

Synergy of Science and Humanities

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The University of the Philippines, originally set up as a transformative agent to obliterate the cultural traces of Spanish colonialism and to create a professional class which will service an international capitalist economy, has since become a native republic dedicated to the propagation of truth. In the context of the Philippines, this has come to mean the movement for national independence. However, the recent emphasis given to science could mean not only the development of a professional class dependent on foreign technology and drawn to the service of multinationals, but also of a mechanical society devoid of traditional values. While the search for a distinctively Filipino identity continues, the humanities must guide us through to enable us to have a hierarchy of knowledge as opposed to a litany of facts. It is important that the humanities and the sciences must develop independently of each other, but it is equally imperative that a synergy between them be established so that science will not be destructive and humanism will not be irrelevant.

I accepted the UP Presidency not knowing that I would be stepping into a revolutionary situation. The turbulence of the '80s, I thought, had spent itself with the global activism that had inspired it.

I was wrong. It seems that an inclination to turbulence and a constant dissatisfaction are permanent attributes of the University.

That dissatisfaction has now turned in on the University itself. The University — its nature and its purposes, its history and its destiny — is now the core of controversy.

I do not know the reason for the University's stoical turn to perfect itself. Perhaps it springs from the painful awareness of the University's inability to press reform on the outside society in the public and riotous fashion of the '80s. At the moment, we should not let attempts to find out why to draw our attention from the importance of the issues that are raised. What is important is that we continue to appreciate what this endemic dissatisfaction has accomplished.

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Without it, the University would have congealed long ago into a center of secular scholasticism. Without it, the university would have become obsolete, dead along with the special purposes that inspired its establishment by a colonial power in the first place.

But that, as we know, is not how it turned out. The University outlived — more than that, it transcended — those special purposes.

The University, the current historical argument goes, was set up as a transformative agent with two missions. The first was to obliterate the cultural traces of the old order; the second, to create a professional class oriented, in accomplishments and outlook, to service an international capitalist economy.

The University, indeed, drove all explicit Spanish influence from the ethos of power in the Philippines and it created a professional class for the new public and private bureaucracies. But its success did not stop there. It went on to rearm, intellectually, the undying movement for national independence.

With a singular dedication to recast the Filipino in the image of American republicanism, the University had dug, inadvertently, the grave of its creator. Here, we see the transformative power of the University and also its peculiar intractability.

It seems that the University is effective only when it is true to itself as a teacher of truth, as discoverer and imparter of accurate knowledge, right values and ordered thinking. Turned against the intellectual and moral lies of Spanish colonialism, the University's victory was assured. Used as a vehicle of republican principles, its success was certain. And it turned out so complete that these principles are now a permanent feature of Filipino yearning. But press the University into the service of purposes less generous and exalted, and a contrary result is produced.

The origins of the University, I admit, point strongly to it as a transformative agent partisan to a particular truth — the republicanism of its colonial creator. But I submit that the University changed quickly and became something better than the captive instrumentality of a particular truth. It became instead the forum for the disinterested search, and the arena for the remorseless discussion, of the infinite variety of transformative truths that powerful and disciplined minds can find, invent, defend or destroy.

From agent to arena — I prefer to think that the first letter of both words is all that its past now has in common with its present. From a far too clever instrument of foreign deception, using the universal prestige of knowledge to disguise an imperial intent, the University graduated swiftly to become a native republic of letters and science, preferring the prolific production and relentless destruction of conflicting doctrines to the propagation of a single, unvarying truth.

In short, the University had declared its faith in the limitless fecundity of the free and disciplined mind, its resignation to the eternal elusiveness of ultimate truths, and its determination, nonetheless, to continue the search for them without ever binding itself to the perennial provisionality of its findings.

This is the University — an institution greater than any single truth. Not the embodiment of one truth, but an invitation to find truth's manifold face in history. Now and then the hostage of an intellectual faction, it is intractable ultimately to any but its special purposes.

If the University is not this, then it should be. That is how I see it. Tomorrow's discussion may show that I am wrong about its past and mistaken about its true nature, still I will stand by those ideas as my vision of its future under my administration.

Whatever time may prove, we have nothing to fear. The University will endure. It will survive, and survive stronger than the challenge of my tenure. It has survived administrations with far more ambitious designs than I shall ever entertain.

This, then, is my idea of the University and in its light I shall labor to cope with the issues and problems that confront it. I shall now share with you my thoughts on some of them.

There are three issues I should like to address on this occasion. The first is the notion of academic freedom. The second is the special role of the University in a society that is undergoing deep social and political changes. The third is the future orientation of education at UP in the technological age.

Academic freedom is not just one of the many ideas that have found currency in our University. It is more than just one item in the list of things to know. It is the guarantee that the list will continue growing into the future. I am therefore surprised that the amount of controversy about its precise meaning seems to be in inverse proportion to the self-assurance with which it is hurled as a challenge at any call for order and restraint.

Academic freedom has been used to challenge any attempt to pervert the University to the political uses of establishments. That is correct. It has been used to challenge any proposal to confine the pursuit of new learning to certain directions. That, too, is correct. But it has also been used to challenge any demand for order in thinking, rationality in discourse, respectful sobriety in argument, and clarity in the development and expression of concepts that are sometimes, just moods.

I will not venture another definition of academic freedom. Nor will I attempt to suggest who are entitled to it and in what circumstances. These

issues have exercised other minds far longer than mine. I will say this much. Academic freedom gives us the total freedom to choose our convictions but it simultaneously demands that we justify our choice with the utmost intellectual rigor and expressive clarity. It rejects out of hand any attempt by us to make up for a deficiency in either with a mere declaration of benign intent on our part.

The University is a place of the mind. It is not a bowl of public emotions served with the catchwords of the social disciplines. What the public appears to want is one thing, what it should get from us is quite another. And that would be -- principally -- a clear understanding of its conditions and its needs, as we variously see them.

Everything in the University should be instrumental to the extension of knowledge, on the premise that the truth alone shall make us free. Therefore, we are not called on to supply the legions of revolution or reaction. What we do here, and do best, is put ideas on trial; the patently true, the subtly mendacious, and those whose edges shade off into both. No "ism" is exempt from trial. None enjoys the presumption of verity. All must defend their right to exist as respected terms in the discourse of the University, just on the strength of their coherence and logic. There is no question, social or national, so pressing as to justify any relaxation of rigor prescribed by the University's standard of excellence.

I see us as soldiers of the mind, following the banners of our free choices. Precise in our maneuvers, disciplined in our assaults, resplendent in the uniform of our erudition, we are, above all, always intelligible in our acts. We are a credit to the causes we variously support because we bring to them the UP mind.

Our expertise is the reduction of social outrage to reasoned critique, of impassioned demand to coherent program. The clarification of issues, the discovery of facts, the exposure of distortions and lies, and the presentation of reasoned alternatives -- these are what we are good at. And they are the best contributions we can make to the causes we choose to support. They define the role of the University in a society like ours.

More, no one has a right to demand of us. For beyond this are matters of physical courage and a perception of desperate necessity. To these the University is not indifferent, but its reaction will be to say: the bravado of the physically reckless act is rewarded in another pantheon; here we celebrate only the victories of the mind.

To sum up: the University guarantees absolute freedom of thought and expression, but the guarantee assumes the universal acceptance of a modicum of order and hierarchy.

The nature of that order I have described as a demand for intelligibility in our acts and a high standard in the quality of our discourse.

The "acceptance of hierarchy" I will not discuss, because it is implicit in the distinction between a university and Holmes' marketplace of ideas. It means no more than the recognition of a necessary structure of authority for the operation of the University. It does not demand a constant deference to the incumbents of authority. But it expects a certain measure of respect, exemplified in the willingness to take institutional routes to challenge the competence of the authorities or the wisdom of the structural arrangements of the University.

No issue has exercised the passions of the university more than the orientation of the education it should offer. A growing emphasis on the physical sciences is noted with alarm. The critics maintain that the emphasis is made at the expense of the humanities.

The thrust of the critique is that this development will adversely affect the spiritual and material dimensions of our lives.

The prominence given to science and its technological applications creates a growing class of professionals whose specialized skills draw them irresistibly into the service of the multinationals. Technology, in the context of a country involved in a dependent capacity in the international capitalist order, perpetuates and aggravates that dependency. The fear is clearly foreign subjection. A scientific orientation will only draw us deeper into it. Unfortunately, the only way out of it is also through more science and technology. This is the dilemma we face. Technology, on the one hand, can draw us deeper into that role of dependency; on the other hand, it is the only force that can pull us out of it. Technology is not the problem. It is the priorities entertained by those who command it.

There is another fear on a higher plane. It is feared that a commitment to technology will mean our resignation to a mechanical society devoid of the values we cherish. This seems too high a price to pay for the power to effect economic independence.

It is true that technology will restructure our consciousness. It will cause changes in our culture to reflect the changes it will make in the material circumstances of our lives. Will such changes be unacceptably radical? Will they change our culture beyond recognition?

In facing this possibility, the transitional character of our cultural condition is an advantage. We are still in the process of finding a distinctively Filipino identity. I see no reason why the ethos of technology should not be a part of its final configuration. But the possibility of course, remains that technology will sweep away everything before it.

It is here that we find the new and very important role of the humanities in the modern age. This age is marked by the exponential growth of knowledge beyond the capability of human minds to absorb or master.

In science alone, the speed of increase has been compared to the physical formula for free fall. And one study calculates that the new data generated worldwide every forty minutes could fill up a whole new Encyclopedia Britannica. Behind this swelling tide, hope of a unified vision, relating the disciplines and prescribing their moral purposes, has all but died.

And yet, without such a vision, we are condemned to wander aimlessly in the electronic labyrinth of the new knowledge. We shall be confined to the fitful study of its parts, resigned never to grasp the whole. In time a sense of impotence will overwhelm the initial wonder of discovery. The desire to learn will fail. And history will close the book on this great and bewildering age of unprecedented and uncontrollable discoveries.

We need a guiding thread to run through this labyrinth — something we can follow out of it to a height that allows us to survey it all. Such a thread can only be laid by the humanities.

This is the role of the humanities that is increasingly being recognized throughout the academic world. A crisis in learning is emerging from the widening gap between the increasing abundance of knowledge and our diminishing confidence in our ability to select the most important items and relate them to our needs.

The electronic accumulation of knowledge has reduced the importance of the discoverer of facts, while it has increased the importance of our ability to ask the right questions, make the most judicious selections, and decide on the most responsible applications of the knowledge we have mastered. As has been observed, even the largest stock of knowledge can be organized if one knows for which purpose it is to be used.

From the specific purpose that organizes knowledge to the grand purpose that prescribes its most uses, we have a hierarchy of values as opposed to a litany of facts. This hierarchy lies well within the domain of the humanities.

In the light of this, no university can ever adopt, with regard to the sciences and the humanities, a policy that excludes one or the other, even if the exclusion is only a matter of emphasis. Certainly, the University will not under my administration. It is important, however, that the two groups of disciplines — humanities and the sciences, do not continue to develop independently of each other. A synergy must be established between them in the hope that mutual respect will follow. Without that respect, neither will learn from the other. Science will go on dismissing humanism as the refuge of weak minds. And humanism will reject the precise but fragmentary ideas of science as fit only for pointed but narrow intelligences, oblivious to the broader concerns of men. If things continue in this way, science will progress to self-destruction and humanism will shrink into irrelevance. This synergy is therefore imperative. Its importance will be reflected in the future budgets of the University.

With that promise I close. Even the President of the University cannot reflect comprehensively on the variety of new features and developments that surprise him each day at the University. It is from this array of impression, sometimes delightful and sometimes disappointing, that the conviction grew that everything in the University should be provisional, nothing should be allowed to become final. Only the University should endure.