

Insight

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From *Philosophy of Man: Selected Readings*, ed. Manuel B. Dy, Jr. (Quezon City, Phils.: Katha Publishing Co., Inc., 2012), pp. 2-5.

We shall not begin with a definition of philosophy. The purpose of this course is not to teach you what philosophy is but to try to give you a chance to philosophize. Like all activities, philosophizing is something which is easier to do than to define. After you have begun to engage in this activity, you might want to try to define it yourself.

[2] Even at this early stage it is probably safe to say that most of you associate philosophy with thinking. A crucial element in thinking is insight. Insight is a kind of seeing with the mind. A good example is seeing the point of a joke. A friend gives a joke. You see the point and you laugh. Somebody else does not see and is bewildered. He might accuse you of pretending to see a point that is not there. But you know quite definitely that there was a point, that you saw it, that you did not feel yourself into thinking it was there. You are glad to be alive and able to see the point. At the same time you realize how hard it is to convey all this to one who has missed the point.

[3] Two things should be considered with regard to an insight:

1. the insight itself.
2. what I do with the insight.

Item number 2 is vague. It will become clear as we go along.

[4] What can I do with my insight into a joke? I can analyze it. If I am merely enjoying the joke, analysis can kill my enjoyment. But if I aim to deliver the joke to others, analysis can deepen and clarify my original insight and to help towards a more effective delivery.

[5] Take this example:

Knock, knock.
Who's there?
Mary Rose.
Mary Rose who?
Me rellos ka ba? Anong oras?

[6] Upon analysis I discover that the point of the joke is this: "Mary Rose" and "*me rellos*" sound very different, yet they are made to sound alike. To bring this non-existing

aliqueness into existence, I must mispronounce “*me rellos*” and say “*me reros*.” But this introduces a new difficulty. Will the listener know that “*me reros*” stands for “*me rellos*?” To make sure he does, I follow it up with “*Anong oras?*” Finally, to make the point of the joke stand out more sharply, I try to surround the delivery with an atmosphere of atrocious nonchalance.

[7] Take another example. Juan is standing beside the coffin of his grandfather who has just died at the age of ninety-five. As far as Juan can remember the old man was always weak and already seventy-seven when Juan was born. Juan comes home from the funeral and his mother hands him his grandfather’s memoirs. There Juan sees his grandfather as he was during the revolution: young and full of vigor and high spirits. Then he hears from old maiden aunts who heard from their old maiden aunts that in his youth his grandfather used to be dashing and quite popular with the ladies. Juan gradually begins to realize: My grandfather as a young man was exactly like me. For Juan likes to think of himself as full of high spirits, dashing, and quite popular with the ladies. Then Juan begins to think more deeply. He is full of high spirits now, but high spirits are not inexhaustible. It will be exhausted. It will be his turn to become old and shriveled and to be contemplated in the coffin by his grandson. Juan thinks to himself: This is the way it is with the generations of men. They start life full of vigor and high spirits then wither away and die. But not before they have left behind sons who also begin full of vigor and high spirits then wither away and die, after they have given life to their own sons. Juan has an insight into the rhythm of rise and fall in the life of the generations of men.

[8] What can Juan do with this insight? He can crystallize it into a metaphor. Homer had the same insight centuries ago and he crystallized it in the same image of leaves. Here are two versions of the passage from the sixth book of the *Iliad*.

High-hearted son of Tydeus, why
ask of my generation?
As in the generation of leaves, so
is that of humanity.
The wind scatters the leaves
on the ground, but the live timber
Burgeons with leaves again in
the season of spring returning.
So one generation of men will
grow while another dies.

As the generations of leaves, so
the generations of men.
For the wind pours the leaves out
on the ground,
But the wood blooms and grows and
begets in the season of spring.
So too the generations of men:
now they bloom,
Now they pass away.

[9] The metaphor sharpens the insight and fixes it in the mind. Also, one portion of reality casts light on another. By contemplating the fall and the return of leaves, we are able to understand not only the nature of trees but also the rising and falling rhythm of the generations of men.

[10] Take the third example: the insight into the meaning of the number four. The insight is so clear that it seems nothing can be done with it. However, just to push a point, one can say that the meaning of four can be analyzed into two and two or into one and one and one and one. And we can see that these analyses do make somewhat clearer the already clear insight into the meaning of four. But let us try another approach; let us ask: how did we gain this insight into the meaning of the number four? The usual answer is: by counting. You can count four cars, for instance. Say you have here a Toyopet, a Mercedes Benz, an Impala, a Volkswagen. Note that you have to look at them in a special way if you want to count until four. You must look on them as cars. If you look on them from the Toyopet viewpoint, you can count only one. Abstraction is involved here. We abstract when we concentrate on one aspect of a thing while prescinding from its other aspects. We prescind when we neither affirm nor deny, we merely disregard. Thus, if I have two carabaos and two dogs, I can count until four only if I consider them as animals and prescind from the fact that two are carabaos and two dogs. But what is the content of the insight into the number four? It is not four cars, not four animals, but simply four. Here we come across a second abstraction; we must not only abstract from certain aspects of the things we count, but in the end we have to abstract from the things themselves. The simple insight into the meaning of four is seen to involve a rather complicated preparation involving at least two abstractions.

[11] Abstraction is one of the tools often used in the analysis of insights. An abstraction thought is called a concept and analysis by abstraction is called conceptual analysis.

[12] We can return to Juan's insight into the rise and fall of generations and analyze it conceptually. The moment we begin the analysis we see that there are many ways of doing it. One way would be: The generations of men begin life with a fund of energy and high spirits which seems inexhaustible. But sooner or later the fund exhausts itself. Yet in the very process of self-exhaustion, it begets another generation equipped with the same kind of seemingly inexhaustible energy and high spirits.

[13] This last example shows one of the dangers of conceptual analysis: it can desiccate an insight. The throbbing tumultuous generations of men become an abstract fund of energy and high spirits. That is why it is necessary after conceptual analysis, to return to the concrete fullness of the original insight. When this return to the concrete is not made, conceptual analysis fossilizes insight.

[14] From this brief survey of insight, we have gained some insight into the nature of insight. It is a kind of seeing, not with our eyes (though our eyes often play an important role in it) but with the powers of our minds, we "do something" with it. We have seen two techniques for doing something with an insight: conceptual analysis and metaphor. But other techniques can be used. There is for instance the important technique of weaving a myth to employ our insight.

[15] There is a second point to note in our survey of insight. The fact that there are many ways of doing something with an insight shows that certain insights are so rich that they cannot be exhausted by our efforts to clarify them. We may explore them in many ways and along different levels, but some superabundance of the original insight always remains beyond the reach of our techniques. In fact one of the effects of "doing something" with this kind of insight is to make us more keenly aware of the superabundance. Hence, this kind puts us into ignorance and darkness.

[16] A third point. Note that insight permeates the process of doing something with an insight. We need insight to see that the contemplation of the fall and return of leaves does lead to deeper understanding of the death and birth of generations. We need insight to see whether a given conceptual analysis of a given insight does probe deeply into it instead of merely classifying its superficial aspects.

[17] Fourth and final point. Why do certain insights resist all efforts to explore them completely? Because these insights bring us into the very heart of reality and reality is superabundantly rich. The richness of these insights then is the richness of reality itself. And the stance of the human being facing reality has always to be a tension between a sense of knowledge and sense of ignorance. [END.]