

Listening through philosophy: an ethical lens for the discourse on truth and politics

Antonio Gabriel M. La Viña

Professor of Law, Governance, and Philosophy

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The working title of my lecture was a mouthful, “Truth and Ethics in a Time of Political Anomie: Finding Paths Forward”. If it were not presumptuous, I would change it to “What will Dr. Ramon Reyes tell us now about truth and politics, how to deal with fake news, and the like?”

At first, I was tempted to just share my reflections on the topics as a lawyer and political analyst. I have written quite a lot about them. I give 2-3 national situation briefings a week to diverse audiences and fake news is always a favorite topic people want me to address. But that would not add a lot of value, to just repeat what I say on those briefings or what I write in my columns here.

Seriously, Ramon Reyes would have a lot to say about our topic today. We need his voice and wisdom in this challenging time. I would not pretend to be able to substitute for him. Thankfully, I do have Professor Randy David, one of my intellectual petmalu lodis, as my co-lecturer this morning. I am sure Professor David will help shed light on our topic. I will try my best as well.

I do want to start by thanking Dr. Nena Reyes, her sons and family, Dr. Jean Tan, and the Ateneo de Manila Philosophy Department, for asking me to do this memorial lecture. I am more nervous than usual, being on the same stage as Prof. David, with a topic which is certainly not uncontroversial, having in the audience many of my teachers, peers and colleagues in the department which saved me from what I thought would be permanent angst in the 1970s and 1980s, and last but not the least that this lecture is in honor of Doc Reyes. As a Kantian myself, at least in my thinking on ethics and hope, I would postulate while not able to prove that our master teacher and beacon of ethical wisdom is listening also to us today.

One of the most fulfilling and pleasurable experiences in the 1970s and 1980s of being a philosophy student and teacher in Ateneo de Manila was to spend hours talking to Ramon. Two or three times a week, we would have conversations about everything, but especially politics, in the room we shared in the old philosophy department. I was a lost young man then, seriously thinking of joining the armed struggle against the Marcos dictatorship, and Doc Reyes was a good listener. He gave good advice – that why I ended up in Diliman and not in the mountains, but he listened first. I can still see that smile in his face, a quizzical look, expressing both fondness and skepticism at what you were saying, but open and never judgmental.

Yes, what made Ramon Reyes a good teacher and philosopher was that he was a good listener. He listened to his students and their questions. He listened to the great philosophers, and that is why he was so successful in bringing them to life in his classrooms. So this is where I would like to begin my reflections on truth and politics in a post-truth era – the importance of listening, and in this lecture, listening through philosophy.

From the working version, I have now settled on this better, more accurate title of my lecture: *Listening through philosophy: an ethical lens for the discourse truth and politics*

Listening through philosophy

To cut to the chase, the main problem we face today is our failure to listen – to each other, to nature, to our history, to the demands of our time, and even to ourselves. The post-truth world is characterized by that failure, which in turn has resulted in political anomie - a state where disregard of rules and institutions is extolled as needed for positive social change. The response then is obvious: we must begin to listen to each other again, create physical and online spaces for conversations, agree on processes that will bring us nearer to the truth, and find consensus in shared values and aspirations so we can move forward even if our politics are radically different and opposed.

To step back from this post-truth world – by the way, the phrase gives me a lot of discomfort but I will give it a philosophical nuance that might give it a better sense - I propose that we reflect on three questions, and listen to how Doc Reyes, and by necessity given that Ramon was the master historian of the history of philosophy, other thinkers, grappled with them. These questions are:

- (1) What is the truth? And related to this, how do we know the truth?
- (2) In the world of politics, is truth always subordinate to political ends?
- (3) What is the role of ethics in the interplay of truth and politics?

The Reyes texts from which I will base my reflections on are: for the first question, Doc Reyes' keynote address to the 1984 convention of the Philosophical Association of the Philippines, later published in *Philippine Studies* as "Philosophy in a Crisis Situation" (Reyes, 1986), when Doc Reyes reflected on the role of philosophy, emphasizing the dialectic of praxis and reflection, as the post-Aquino assassination political and economic crisis unfolded and intensified; for the second question, his Budhi monograph on Eric Weil's Political Philosophy (Reyes, 1989), which was based on his doctoral dissertation from Louvain, which underlined the necessity of political action; and finally, for the third question, I will rely on insights from Doc Reyes' ethics book for college students, *Ground and Norm of Morality* (Reyes, 1988), particularly from his framing of the Kantian concept of the categorical imperative which is I think what we need.

The interview of Ramon conducted by Eddie Calasanz for the series on University Traditions, part of the volume *The Humanities Interviews* published in 2005, helped me understand where Doc Reyes was coming from as a teacher.

More personally, providing context for my understanding and interpretation of these Reyes texts is my experience of being his student in several philosophy undergraduate and graduate courses – modern philosophy, contemporary philosophy, philosophy of the state, advanced ethics, and an elective on Husserl. He also was responsible for my comprehensive exams when I was trying to complete my MA in philosophy, as I chose ethics and contemporary philosophy as my subject matters for that exams. I passed them but was not able to finish my Marx thesis, my official excuse being that Fr. Joel Tabora, my mentor, had left the department do full-time pastoral work but the actual reason was the detour to law and getting married to Titay who is in the audience.

Coincidentally, being on transition to retirement and sorting boxes of documents and giving away books and materials, I was able to recover my notes from Doc Reyes' classes, including the notes I took on the day Maam Nena gave birth to their first born, Javier, when Doc Reyes came to our contemporary philosophy class still dazed but more inspired and animated than usual to teach us Hegelian dialectic in action. I also have the notes from the philosophy of state course I took with Doc Reyes when he introduced us to the political philosophy of Eric Weil, which he framed as a reconciliation of Kant and Hegel. I remember distinctly that class as we were just four students there - Dr. Tonette Palma Angeles who was still finishing her masters in philosophy, Dean Sed Candelaria who was taking it as an elective for his political science degree, an American graduate student whose name I don't recall, and myself. I mention this course because if there was any academic subject in my undergraduate years that would shape my thinking on politics, it was this course and it was this not very well known philosopher Eric Weil that would have the most influence on my thinking for a couple of decades.

A final introductory note on my lecture: As I reflect on the three questions: what is and how to know the truth, the dynamic between truth and politics, and grounding this dynamic in ethics, I will cite concrete examples to illustrate my points. Among others, I will point to the controversy on the uncertainties around climate change, the controversy surrounding the Dengvaxia vaccine, the fake news debate and how to counter it, and finally human rights and the illegitimacy of the justifications for its disregard and derogation.

What is the truth? How do we know the truth?

Knowing the truth, as our master teachers in this department, have always thought us has never been a simple and easy enterprise. I do not want to dwell too much on the debate among pre-modern, modern, and post-modern philosophers on what the truth is and whether we can know it. But I remember how intellectually liberating it was to me when Doc Reyes first introduced this framing of western philosophy one summer during a philosophy of man graduate seminar. I actually still have my notes from his lecture on that topic, and in one page, I wrote: "Now I know that there is such a thing as truth, but it will take a lifetime of engagement and thinking to actually know it."

Soon after he taught that course in the summer of 1983, Ninoy Aquino was assassinated and the country was in turmoil. Doc Reyes did not hesitate to apply philosophical thinking to what the country was facing to a convention of philosophers. I was in that forum and I

remembered how illuminating it was, and how it was in fact a call to arms directed to the country's philosophers and philosophy teacher. Let me quote from his "Philosophy in a Crisis Situation":

First, Doc Reyes reflects on the Aquino assassination. And how it transformed our consciousness: "And so, it was the Aquino event, a moment of negation, which shook us from a certain level of life we had somehow come to accept and adjust to, putting into question our very manner of existence. On the other hand, just as the Aquino event has succeeded in transforming our consciousness and our conscience, we in turn address and question as it were the text or message of Aquino's life and death, and eventually go beyond it, negating it, as it were, going to the very questions that his life and death were answers to, and eventually exploring other possible responses that Aquino himself perhaps had not ventured into toward a more fundamental restructuring of the economic and political bases of our communal life." (Reyes, 1986)

Doc Reyes then identifies the three roles of philosophers in a crisis situation, namely, as critic, as poet, as one rooted and committed to his life situation. "In a sense they are the roles that each and everyone of us must assume for himself, in so far as philosophy is nothing but every man trying to get a better understanding of himself and his worldly tasks. In recapitulation, as critical reflexion, philosophy leads to a dialectic of negation and creative transformation in view of a better future world, transformation however to be effected in situ, to be fashioned out of the gleanings from his past objectivations as handed down to the present by the communal tradition. And so, KRISIS, POESIS, PHRONESIS." (Reyes, 1986)

He describes this third role as follows: "to show man his historical situatedness, to show him that our task is to espouse the limitations and possibilities of our common destiny, to re-create and transfigure the world by fashioning new symbols and opening up new horizons out of the very materials and traces bequeathed to us by our communal past." According to Doc Reyes: "In fine, man is not primarily a knower, surveying and contemplating his world from above independently of time and history, but a being-in-the-world, one who from the start, pre-reflexively, has been actively involved in a life-world of commitment and praxis, a world of work and political struggle and feeling and valuing, never arriving at a moment of intuitive, serene, eternal self-presence, for he is ever behind; ever belated in relation to a past that is always already there preceding him, even as he is ever ahead of himself, anticipating and projecting himself in his possibilities, possibilities which, as we have seen, would have come only from his present situation." (Reyes, 1986)

So yes, there is truth, and it is knowable, but it requires engagement for us to know it. The greek word, made famous again by Martin Heidegger, in the 20th century, is Aletheia – being or reality disclosed, unconcealed. The truth does not come all at once; it requires an effort on our part to uncover what is there. We use reason, the natural and social sciences, logic, our own categories, even our passions, a combination of all of these to get to the truth. Sometimes, it takes decades to verify a hypothesis, to validate an informed guess, but even as we await that, we must already act. The world does not stop

even when the truth has not yet fully emerged. And even when the truth is much clearer, there are those who will still deny it for their own interests.

Take for example climate change, a field I am familiar with, having done my doctoral studies at a time when we were only beginning to understand the enormity of the problem. In the early 1990s, we were faced with a lot of uncertainties in the science of climate change. In particular, we were not sure of the impacts of global warming as the most that could be done then was to model the potential impacts. That approach had inherent limitations. Attribution of those impacts anthropogenic greenhouse emissions was also and remains difficult, making it challenging for governments to make policy decisions that would effectively address the problem. But over time, with billions of US dollars invested to narrow down the uncertainties, things became clearer with every assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, done every five years, getting better and more accurate with every report.

One would think that as the science got better on climate change, countries would act more decisively to deal with the challenge. But that has not been the case. In a country like the United States, politics continue to cloud the truth about climate change and prevents societal consensus to respond effectively to this most serious environmental and development concern.

When this happens, philosophers are needed to reflect on our experience and to call it for what it is: this is no longer a search for truth but its hijacking for political ends.

Missing the forest for the trees

One way the emergence of the truth is obstructed is when we miss the forests for the trees. The dengue vaccination issue is an example of this. There are those who, for their own political reasons, have sensationalized the issue, causing panic among parents, affecting vaccination programs that will likely have long term consequences on public health, and casting a wide net of blame that some say is unfair and unwarranted. But this does not mean that this is all noise and that there is nothing to be worried about.

I support exhausting all avenues and angles in investigating this controversy. Distinctions must be made between the scientific, governance, legal, and political issues. It has become very confusing because these distinctions are not being made. It is important then to step back and look beyond the trees at the forests at stake here. For me, there are two,

One forest to these trees is the impact of this controversy on public health in general, on how parents and families will make vaccination decisions, on whether or not the public will be able to trust our health officials again if indeed it is true that such trust has been lost. Regardless of our politics, what we believe regarding who is accountable here, can't we all agree to work together to restore this confidence?

An even greater forest is the way we make policy and other important decisions in our country. Frankly, the controversy reveals how appalling our decision-making process is. On what needed to be science-based and precautionary, given the magnitude of dengue as a problem, the scientific uncertainty involved, the risks that have been raised, the fact that the scientific debate was intense, the amount involved in the purpose, and the fact that the 2016 elections was just around the corner, good sense did not prevail and a bad policy decision was made. It was remarkable to me that President Aquino said that nobody told him the dengue vaccine was controversial and that there was a debate over risks. How could that have happened if there was complete staff work?

As we know, the scientists of the Department of Health, through the Formulary Executive Council, were ignored and even pressured to give a limited approval; subsequently, even the conditions which they imposed were set aside. To be sure, other scientists inside and outside of the DOH supported the mass vaccination decision. And even now, we see that division in the scientific community of the risks of Dengvaxia and whether the right decision was made by President Aquino and former Secretary Jannete Garin. That this debate was and is intense should have been the red flag. Apparently, President Aquino was not even aware that his own Department of Health was divided over the issue.

One hopes that lessons can be learned in this Dengvaxia controversy. This lack of evidence and science based policy decision making, the absence of complete staff work, is not exclusive to the Aquino government. Previous administrations have been guilty of this. Currently, the Duterte administration is doing this in its war against drugs.

In summary, applying the Reyes maxim on how truth is a result of reflection on action by beings-in-history, I say that the truth about the Dengvaxia controversy can be pinned down. But not right away and not in one instance. Our scientists will have to do the work. But in the meantime, life goes on and decisions have to be made with incomplete information. Should the suspension of dengvaxia be now lifted and the vaccine made available to at least those who have had dengue? How do you move forward on the liability questions? How can the DOH get back public trust for vaccination? How will we decide similar questions in the future?

Subordinating truth to political ends

This brings me to my second question. In the world of politics, is truth always subordinate to political ends? Because pinning down the truth can take time or because the truth can in fact be complex, given the need to make decisions and to convince publics to support decision, is it logical then that truth should be subordinated to whatever political objectives that leaders or vested interests might already have in mind?

Fake news has always been with us. Fake news and politics have always been intertwined. One of the most famous maxims of Sun Tzu's Art of War, written in the 5th century BC, is: "All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we

are near.” More concisely, he says: “Appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak.”

Sun Tzu is echoed a thousand years later, in the 16th Century, by Niccolo Machiavelli in *The Prince* when he suggested how to win battles: ““Never attempt to win by force what can be won by deception.” This Florentine thinker, still very influential among politicians (at least those who still read) had a very cynical view of human beings: “Men are so simple of mind, and so much dominated by their immediate needs, that a deceitful man will always find plenty who are ready to be deceived.” Macchiavellians find “double pleasure” in deceiving the deceivers.

Our current President is said to be a practitioner of the Art of War and *The Prince*. True or not, he certainly likes to stir conflict, putting all of us on our toes, igniting fires everywhere. Whether he has a grand plan, I do not know. But only the fool would assume that he is completely transparent when he promises to resign for this or that reason or that he will not extend his term of office.

Is there an alternative view to politics for men and women of good will?

Thankfully, Doc Reyes taught us Eric Weil’s political philosophy who had such a positive view. For Weil, as explained by Reyes (Reyes, 1979), “Reason knows itself to be historical and political and politics acts in view of reason.” Moreover “Taken within the context of modern historical development, the government is by necessity the bearer of the common interest or the universal.” But this does not happen overnight, this convergence of the moral and the political. “Thus, while it is the modern empirical state that has led to the concept of State of law and justice, the distinction and tension remain between the formal, ideal, universal concept and the given, empirical state, consequently issuing in continuous contestation and action.” (Reyes, 1979) In other words, it’s not a perfect world and politics can in fact be dirty, deception a part of it. But in typical Hegelian fashion, Weil sees this as a necessary movement.

In the *Budhi* monograph, Doc Reyes has this great quotation from Weil: “Wisdom is not the truth . . . wisdom is that which leads to it. The universal exists and is one, but reveals itself to the category in the attitude, to discourse in situation . . . under two aspects, that of Liberty and of Truth. This is the most profound duality of discourse, duality which is always reconciled but which always remains to be reconciled.” (Reyes, 1979)

You have to be Hegelian or Marxian to understand that phrase. But actually, it’s very simple: truth can only be discovered as truth when confronted with untruth. Justice will not emerge until injustice is exposed and overturned. Human beings cannot be truly human until they face their own alienation and revolt against its roots.

Let’s go back now and apply this Weilian dialectical thinking to the phenomenon of fake news.

Addressing fake news

“Pope Francis, in his message for World Communications Day this year, defines fake news (which he traces all the way to the biblical story of the snake tempting Eve in paradise with a false promise), the objective of those who disseminate it, and why it is effective: “The term “fake news” has been the object of great discussion and debate. In general, it refers to the spreading of disinformation on line or in the traditional media. It has to do with false information based on non-existent or distorted data meant to deceive and manipulate the reader. Spreading fake news can serve to advance specific goals, influence political decisions, and serve economic interests.” (Pope Francis, 2018)

He continues: “The effectiveness of fake news is primarily due to its ability to mimic real news, to seem plausible. Secondly, this false but believable news is “captious,” inasmuch as it grasps people’s attention by appealing to stereotypes and common social prejudices, and exploiting instantaneous emotions like anxiety, contempt, anger and frustration. The ability to spread such fake news often relies on a manipulative use of the social networks and the way they function. Untrue stories can spread so quickly that even authoritative denials fail to contain the damage.” (Pope Francis, 2018)

Pope Francis then elaborate on the consequences of fake news, quoting from Doestevsky’s epic novel *Brothers Karamazov*: “Constant contamination by deceptive language can end up darkening our interior life. Dostoevsky’s observation is illuminating: “People who lie to themselves and listen to their own lie come to such a pass that they cannot distinguish the truth within them, or around them, and so lose all respect for themselves and for others. And having no respect, they cease to love, and in order to occupy and distract themselves without love they give way to passions and to coarse pleasures, and sink to bestiality in their vices, all from continual lying to others and to themselves.” (Pope Francis, 2018)

Fake news in relation to freedom of speech and press

The issue of fake news is personal and political for me. As an individual, I like my freedom and would want to be always free to express my opinion. As a law and philosophy professor for many decades, I have seen how freedom of thinking and speech, which includes the freedom to have the wrong opinion and to make mistakes in appreciating events, is critical for a vibrant society. As a practitioner of governance and politics, I have also witnessed how the ability to speak, write, and publish freely is important for dialogue and consensus. This ability is also important in the search for the truth as defined by Doc Reyes as the constant dialectic of reflection and praxis.

In addressing fake news, defined as deliberate fabrication and dissemination of false facts, my overriding concern is that we do not throw out the baby with the dirty bath water. Fake news and their promoters would have won if we sacrifice in any significant way the great freedoms of speech and press.

Freedom of speech, expression, and press are all necessities of a modern state. They come with risks though, of abuse and mis-use, but I do not think there is a way around that. This is not to say though that we are helpless against fake news.

In "Philosophy in a Crisis Situation", Doc Reyes pointed out how "In the course of this process of negation and trans-formation, we eventually shall have to create a renewed vision of man, thus, for example, pose new norms for a legal framework that would provide tighter guarantees for human rights, new norms for an economy that would be more equitable in the sharing of the burdens as well as of the benefits, and for a political system more participative, more effectively representative of the various sectors and interests of the people." (Reyes, 1986)

I think we are in that moment for these great freedoms, we need to reaffirm them while creating new norms to overcome the fake news challenge.

In my view, the valid test for taking action against fake news continue to be the classic clear and present danger test. What is the harm created by fake news? How serious is that harm to society? What is the least intrusive (to personal freedom) approach to prevent that harm?

The best practice is still bad speech (fake news, wrong opinions) should be countered with good speech (the truth, better arguments).

Some speech, whether fake news or bad views, can be very harmful however and this we must figure out how to suppress or hold people liable. For speech that is libelous and that causes a threat to individuals, for example troll attacks that encourage violence, there are already existing laws that can be used to go after the perpetrators. But speech that incite hate and violence is a new phenomenon and is something we need to grapple with. How should fake news be regulated? Are new criminal and civil laws needed to address this problem? Should we set up a regulatory body that will decide for society what is fake news or not and take steps to prevent such news from being disseminated and to punish the guilty?

Distinguishing news from opinion

To answer these questions, one must first distinguish news from opinion. Unfortunately, we have conflated fake news from bad views and that has added to our confusion. While there might be only one set of facts that could be reported, there could be different interpretations of these same facts. One could have different witnesses; for example, bystanders would see things differently from participants in a violent altercation. Regardless of how objective a reporter may be, she or he brings her own biases in writing her or his stories.

We must not conflate fake news and bad views. Fake news must be countered by the truth, bad views with better arguments.

Fake news is old and new

As I said earlier, quoting Sun Tzu and Machiavelli, fake news and bad views are not a new phenomenon. We always have had them, motivated by politics, self-interest, for fun or even for no reason at all. But in the past, the established media platforms controlled the flow of these news and information.

While not perfect, traditional media did have common and accepted journalistic methods of fact checking and verification, editing of content and language, procedures for getting the other side of the story, allowing for publication of replies, and procedures for issuing erratums and apologies. Some newspapers even have ombudspersons and reader's advocates that monitor the work of their reporters and writers.

While these internal and external systems have been helpful in the past, the advent of the 24/7 news cycle, the internet, and social media has rapidly changed the situation. News organizations need to be more agile now and the old system has to adjust to that. In addition, everyone theoretically has the ability to release news, fake or true, and views, good or bad. The ordinary Facebooker or Tweeter is still probably harmless but some clearly have a wider reach than others. In the case of the latter, most are one person operations and, even if motivated by good intentions, certainly would not have the same resources as traditional media would have to fact-check, verify, edit language, etc.

Defeating the trolls

Professors Jonathan Corpus Ong, associate professor of communication at UMass Amherst, and Jason Cabañes, lecturer in international communication at the University of Leeds, has released an interesting and excellent report entitled *Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines* (Ong and Cabanes, 2018). The findings of the report which is based on a 12-month research project that involved in-depth interviews with disinformation architects and online observation of the fake accounts they operated.

As articulated in its executive summary, the report outlines the motivations and strategies of people it labels “the architects of networked disinformation”— “a professionalized hierarchy of political operators who maintain day jobs as advertising and public relations executives, computer programmers and political administrative staff.” The report “explains how strategists set campaign objectives based on input from their political clients, then delegate political marketing responsibility to a team of digital influencers and fake account operators. These operators infiltrate online communities, artificially trend hashtags to hijack mainstream media attention, and disseminate disinformation to silence enemies and seed revisionist history narratives.” (Ong and Cabanes, 2018)

Corpus and Cabanes points out an important fact: While it is people like Mocha Uson that many are upset with, because they are seen to incite political divisiveness and harass journalists, “the real chief architects of disinformation are hiding in plain sight—wearing respectable faces as leaders in their industry while sidestepping accountability.” (Ong and

Cabanes, 2018)

Are we helpless before this architects of disinformation?

Ong and Cabañes does not think so. After consulting with some of us who work on this from the media or policy point of view, they suggest policy-driven solutions to industry, government and civil stakeholders and calls for new collective interventions to the systematic production of disinformation. These recommendations include self-regulation measures in the digital influencer industry and legal reforms for campaign finance transparency.

Indeed, as I have suggested to Senator Grace Poe in the hearings on fake news, Congress does have options with respect to the platforms that allow fake news and hate language to proliferate. In Germany, it has been reported that laws will be passed imposing heavy fines on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms for failure to take out fake or hate content within specified timeframes. Laws are not even necessary for this as consumer demand might be enough.

Pope Francis suggests ways on how we can defend ourselves, and expounds, among others, on the role of journalists:

“The most radical antidote to the virus of falsehood is purification by the truth . . . To discern the truth, we need to discern everything that encourages communion and promotes goodness from whatever instead tends to isolate, divide, and oppose . . . An impeccable argument can indeed rest on undeniable facts, but if it is used to hurt another and to discredit that person in the eyes of others, however correct it may appear, it is not truthful. We can recognize the truth of statements from their fruits: whether they provoke quarrels, foment division, encourage resignation; or, on the other hand, they promote informed and mature reflection leading to constructive dialogue and fruitful results.” (Pope Francis, 2018)

He continues: “The best antidotes to falsehoods are not strategies, but people: people who are not greedy but ready to listen, people who make the effort to engage in sincere dialogue so that the truth can emerge; people who are attracted by goodness and take responsibility for how they use language. If responsibility is the answer to the spread of fake news, then a weighty responsibility rests on the shoulders of those whose job is to provide information, namely, journalists, the protectors of news. In today’s world, theirs is, in every sense, not just a job; it is a mission. Amid feeding frenzies and the mad rush for a scoop, they must remember that the heart of information is not the speed with which it is reported or its audience impact, but persons. Informing others means forming others; it means being in touch with people’s lives. That is why ensuring the accuracy of sources and protecting communication are real means of promoting goodness, generating trust, and opening the way to communion and peace.” (Pope Francis, 2018)

Mocha Uson and the mirror she brings

The critics of Mocha Uson accuse her of peddling and disseminating fake news and bullying people and organizations. Certainly, her errors are not harmless, such as the Naga mistake, and have consequences especially now that she is in government.

In my view though, the latest attacks against her, the UST Alumni Association, and UST itself were not justified. Any reading of the so-called award given her yields clearly the conclusion that she was not being extolled but only recognized as a public official. It's a kind of distinction that many schools and alumni associations give to appointed government officials, done without any kind of vetting. In my view, reporting the recognition as bestowing honor on Mocha was fake news with intention or certainly had the result of humiliating her.

One can argue of course says that Mocha deserves the bullying. I disagree. As I have written before we must treat everyone alike from the point of view of human rights and dignity

It's time for all of us to look at ourselves and how ugly we have made our society. For sure, it did not start under the Duterte government but this disregard of the truth for political gain has intensified.

If we do not like how we have become, it is because we have detached ethics from politics. It is because we have allowed politics to determine the truth for us, how we see things is reduced to our political views, and as long as our aspirations for the country are noble, we sacrifice the truth and disregard ethical norms.

Truth, politics, and ethics

This brings me to my final set of reflections, on how we can ground the discourse of truth and politics in norms of morality.

On this topic, I do not hesitate to rely on the moral philosophy of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Doc Reyes introduced Kant to generations of philosophy majors, sandwiched in his courses between Descartes and Hume on one side and Hegel, Marx, Husserl, and Kierkegaard on the other side. I do not think it is a wild guess for me to say that, on ethics, Kant was most influential on the development of the Reyes moral philosophy which, after decades of teaching, matured as uniquely his own.

That philosophy is well explained in his 1988 textbook *Ground and Norm of Morality: Ethics for College Students* (Reyes, 1988) where Doc Reyes provides students with a comprehensive overview of how philosophers from Plato to the Utilitarians like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill grappled with the morality. In that book, he also systematically articulated the elements of his moral philosophy, describing aspects of the moral dimension (such as action, freedom, universality, and obligation), reflecting on conscience, the personal nature and dignity of man, and natural law as norms of morality.

He ends the book elaborating on the ultimate foundation of morality and applying the elements he has identified to arrive at a method by which to determine the morality of our action in a given situation.

As he did in 1984 reflecting on the Aquino assassination and as he used in his doctoral dissertation on Eric Weil, Doc Reyes relies again on dialectic thinking. Again I quote from our master ethicist: “Thus in a first moment, man in his very being as openness to the good finds himself claimed by the final end, which expresses itself in syndresis (or the innate capacity to discern what is good and evil) and the universal principles of morality; in a second moment, man in his concrete situation reflects and comes to a practical judgment of conscience, and acts accordingly in view of the good; in a third moment, man, in acting and subsequently after acting, finds himself vis-à-vis a historical reality other than himself, with its own proper structure and tendencies which go beyond his own intention and direct control.” (Reyes, 1988)

Doc Reyes then describes the constant possibility of an erroneous conscience, which he defines as “a conscience decided to act according to what man perceives to be the good, but due to misinterpretation of the principles or misinformation regarding the facts, comes to the wrong judgement regarding the good he ought to do”. Indeed, it is entirely possible that by a judgement of conscience, a human being might sometimes find that what he has done with all good will and intention was wrong and or was inadequate. Certainly, this happens in politics all the time. But this should not destroy or disappoint. This historical reality, which to Reyes is properly the locus of action and of the concrete good, “leads man from time to time toward an ever wider openness, an ever keener or broader perception of the good”. (Reyes, 1988)

Application to human rights

There is no other area more urgent to apply ethical thinking too than that of human rights. Unfortunately, its derogation or utter disregard is justified by societal aspirations and exigencies. I pointed this out in a lecture on Thomas More’s Utopia in 2016, citing the moral crusades that characterized the presidencies of Presidents Marcos, Noynoy Aquino, and now Duterte.

Whether it was the war against oligarchs and communist for Marcos, corruption for Aquino, and illegal drugs for Duterte, all these presidents, in my view, justified violations of human rights of individuals in the pursuit of the big national goals they have appropriated. The scale of course is different. The numbers of the Marcos era human rights violations and numbers of casualties we are seeing now in the war against drugs cannot be compared to the corruption prosecutions launched during the Aquino administration. We know that the zeal with which President Aquino went after former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo did not end up with her assassination in the hospital or elsewhere and certainly, eventually, due process did work with Arroyo’s acquittal. But that had to wait until the end of the Aquino term.

Politics, no matter how noble, should not be the basis of how we treat people. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo should not have been detained. Senator Leila De Lima should be released from prison. President Aquino should not have unleashed all the powers of presidency against Chief Justice Corona. The House of Representatives should stop its persecution of Chief Justice Sereno.

In all these cases, I have no doubt what the categorical imperative is, and that is to follow scrupulously due process of law. Some of my law students from UP, PUP, DLSU, and Ateneo Law are here this morning, not by coercion I hope not just to gain incentive credits which I allow but to learn. I emphasize to them why due process is the most fundamental of rights and why criminal due process is the most essential of rights. Without due process, government becomes a monster. Without criminal due process, we can all be targeted and become victims.

In my last conversations with Doc Reyes, including when I visited him in the hospital. I told him that the more experience I had in politics, the more Kantian I had become. When I was younger, I was very much attracted to Marx and even Hegel, as contradictory as that seems, but dialectic thinking was powerful as a framework for social analysis and as political action. But it falls short, steeply at times, in guiding us to make ethical decisions. That is why Eric Weil, and I suspect Doc Reyes as well, in the end acknowledged that he was more Kantian than Hegelian. I thanked Ramon then for that insight and thank him again for that today.

Conclusion: paths forward

Let me end now with three final points.

First, on the philosophy of Doctor Reyes. In his works I reread for this lecture and the passages I highlighted today, it is clear what the man we honor these lectures bring to the discourse on truth and politics. To borrow words from Martin Luther King, Doc Reyes is a drum major for constant reflection on praxis so we can continually transform our society and country for the better, for the nobility of politics, for the categorical imperative and universal principles of morality, for doing the right thing at all times regardless of circumstances, for learning from one's mistakes and accepting responsibility for them, and yes for personal conscience.

Second, we do not need to despair over the state of the country and of our politics. Dialectic thinking, in the way Doc Reyes practiced it, following Weil, Hegel, and Marx never surrenders to pessimism. There is always a synthesis that follows a negation. As I tell my natsit audiences, we have been here before, this moment of anti-thesis. It does pass. It always does. What is important is to prepare for that moment of a new synthesis, for still another opportunity to renew this country and yes this world which is also in a moment of negation.

Third, and last, I would repeat what I said at the beginning of this lecture. We must begin to listen to each other again, create physical and online spaces for conversations, agree

on processes that will bring us nearer to the truth, and find consensus in shared values and aspirations so we can move forward even if our politics are radically different and opposed. I hope today's lecture, where we listened to philosophers. Illustrated this well.

Thank you very much and good morning.

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