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## Von Hildebrand: What is Philosophy?

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chronological sequence. But N.V.M. Gonzalez chose to begin the book not with "The Whispering Woman" but with "The Bread of Salt." Perhaps the departure from the chronological order is designed to call attention to the contrast between the first and the last story in the collection, between popcorn and *pan de sal*.

His Grandfather had spent the last thirty years of his life as an overseer in a coconut plantation. But the boy in "The Bread of Salt" feels that better things are in store for him. He is only fourteen but his skill on the violin has already earned him a spot in a professional band. He sees how fitting it is that he should no longer buy the *pan de sal* for the family's breakfast table. Indeed, he feels he should not be asked to run errands anymore. He hopes to woo and win the niece of his Grandfather's employer. At night he dreams of success, wealth, fame. But at an *asalto* for the girl's aunts, the boy becomes aware that he is out of his depths and he is able to reconcile himself to his condition. On the way home after the party, the boy stops at the bakery to buy *pan de sal*.

Associate Professor Leynes in "The Popcorn Man" is as empty, as unsubstantial as the popcorn he feeds on. He is dissatisfied with the progress of education in the American military base where he is teaching. But more than once, he gives himself a pat on the back for staying in spite of the indifference of his superiors, the insipidity of his colleagues and the impertinence of his students. One major consolation is that in the camp, popcorn and coffee come free. It is clear that Leynes has cause for discontent. But he is willing to compromise. What may have been righteous indignation dissolves into an embarrassing self-pity. And in the end, he begins to wall himself in with illusions he may yet come to believe.

We can see from the evidence of *The Bamboo Dancers* and the short stories in *Look, Stranger, On This Island Now* that one main motif dominates N.V.M. Gonzalez's fiction of the last seven or eight years: the illusion-reality motif. It seems safe to say that self-knowledge is one value N.V.M. Gonzalez dearly cherishes and that one problem he sees in contemporary society is the inability and sometimes the refusal of so many people to come to terms with reality.

EDILBERTO DE JESUS, JR.

## THE PROBLEM OF PHILOSOPHY

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY? By Dietrich von Hildebrand. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1960. viii, 242 pp.

*What is Philosophy?* establishes beyond doubt von Hildebrand's status as a philosopher. Displaying the clearness and agility of a penetrating mind, he may be listened to in the same way Plato and Descartes were. For as it is only reasonable to expect solely a carpenter to explain and illustrate carpentry well, similarly only a philosopher can talk of philosophy adequately and with excellence. And von Hildebrand proves this only too well. Not only is he capable of posing the question-title of his book, he also shows he can answer it fully.

The approach taken seems to be pedagogical, from-teacher-to-pupil, and often the book sounds like a lecture or a thesis. Yet underneath, we can always discern the philosopher in the author, his mind clicking like a clock, grip to grip with the problem at hand. Perhaps the place where he reaches philosophical heights is his discussion of the a priori, in which he expounds the proper object of philosophy. At times, however, von Hildebrand verges on some sort of punctilious legalism, laying down strict rules whereby one can be said to be philosophizing, but this is never the total impression the reader gets. Besides, this, in a way, becomes understandable when we consider the author's introductory remarks by which he places himself squarely against positivistic and relativistic philosophies that seek to reduce philosophy into science. A reactionary more often than not hastens to the opposite extreme. Perhaps in his enthusiasm to mark a clear-cut and unconfused division between philosophy and science, von Hildebrand did just that.

In another sense, however, von Hildebrand's drive against positivistic and relativistic philosophies gives him his first laurel. The influence of August Comte has not disappeared totally yet. And in an age where the fast-appearing and tangible wonders of science are leaving man in awe, the tendency for science to overrule philosophy becomes doubly strong. Thus von Hildebrand's insistence on the difference between the two branches of study is both necessary and timely. The erroneous mentality, to be sure, must be corrected and it is to von Hildebrand's tribute that he has taken steps to do so. That is the reason behind the book's publication and in two-hundred pages, he hammers out first, what philosophy is not, and then, what philosophy is.

The first few chapters discuss knowledge—knowledge in general, its basic forms, the nature of philosophical knowledge in contrast to naive and theoretical prescientific ones. What catches our eye here is the stress on knowledge as a spiritual possession and on the subject as a conscious being. Perhaps von Hildebrand does not pursue this line of thought to the full but from indications, he may well be aligned with the "subjective" thinkers like Johann or even de Finance. Here too is pointed out the need of penetrating into the object which

is of the highest importance in philosophy. Superficialities merit no second glance in metaphysics and perish with their authors; the true philosopher digs deeper always and his greatness is measured by how many more inches he has successfully drilled into the well of reality.

In considering the nature of philosophical knowledge, von Hildebrand furnishes us norms to recognize it by, and he makes this even clearer by contrasting it with other types so as to allow for distinctions. But his criteria—thematicity, critical attitude and systematization—seem to be external and here von Hildebrand's legalism makes its presence felt. Philosophical knowledge is critical; what is uncritical is therefore unphilosophical and so on. We are also bothered by the unpleasant query whether or not von Hildebrand is imposing upon philosophy a priori norms much like what T. S. Eliot did as regards drama. Granting this, then, von Hildebrand will appear to be running for the position (they call it "literary dictatorship") that Pope held during the age of Neo-Classicism; only this time the "dictatorship" will dictate not to literature but to philosophy.

Going over to von Hildebrand's side, perhaps he is justified. That the norms seem to be merely external is true but it is equally true that they are intrinsic to philosophical knowledge, and not to fulfill these norms, whether we like it or not, simply is not to be philosophical. For instance, we can put down in writing that a tree to be a tree must have roots, a trunk and leaves, otherwise it is not a tree. Indeed these will appear as external criteria but they are not absolutely external. What von Hildebrand does is describe the nature of philosophical knowledge unfortunately in enumeration form. Although he sounds legalistic, in reality, he is not, for he is just pointing out the right things. In saying red is red and what is not red is not red, he is merely being consistent. Then too, von Hildebrand, we can say, never usurps dictatorial powers in philosophy for he is not dictating, he is merely stating the truth.

The knottiest part of the book comes in the chapters regarding the object of philosophical knowledge. The question, to be sure, has plagued thinkers through the centuries, stirring up the most interesting and oftentimes bitter controversies. Indeed what do I know? Philosophically speaking, von Hildebrand answers with the a priori and we immediately recall Kant, the one who made the greatest fuss about the a priori and its priority in metaphysics. At first glance, the Kantian a priori and that of von Hildebrand's may appear the same for both bear the same traits—strict necessity, apodictic certainty and intelligibility. But von Hildebrand includes one thing Kant most emphatically left out—experience. To von Hildebrand, experience is needed and what he opposes is "blunt observation". Kant's distinction between the a priori and the aposteriori is that the former,

of which the forms and categories are examples, always stands before experience. However, von Hildebrand strikes a note reminiscent of Kant and even Hume. For he avers that an essence may be necessarily so in a way that even without experience one can grasp it. For instance, given the essence of orange, red and yellow, even before seeing orange, one can conclude that it stands between red and yellow. It is in reading such passages that one finds it extremely hard to classify von Hildebrand. Is he an essentialist or an existentialist? For he also advances the need for experience and the necessity of the existence of the object before any study of it is possible, especially if a material being is in question. But several pages down, he speaks of "ideal existents", like justice, which are too true to require real existence. Later, he asks us, in terms that smack of existential flavor, to delve into reality. We cannot resolve the question here on the basis of this book alone, but it certainly provides food for thought.

Like most good philosophers, von Hildebrand presses hard on the value of insight as a most important tool of the would-be philosopher. There is no substitute for this. Some things are never deduced, only pointed out and, in the last analysis, all knowledge consists in each man seeing for himself. Von Hildebrand uses insight himself, and one deep insight of his concerns philosophy's meaning to man. Here also he finds some practical use for the subject. Philosophy, he says, is the "preamble to faith". Indeed this is true. No one can practice his faith strongly, persevere in it if that faith has no solid foundation. And philosophy gives this basis through the intellectual grasp of truth. That is why von Hildebrand philosophizes, and how he must love it.

In conclusion, after reading the book and reflecting on it, there is one last thing we have to say about von Hildebrand—indeed he must love Wisdom so. And his love seems to be contagious, for we leave his book feeling refreshed. It is always a refreshing experience to encounter "man-thinking".

JOSE MARIO BUÑAG

## THE FILIPINA IN PERSPECTIVE

WOMAN ENOUGH AND OTHER ESSAYS. By Carmen Guerrero Nakpil. Quezon City: Vibal Publishing Company, 1963. vii, 149 pp.

This collection of essays was not originally intended to form one unit; most of the pieces, if not all, were written under pressure of newspaper