

Pag-ilaila sa Kaugalingon:
The Introspective Turn in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract

The global pandemic has disrupted almost all human habits and engagements for the past months. Thrown into a new and complex situation, we have seen how COVID-19 pushed countries into lockdowns thereby driving social institutions to deal with the emerging phenomenon. Given this flux-ridden time, the situation has afforded many existential queries about life, death, meaning, and purpose of one's existence. What does it mean to be a self in this time of great uncertainty? This is a query which this paper tries to reflect upon which takes its philosophical ground from Socrates' familiar dictum – *Know Thyself*. Inspired to possibly thresh out insights that can be derived from reflective and rethinking dispositions about the self, this paper hopes that a philosophical approach to where we are right now could challenge certain ways or postures by which we frame ourselves, our relationship with nature, and others. In this paper, this reflective thinking is treated as a way of participating in this call for a substantive existential reset by walking through the routes opened by an introspective turn in the time of COVID-19.

Keywords: Self, self-reflection, existential vulnerabilities, self as inquiry

Encountering the Socratic Inquiry

March 14, 2020 was my last visit to UP Mindanao before the LGU implemented the community quarantine. It was a Friday and I went there to attend to some administrative concerns. But what I would like to specifically recall was the feeling that I was still allowed by the conditions to have closer contact with my colleagues, the students, and staff in the University. At that point, the term social distancing was not yet coined. Now, its May 24, 2020, and I have been staying mostly in our house.

The past days have been strange and remain difficult to describe. The thing is, I still do not know exactly how to make sense of my experiences, hence this effort to write a paper about this new phase in our lives. To begin, everything appears to be very interconnected. Unfortunately, the characteristic of wholeness is not about joy or pleasure but due to the regulative presence of fear, anxiety, and at times depression. While I tried to inject some happy thoughts in between hours and days, I remained unwilling to accept the new situation. The disposition of being able to move freely is no longer present, and every decision to go out of the house has to be necessary, calculated, and short. One cannot just go out of the house, wander and get lost. Such freedom has disappeared. I still want to walk around the city with my partner, go to school where I could see my students, or visit *Mintal* and have some free food from my friends' house. Unfortunately, COVID-19 gifted us with fear-laden immobility. Recalling Camus', *The Myth of Sisyphus*,¹ it is as if we are eternally pushing against a big stone each time we need to move. How long can we keep on dealing with this ordeal?

With forced quarantine, the first thing that I felt that I needed to come up with was a working structure to help me live

¹ Camus, Albert. 2005. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books Ltd.

the everyday life. Remembering de Certeau in *The Mystic Fable*,² the notion of the everyday life used to stand for the undervalued opposite of grand/meta-narratives. Now, the everyday life is wreaking and imposing its presence. It is as if the hold of grand narratives has been lifted and dislodged. This happened not because of a counterargument or a better proposition but because COVID-19 forced everyone back to the most basic of things – human and biological survival. The change in paradigm was immediate and with the way events are turning, we may have realized that we now find ourselves dealing with a sense of loss as we gradually recognize that the world may never be the same again. The things that we freely enjoyed have come to an almost full stop. And for many, it is only now that we see value in the freedoms that we had, the little things that we used to do, such as, giving a hug to our friends, a high-five, or queuing for a grilled banana for an afternoon snack.

With the new normal gazing with intent, these questions keep on pressing for attention: Will this situation stay with us for another two to five years? Will we survive such a period? Will a time come that we will also be infected with the virus? To help me make sense of these queries, I was reminded of this Socratic question: What have I learned so far about myself? This query follows the familiar Socratic dictum “Know Thyself”. With the community lockdowns, and the shutting of offices, stores, and malls, it seems that the question has now fully regained its place among the crucial questions that should be attended to as this pandemic unfolds. We can even propose that no one is exempt from the significance of the query. This means that at some point, each person would need to admit that the situation has transported or will bring us into a different terrain where one is expected to at least – even partially, take an introspective

² De Certeau, Michel. 1992. *The Mystic Fable*, trans. Michael B. Smith. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

turn. What kind of selves will unravel as the new normal forces us to slip into a different and unsafe world?

A Glimpse of the Everyday Life

Living a quarantined life, my first worry was about not being allowed to take long walks. Walking is a daily exercise that I need to keep doing for my lower back. I was hoping that taking light walks would still be permitted as it is one of those activities that reminds me of my victory in overcoming a physical pain that I dealt with silently for the past three years. Hence, walking has become a symbol of freedom, of a life that is finally reprieved of the daily grind of physical pain. Even until today, I always feel privileged that I am still able to walk. For me, each step is an overlap between lived and imagined freedoms. Fortunately, walking inside our neighborhood was allowed. Despite the initial fears that transmission of COVID-19 is airborne, I tried to walk at least three times a week in our village. It was a strange route for me since I never really had any intent to walk around our small neighborhood. This explains why I had no idea how other parts of our village looks like. Now, I can describe the different streets and the houses in the area. I also had the chance to meet from a distance some of my neighbors. What used to be an unfamiliar site is gradually becoming familiar. It is as if I am walking away from being a stranger in our little community. I am almost certain that our neighbors were also surprised to see me walking at times in streets near their vicinity. Perhaps they were wondering if I am new to the village, and I would like to apologize to them for reminding them of what it means to be with strangers and strangeness. But in recalling Nietzsche's reflection in *On the Genealogy of Morality*,³ I am reminded that

³ Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2006. *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

we are naturally strangers to ourselves. This means that to be estranged from one's self is almost normative.⁴ This is in keeping with the thought that mastering the self or a place is nearly an impossible and unsound task. What should we try to do with this implicit stranger in us? This is a question which the everyday life in a community quarantine has somehow taught us to consider as we find our old values challenged or tested by the newness and complexity of our current situation.

The other thing that I became concerned about was my dislike for gadgets and internet connection outside my work station. After working in school, for instance, I leave the place thinking that I am now done at least for the day with my academic and administrative responsibilities. For the past years, I think I have successfully demarcated the line between home and work. The mutual exclusion, however, needs to change now because of the community quarantine. During the community lockdown, my struggles with work began. I had my first experience with a video call via Facebook for a meeting with the Department. I also had to contend with the flickering signal while having a zoom meeting with the Dean of our College. Next week, I fear that my participation in the zoom meeting with the administrators in the University might be embarrassing. In trying to keep in touch with friends, my friend even posted a photo on Facebook where a black space with the word "connecting video" stood for my participation in our *kumustahan*. These are perhaps indicative of my confusion and lack of preparation in conflating work-related activities with personal space.

Despite such difficulties, I remain privileged to have these options for technology-aided communication. When staying

⁴ Hanauer, Tom R. "Strangers to Ourselves: Self-Knowledge in Nietzsche's Genealogy." *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, vol. 50 no. 2, 2019, p. 250-271. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/740138.

outside one's home has become risky, technology has asserted itself as the alternative space through which the world can still revolve. But will technology, as Heidegger discussed in *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*⁵ still dictate the way we frame ourselves and the world? In raising such a question, we may have realized the double-edged character of technology. It can either connect individuals who have access to technological resources, or disconnect those who do not have access to these technological platforms. Using Collingwood's principle of concrete affirmation and negation,⁶ technology affirms those who have the option, and negates those who do not have the economic means. This is why the affirmation of the proposed on-line teaching platform will only negate those who do not have access. When imagined, the on-line world posits the existence of a world that has gone off-line, sidelined or marginalized by the privileged means and language of communication. The contrast between the on-line and off-line worlds seems to have become characteristic of the households, communities, and institutions in this era of the pandemic. Paradoxically, technology links people but also divides the classes amongst peoples. In silence, a big part of the population of students may be forced to postpone their studies, waiting that the face to face classrooms would soon be safe and permissible.

Every afternoon, death and dying is another reality that we are confronted with. With each news update from the Department of Health (DOH), the number of recoveries is always presented against the number of deaths. As deaths persist, the cumulative number reminds us that it could have been any one of us. These deaths also mean difficulty for the families left

⁵ Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.

⁶ Collingwood, Robin George. 1933. *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. London: Oxford University Press.

behind as they grapple with the loss and the social stigma. The entire family would need to undergo household quarantine for 14 days just to ensure that they are COVID free. The reality of cremation is another hurdle as the practice is not yet culturally acceptable for many. This requirement seems to stand for another form of dying as the person's dead body is churned to ensure that it can no longer infect another person. On top of these worries, dying alone with no contact with the members of the family seems to be the most tragic part of dying for COVID-19 patients. Such a possibility has made us reflect on how tragic such realities could be. When dying is seen as the last human potential according to Heidegger in *Being and Time*, will death due to this virus be considered a fulfillment of death and dying as a human capacity?⁷

With dying, I also asked myself if I am ready to let go and die if I get infected and succumb due to complications. For this thought, I remember explaining in class that only a handful will be remembered while the rest of us will be reduced to oblivion. Each time I say such a line, I always tell my students that we should not worry that much because the term oblivion can be seen in a different light. Instead of seeing it in terms of nothingness, the word can be construed as a place of compassion. It is a safe and assuring kind of oblivion. I am not sure if my students agree with me, but I do hope that such points may come in handy when dealing with our finitude. This way of framing oblivion or of being forgotten can somehow be traced back to one of Einstein's enduring questions: Is the universe a friendly place? Many masters and teachers of Buddhism have picked up such a question as a springboard for their discussions. When framed from the language of care and love, oblivion is no longer construed as the anti-thesis of being remembered. It is an

⁷ Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

ally and may even be recognized as another face to what remembering and forgetting could mean and reveal.

The spiritual reinterpretation of oblivion, however, also needs to converse with its materialist interpretation. Death and dying as an experience of the everyday life also stand for the abandoned, deprived, and oppressed sectors in the society. As COVID-19 derailed economic activities, people are either furloughed or laid-off. In both cases, the person loses an economic resource which is usually tied up to the future of a household. Oblivion, in this case, regains its negative gaze as these families are thrown in the dark. With less and lesser capacities to pay monthly bills, the situation looks bleaker as the economic activities continue to shrink. The everyday life in this context is characterized by hunger, anxiety, and depression. This is where families become most vulnerable to illness, illegal arrangements, and violence. This is a scenario that poor families contend with. Unfortunately, this is also a time when the economically well-off families showcase their privileges. With contrasting contexts, the divide between classes is further revealed and sharpened. Will there be anything new in the relation between social classes in the so-called new normal?

Mindfulness of Existential Vulnerabilities

The glimpse of the everyday life in the time of COVID-19 has disposed us to see ourselves from a different light. When tragedy is written all over the narratives of this pandemic, the self is exposed, and its vulnerabilities become visible. These aspects are specifically revealed when we find ourselves entangled with finitude and its absurdities, when our susceptibilities are magnified, and when ignorance casts doubt to our capacity for reason. What does it mean to be a self in a pandemic? What is the meaning of life given our new context?

What do such questions mean concerning our nature as human beings? These are queries which this pandemic has made us consider that also challenge us to make an introspective turn as we live with a contagious virus.

Upon reflection, these vulnerabilities may revolve around three interrelated existential dispositions: (1) The seeming absurdity of human existence, (2) How certainties rest on uncertainties, and (3) In grappling with an unknown, reason finds itself to be at the perpetual scrutiny of doubt. These existential realities can be partly at the heart of the anxiety that we feel and are enduring in this public health crisis. But amidst such conditions, there might be an opening which we can take advantage of in challenging ourselves to reflect on the meaning of existential vulnerabilities in our lives as individuals and communities. For this way of thinking to systematically proceed, this query can be of assistance: As our vulnerability and seeming defeat are at times felt, will the self eventually become aware of its strengths?

The proposal for this reflective exercise with the query zeros in on the possibility of cultivating strength around a philosophic disposition towards existential vulnerabilities. To explore this possibility, reference shall be made to a line that has evolved and can be traced back to so many authors/figures: "*A philosopher is a blind person in a dark room looking for a black cat that is not there.*" In this section, an interpretation of such a statement is presented to help frame our exploration of the characteristics and meaning of existential vulnerabilities in a pandemic setting.

The analogy between a philosopher and a blind person can be interpreted in different ways. In this paper, our interpretation begins with a closer look at the way a blind person walks as he/she uses a cane or a stick to navigate streets, corners, areas, for instance, in an urban setting. The streets and

lanes in the urban jungle as we know it keeps on changing. An urban dweller may at times get confused in finding certain geographic/social markers as the city keeps on expanding. How does a blind person navigate his/her way through the maze which a city offers? The cane proves its role as it allows the blind person to check if there is an obstruction, a person, or if the next part of the street remains paved. This form of checking is careful, tedious, and is always coupled with gradual thinking/assertion. When symbolically appropriated, however, the meaning of the cane can be deepened as it can be taken to mean as an extension of one's careful awareness of what it takes to make one step and its connection to the other steps when one is moving, thinking, reasoning, or speculating. Analogically, walking with a cane can refer to being careful while diligently thinking and doing at every step of the way. But what does this position mean when philosophy considered?

In philosophy, careful walking or thinking means having this disposition to be aware of one's presuppositions or assumptions. When a blind person, for instance, leaves a room after working there for eight hours, he/she finds it necessary to use the cane or stick to check if his/her assumptions on the room's arrangement will still be the same. The blind person, in this regard, cannot simply decide to presuppose that the set-up in the room would remain unchanged. The blind person recognizes that he/she cannot simply build on pre-conceived assumptions. Each presupposition has to be thought of, assessed, and at times tested. It is this habit which makes the blind person's actions symbolic and philosophical since he/she is mindful of at least two assumptions: the way a space is arranged, and the possibility that the arrangement is not the same as previously experienced. Increasing one's grasp or hold of assumptions is a key interest in philosophy which the blind person symbolically represents. Interestingly, it is the blind

person who serves as our model in leading the way to metaphysical reflection and careful understanding.

With the pandemic, the way we walk around in an unfamiliar surrounding due to COVID-19 analogically shares similarities to the way a blind person walks with his/her cane or stick. The unfamiliarity of the situation forces us to be mindful of our steps, recalibrate our habits, even interrogate the reasons why there is a need to walk outside, and logically imagine how our choices can impact the well-being of others. It is this relationship with the known and the unknown that brings us to this precarious situation and it forces us to be mindful of our assumptions concerning life, work, knowledge, and existence. This is where the introspective turn asserts its force as we try to come to terms with the new normal. As we slip into a new period, we are called to walk with care with our masks while maintaining physical and social distancing. We are invited to learn from the blind person, who keeps a close and critical connection to his/her assumptions with the way the world is arranged. Philosophically viewed, living a life with a lack – in this case, the lack of certainty that we will be spared from the virus each time we walk outside of our homes, teaches us to make the most of our available faculties or capacities. Like the blind person, the lack of a functional physical vision has allowed him/her to magnify the reach of the sense of touch, hearing, smell, and taste. These senses are also coupled with the faculty of imagination. This is one way of re-strategizing the faculties of knowing when the unknown now impinges itself to the ways of the world.

The analogy between philosophy and the blind person also helps us to look into the meaning of existential vulnerability in the face of the unknown. In the statement, this alludes to the cat which is sought but is not there in the darkroom. What does the cat symbolize? In the race to find a vaccine or a cure to

COVID-19, we would not want to think that such a race will just end in futility. Thinking that there might be a one-stop or complete solution to get rid of the virus once and for all seems to be the perfect solution. Will such a day arrive? Philosophically treated, the idea of a perfect solution is comparable to lifting the blind eye from a blind person. This means lifting away the presence of lack in our day to day existence may mean becoming more blind or blinded to the kind of world that is imagined as we allow ourselves to build an imagined society around the notion of a vaccine to COVID-19 that is effective enough to put a stop to the existential discomfort that we are all facing and trying to deal with. Is the idea of a perfect solution just another face of our excuse in avoiding the lessons and insights as we brace the unknown?

Philosophically interpreted, the cat is not there since it has been familiarly framed as the answer to our struggles and difficulties. The cat with a philosophical lens, for it to make sense, has to be seen not as an answer but within the purview of a query. When framed in this manner, the philosophic gesture of searching like a blind person for a cat in a dark room which is not there makes sense as it stands for the effort of the mind to get hold of or grasp a query. This means that philosophy's answer to its question is its effort to understand what the question could mean. This is how we can interpret the philosophic gesture of the introspective turn guided by the tradition of the logic of question and answer as espoused in R.G. Collingwood's *An Autobiography*.⁸ Hence, in thinking of the cat and the vaccine, these questions are in order: What does it mean to think of the vaccine or cure as a question, and not as a set of answers to the predicament that we are in? Can this question situate a philosophic home for the interface between knowing

⁸ Collingwood, Robin George. 1993. *An Autobiography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

and not knowing, between the familiar and unfamiliar, between presence and absence, and in Russell's words, between the self and the not-self⁹ in this time of the disruptive pandemic?

The third existential vulnerability has to do with the seeming absurdity of human existence when facing or dealing with human finitude. This may have been felt after seeing how we have painfully reclaimed our future by seeing our plans gradually drift away. In the pre-COVID days, society has conditioned us to plan, and to make the most of every opportunity to build careers. This is reflected in attempts to improve our position or rank as if we were in a race. Now that the world is shifting and is immersed in complex uncertainties, the present demands a reclassification of priorities. At times one could ask, what was the purpose of it all? This question seems to suggest that the world is also ready to forget your accomplishments that may not be needed for the time being. We all somehow find ourselves back to the drawing board of our existence. How will I survive in these times? Will my skills afford me food on the table? Can I still retool, adapt, and be useful to society in the time of a pandemic? These queries bring us to a dialogue with the seeming absurdity of life, and the finite nature of our engagements. A quick look at establishments, some business firms are already folding up, the charm of certain buildings are starting to fade, and the once busy cities are changing into empty and strange towns. What remains of us when most of our engagements are stripped away? What remains of the self when the skills that it tried to study, develop, and sharpen are potentially no longer relevant?

The seeming absurdity of life is also echoed in the analogy in the statement that we are looking into between a philosopher and a blind person. Why would one search for

⁹ Russell, Bertrand. 1997. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

something which it knows that it cannot be found? This is perhaps an immediate question which one can think of after reading the statement. With the global pandemic, absurd situations, however, also abound. The virus, for instance, is telling us that its absurdity lies in its minuscule size but having the capacity to put countries on a lockdown. It is not visible to the eyes yet it keeps on gazing at us reconfiguring and disciplining the way we now behave. It also reveals the paradoxical commitments of human beings when we keep on making mountains of accomplishments which can be easily wiped out, or when we devote time and energy to gain confidence about the present and the future which can easily change when the current scenario is altered, or when the human race attempts to dominate, exude its mastery over nature only to be humbled at an instance by his/her ignorance. Like the philosopher in the analogy, absurdity lies in not knowing that we cannot fully have the answers that can pacify all forms of curiosity. This also explains why when we forget such points, our efforts may become comedic, narrow, and conceited. Is the world before COVID-19 narrow and conceited? The symbol of the black cat in the darkroom which is not there may have an insight which we can reflect upon at this time of global pandemic – that we may need to reconsider the limits of our engagements and actions so another pandemic may be avoided in the nearest future.

Concluding Insights

The changing circumstances and conditions in the time of global pandemic can be taken to mean as a standing invitation for individuals and communities to engage in self-reflection. At the minimum, this call for an introspective turn means revisiting the Socratic dictum, “Know Thyself”, staying connected with the everyday experiences, and becoming mindful of our existential

vulnerabilities. In this paper, this invitation to immerse in the introspective turn can take a full swing if we think of ourselves as questions, and when we aspire to become inquirers – as persons who have decided to carefully reflect on life as a query. To think of life as an inquiry and to become an inquirer are two basic goals which the introspective turn hopes to uphold. In this age of global pandemic, the introspective route presents itself as an opportunity to reassess the way we reflect and question our beliefs, practices, and ideologies. What does it mean to consider humanity, the human being as a specific inquiry? What kind of community can we imagine if everyone strives to become inquirers? Following the introspective turn, our present condition may hopefully inspire and challenge us to further raise these queries: What do we want as individuals and communities? What kinds of life do we want to live? Are our endeavors and commitments before the COVID-19 phase worth continuing? When we see ourselves as questions, and as inquirers such perspective may allow us to start anew, build a sense of courage to sincerely face our existential presence and facticity, and gradually acknowledge our participation in the great existential reset.

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