* presented at Waseda University, Tokyo Japan in 1979, "every great undertaking in the world, be it in science or literature or practical politics, began with the germ of an idea ... behind every major and minor revolution, there was a potent idea to start the machinery of change."⁹ So, to indulge into philosophy might seem a painstakingly arduous task of reflective thinking but it clears the ground and prepares the individual to higher and sublime realizations. "True contemplation is, after all, an

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 135.

⁸ Emerita S. Quito, *A Life of Philosophy: Festschrift in Honor of Emerita S. Quito* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1990), iii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 498.

activity from the Greek *theorein*, 'to speculate', and from this theorization proceed many thought-trains that lead to new discoveries."¹⁰

Quito claims that the duty to think is endless."¹¹ She says that "thinking, in fact is an unceasing motion; it is the *theoretike energia* identical to the activity of the immortal gods, so that when man thinks, he does his utmost in accordance to what is highest in him."¹² It befits our nature not to stay and be overwhelmed simply by what our senses dictates, but, rather, to become a noble person, one who projects oneself capable of what it means to be a rational agent.

It is in these words of Dr. Quito where we find the philosophical ideals of Br. Romy come alive. To be a rational agent is to live up to the name, to be rational also means to be responsible. So, we live up to the task, and we rectify our names as students, as teachers, as philosophers. That is, if one is a student, be a good student; if one is a teacher, then, be a good teacher! We rectify our names and thus we do our duties.

At this juncture, allow me to quote a paper Br. Romy published in 2005 which supposedly holds much hope for the future of philosophy which sadly today remains unstable due to the short sightedness of many so-called educators, and I dare say administrators who are bereft of the value of philosophy. The article is entitled *Filipino Philosophy in the Turbulent Period of Postmodern Transition*.

It is a philosopher's business to think. And the Greeks were the first to show us how. This thinking of the Greeks culminates in the various sciences which grace today's colleges and universities. It can be said that Philosophy is the mother of all sciences and it remains so in our days. This is the key to the still prevalent practice of ending all graduate studies with a Ph.D., a Doctor of Philosophy. Philosophy is indeed the crown of all sciences. Especially in our time of interlinkages and multidisciplinary, when the boundaries of the disciplines are beginning to meet in a borderless land, the future of philosophy is becoming more and more assured.¹³

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 499.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Romualdo Abulad, "Filipino Philosophy in the Turbulent Period of Postmodern Transition," in *USC Graduate Journal*, 25:1 (2005), 102.

Conclusion

I wrap up this tribute by going back to the three questions of Kant:

What can I know? In answering this, I try to echo Br. Romy's lectures on Kant's theory of knowledge that says, *thoughts without contents are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind*.¹⁴ In wanting to know, it is always the two-fold stem of reason and experience. And learning from our teacher, we remember that what we know is sometimes not enough, rather, how we use what we know is ultimately what matters thus we are led to the second query.

What ought I to do? We do our duties simply because it is the right thing to do. As students, as teachers, as rational agents, we must always embody the good will in all our endeavors.

What may I hope for? Perhaps this is a question I leave open for us to chart our paths to continue to rectify our names hopefully enlightened by the arduous toil of our beloved teacher to whom we honor today.

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¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 107.