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Re-conceiving Liberal Education: The Philosophical Route Less Taken in the Confused and Confusing Contemporary Society

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ABSTRACT

This essay presents a critical philosophical examination of contemporary educational realities within the South-east Asian context, particularly focusing on the Philippines and broader ASEAN region. Employing Presuppositional Epistemology—the principle that knowledge emerges from foundational commitments and principles—this study argues that education is never theologically or morally neutral, necessitating rigorous philosophical inquiry into educational practice. The paper addresses the pervasive learning crisis evidenced by recent data showing that nine out of ten Filipino children aged ten cannot read simple texts, alongside declining enrollment rates across the region. Through systematic metaphysical analysis of learners, educators, and institutional frameworks, this treatise challenges prevailing educational paradigms that prioritize economic utility over human flourishing. The methodology integrates classical philosophical inquiry with contemporary educational criticism, examining how ignorance—conceptualized as a noetic effect of human depravity—manifests in systemic educational failures across ASEAN nations. The study proposes a reconceptualized philosophy of education that synthesizes Essentialist rigor, Perennialist wisdom, Existentialist authenticity, and Critical Pedagogical liberation, offering a holistic response to the educational crises plaguing Southeast Asian societies. This

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philosophical framework contends that authentic education must confront competing worldviews while maintaining an unwavering commitment to truth, wisdom, and human dignity in an increasingly fragmented global landscape.

Keywords: Philosophical Theology of Education, Presuppositional Epistemology; Truth-Centered Liberal Education, ASEAN Education Crisis; Critical Educational Philosophy; UN-SDG 4

1. Introduction

As I usually state elsewhere, I hold up to what is rather called Presuppositional Epistemology of contingent learning as a design, *i.e.*, created, not constructed, reality in human (inter-)subjectivity. I would even dare say that “[a]rriving at knowledge and owning it is a continuously baffling route for some. But understanding that there are certain preconditions that exist makes it much easier for the learner to know that knowledge is not only possible, but that ascertaining it is tenable on certain conditions”^[1]. The contemporary educational landscape in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines and broader ASEAN region, presents a compelling case study for examining the philosophical foundations of educational practice. Recent reports indicate that the Philippines faces an unprecedented learning crisis, with 9 out of 10 children aged 10 years old unable to read simple texts even before the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing educational inequities^[2]. This statistical reality, when viewed through the lens of Presuppositional Epistemology, reveals deeper ontological and epistemological questions about the nature of learning, ignorance, and human flourishing.

The decline in educational outcomes across the region cannot be divorced from broader philosophical questions about the purpose and methodology of education itself. The Department of Education (DepEd) noted a decline in registration for the 2023–2024 academic year, marking the end of a two-year growth trend^[3], while issues like the climate crisis, societal inequality, and digital polarisation continue to shape educational futures across ASEAN nations^[4].

Notwithstanding the call for defining and forwarding an “informed” philosophy of education (for all its worth or whatever it may mean to some), I shall be articulating the embedded notions in that fancy phrase, “Presuppositional Epistemology”. In the process of unveiling, I shall be crafting this material in a Socratic Method, where there are fundamental, *i.e.*, presuppositional, questions that I take to be philosophical in nature and hence the answers will be

philosophical as well. In the end, I will thus reel everything together in the hope of asserting a coherent case as to what I hold to be the traditional ancestor of this idea I claim to be upholding, hence affecting my epistemology, pedagogy, and andragogy.

2. Methods

Philosophical Foundation and Research Design

This study employs a comprehensive critical philosophical inquiry approach to examine the nature of education within contemporary Southeast Asian society through the lens of Presuppositional Epistemology. The research methodology is grounded in analytic philosophy, incorporating elements of hermeneutical analysis, phenomenological investigation, and dialectical reasoning to develop a cohesive philosophical framework for education that addresses the specific challenges facing the Philippine and ASEAN educational landscape. The methodological framework operates from what Van Til^[5] termed the “impossibility of the contrary”—recognizing that all epistemological systems, including educational philosophies, necessarily presuppose certain foundational commitments about the nature of reality, knowledge, and human purpose. This approach acknowledges that neutrality in educational philosophy is both impossible and undesirable, as every pedagogical decision reflects underlying metaphysical and theological commitments^[6].

I thus assert here that unless the truth of the Judæo-Christian worldview—centered on the triune God revealed in Scripture—is presupposed, no knowledge, logic, or intelligible experience is possible; thus, any worldview that denies Christianity collapses into irrationality or self-contradiction. This idea is foundational both philosophically and theologically: it undergirds presuppositional modes of thinking and reasoning by showing that all noetic exercise, morality, and meaning “borrow capital” from the Christian faith, and the only coherent basis for proof or understanding is found in Christ as the source of all wisdom and knowledge. There-

fore, Van Til's approach claims that Christianity is not just one rational or probable system among many, but the exclusive precondition for the possibility of rational thought or argument itself^[7].

Conceptual Design and Philosophical Approach

The study begins with the articulation of foundational presuppositions about human nature, knowledge acquisition, and the ultimate purpose of education, particularly as these relate to the documented challenges in Philippine and ASEAN educational systems. These presuppositions serve as the analytical framework through which contemporary educational theories and practices are evaluated against the backdrop of regional educational failures and declining academic performance indicators.

The methodology consciously operates from a Christian philosophical-theological standpoint, following the tradition established by thinkers such as Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and contemporary reformed epistemologists like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. This approach acknowledges that all epistemological frameworks, including secular educational theories, are derived from underlying religious or quasi-religious commitments and principles^[8].

Enhanced Analytical Framework

The analytical framework consists of five interconnected components that together provide a comprehensive philosophical examination of educational practice:

1. Presuppositional Analysis: This component examines the foundational assumptions that undergird various educational philosophies operating within Southeast Asian contexts, with particular attention to theological presuppositions about human nature and the noetic effects of depravity. Special consideration is given to how these presuppositions manifest in the documented learning crisis across the region, where systemic educational failures reflect deeper anthropological and epistemological misconceptions.

2. Phenomenological Inquiry: Following the methodological insights of Husserl^[9] and Heidegger^[10], this component investigates the lived experience of educational agents within the specific cultural and socio-economic contexts of Southeast Asia. This includes examining how teachers, students, and educational administrators experience the tension between global educational paradigms and local cultural values, particularly in post-colonial societies like the Philip-

pines where educational systems reflect complex historical legacies.

3. Dialectical Reasoning: Employing the dialectical method refined by Hegel^[11] and critically appropriated by contemporary Christian philosophers, this component examines the tensions and contradictions within current educational discourse in the ASEAN region. This includes analyzing how competing educational philosophies—from Western progressive education to Confucian educational values to indigenous pedagogical traditions—interact and conflict within contemporary Southeast Asian educational systems.

4. Metaphysical Inquiry: This component investigates the ontological status of educational agents (learners and educators) and institutions (schools and curricula) through critical philosophical reflection, with specific attention to how anthropological assumptions affect educational outcomes. This inquiry becomes particularly relevant when examining the documented challenges in Philippine education, where the average passing rate for teacher qualification exams reflects broader questions about educator preparation and institutional effectiveness^[12].

5. Philosophical Synthesis: This component integrates insights from various educational philosophies—Essentialism, Perennialism, Existentialism, and Critical Pedagogy—to develop a coherent philosophical stance toward liberal education that addresses the specific challenges facing Southeast Asian educational systems in the 21st century.

Contextual Integration and Regional Analysis

The methodology incorporates systematic analysis of contemporary educational challenges specific to the Philippine and ASEAN contexts. This includes examination of policy documents, educational statistics, and reform initiatives from the Department of Education (Philippines), ASEAN Secretariat educational reports, and various national educational agencies across the region. The conceptual design acknowledges the post-colonial educational landscape of Southeast Asia, where educational systems often reflect hybrid influences from indigenous traditions, colonial educational structures, and contemporary global educational trends. This methodological awareness is crucial for understanding how philosophical presuppositions about education manifest differently across various cultural contexts within the region.

Data Sources and Interpretive Approach

The study draws upon multiple categories of sources to ensure comprehensive philosophical analysis:

Primary Philosophical Sources: Classical philosophical texts including works by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and contemporary philosophers such as Adler^[12], Bloom^[13], Bell^[14], and Freire^[15], alongside theological sources including Christian Scriptures and confessional documents that articulate clear anthropological and epistemological positions.

Regional Educational Data

Current statistical reports, policy documents, and educational assessments from Philippine and ASEAN educational authorities, including recent findings about literacy rates, educational access, and systemic challenges facing the region. The interpretation of these sources employs hermeneutical techniques that acknowledge historical context while extracting principles applicable to contemporary educational challenges in Southeast Asia. This hermeneutical approach recognizes that educational philosophies cannot be transplanted wholesale from one cultural context to another without careful consideration of local conditions and presuppositions.

Limitations and Methodological Boundaries

As a philosophical inquiry, this study employs non-empirical data collection methods, relying instead on conceptual analysis, logical argumentation, and critical examination of presuppositions. While this approach allows for deep theoretical exploration of fundamental questions about educational purpose and methodology, it necessarily operates at a level of abstraction that requires further empirical investigation to validate its practical applications in specific educational settings within the Philippine and ASEAN contexts.

The study's focus on Christian philosophical presuppositions, while providing clarity and coherence to the analysis, necessarily limits its direct applicability to educational contexts operating from different philosophical or religious foundations. However, the methodology's emphasis on presuppositional analysis provides tools for understanding how different foundational commitments shape educational theory and practice across diverse cultural contexts. The regional focus on Southeast Asia, while providing specificity and relevance to local educational challenges, may limit

the broader applicability of certain insights to educational contexts in other global regions. However, the philosophical framework developed here offers principles that can be adapted and applied to educational challenges in various cultural and socio-economic contexts.

3. Results: A Synthetic Philosophy of Education for Southeast Asia

Integrating Educational Philosophies

The development of a coherent educational philosophy for the contemporary Southeast Asian context requires careful synthesis of insights from various educational traditions while maintaining philosophical consistency and practical applicability. This synthesis must address the specific challenges facing the region while drawing upon universal principles of human learning and development.

Essentialist Contributions

The Essentialist emphasis on core knowledge and academic rigor provides important correctives to educational approaches that prioritize process over content or that fail to maintain adequate intellectual standards. The current learning crisis across Southeast Asia demonstrates the necessity of ensuring that all learners master fundamental knowledge and skills that provide the foundation for continued learning and civic participation.

However, Essentialist approaches must be tempered by adequate attention to individual differences, cultural contexts, and the broader purposes of human development that extend beyond merely cognitive achievement. The mechanical application of Essentialist principles without consideration of learner motivation, cultural relevance, and ultimate educational purposes can result in educational approaches that are technically proficient but ultimately dehumanizing.

Perennialist Wisdom

The Perennialist emphasis on timeless truth, classical education, and the cultivation of wisdom provides essential resources for addressing the philosophical relativism and cultural confusion that characterizes much contemporary educational discourse. The Great Books tradition offers tested wisdom about perennial human questions and challenges that prove relevant across cultural and historical contexts.

The integration of classical education within South-

east Asian contexts requires careful attention to both universal human themes and particular cultural applications. The recognition that human nature exhibits consistent patterns across time and culture provides justification for engaging with classical sources while maintaining sensitivity to local contexts and contemporary applications.

Existentialist Authenticity

The Existentialist emphasis on individual choice, personal meaning, and authentic engagement addresses important dimensions of human experience that more systematic educational philosophies sometimes neglect. The recognition that education must engage not only intellectual development but also personal identity formation and meaning-making proves particularly relevant in pluralistic societies where learners encounter diverse worldviews and value systems.

However, Existentialist insights must be balanced by recognition of objective truth, moral reality, and communal responsibility that prevent authentic personal development from degenerating into mere subjectivism or narcissistic self-focus. The challenge is to cultivate authentic personal engagement with learning while maintaining commitment to truth and wisdom that transcend individual preference or cultural fashion.

Critical Pedagogical Liberation

The Critical Pedagogical emphasis on social justice, power analysis, and liberation from oppressive structures addresses important dimensions of educational practice that more traditional approaches sometimes ignore. The recognition that education inevitably involves questions of power, privilege, and social responsibility proves particularly relevant in post-colonial societies like those throughout South-east Asia.

Critical Pedagogical insights must be integrated within broader philosophical frameworks that provide an adequate foundation for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power, authentic and inauthentic forms of liberation, and constructive and destructive approaches to social change. Without such philosophical grounding, Critical Pedagogy can become merely another form of ideological indoctrination rather than genuine education.

The Proposed Synthesis: Truth-Centered Liberal Education

The philosophical framework developed here proposes a synthesis that maintains the strengths of each educational philosophy while addressing their limitations through integration within a comprehensive understanding of human nature, knowledge, and purpose grounded in Christian theological anthropology. This Truth-Centered Liberal Education approach emphasizes several key principles that address the specific challenges facing Southeast Asian educational systems while maintaining universal applicability:

Anthropological Realism

Educational practice must be grounded in a realistic understanding of human nature that recognizes both human dignity and human limitation, both potential for flourishing and susceptibility to corruption. This understanding provides the foundation for educational approaches that maintain high expectations while demonstrating genuine compassion, that challenge learners toward excellence while providing appropriate support and structure.

Epistemological Confidence

Educational practice must be grounded in confidence about the possibility of knowledge and the reality of truth, while maintaining humility about human limitations and the need for continued inquiry. This epistemological stance enables educators and learners to pursue truth and wisdom with appropriate confidence while avoiding both dogmatism and skepticism.

Teleological Clarity

Educational practice must be oriented toward a clear understanding of the ultimate purpose and meaning that provides direction for specific educational decisions and priorities. This teleological orientation prevents education from becoming merely functional or pragmatic while ensuring that educational activities serve genuine human flourishing rather than merely institutional or economic interests.

Communal Responsibility

Educational practice must recognize the inherently communal nature of human development and learning, emphasizing the responsibilities of families, communities, and institutions in supporting learner development. This communal emphasis addresses the inappropriate individualism that characterizes much contemporary educational theory while maintaining appropriate recognition of individual dignity and responsibility.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Need for Educative Presupposition: A Philosophical-Theological Commitment in Light of Regional Educational Crises

The Anthropological Foundation Amidst Contemporary Challenges

I hold that human beings bear that inherent, universal value—inalienable, ontological, even properly warranted. By virtue of being “created in *imago Dei*”, people, especially learners, though they may have been demonstrating some centuries-old flashes of brilliance, are not in their—OUR—best possible condition. Why? Because we all live in a “fallen world”. We all are “radically depraved”, that is why, our pursuit of human flourishing THROUGH and WITH education and learning is not (always) as pure or as intended for mutually collective flourishing as it can be.

This theological anthropological foundation becomes particularly relevant when examining the contemporary educational crisis in Southeast Asia. The statistical reality that 9 out of 10 children aged 10 years old were unable to read simple texts even before the COVID-19 pandemic^[4] cannot be adequately explained by merely sociological or economic factors. While these factors are certainly contributory, the depth and persistence of educational failure across the region suggest more fundamental anthropological and epistemological issues at work.

If the Bible is true, and I am convinced it is, then “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23 (CSB))^[16]. And this “falling short”, this “*khata*”, this “*hamartia*”, this “depravity” is so deep, so radical that it not only severed our human nature from its divine source, but that in our current state of needing for “full redemption”, we face, rather suffer what philosophical theologians call as the “noetic effects of sin”^[17]. Learners, as human beings, are inheritors of a sinful nature that badly affect—distort, dim, derail—their learning capacities and potentials.

The Manifestation of Ignorance in Regional Educational Systems

Is it an undeniably empirical manifestation? IGNORANCE. Among others, ignorance is that pervading noetic effect of sin in the human capacity for learning and flourishing. The current state of Philippine education provides compelling evidence of this philosophical claim. Recent data

reveals troubling trends that cannot be adequately addressed through merely technical or administrative solutions.

The challenges facing Philippine education extend beyond simple resource allocation or teacher training issues. Between 2009 and 2023, the average passing rate for teacher qualification examinations has declined significantly^[2], suggesting deeper systemic issues that affect not only student learning but also educator preparation and competency. This decline in educational quality occurs despite increased government spending on education and numerous reform initiatives, pointing to more fundamental philosophical and anthropological misconceptions underlying educational policy and practice.

The problem extends throughout the ASEAN region, where ensuring foundational literacy and numeracy—core indicators of the quality of basic education—remains a pressing challenge across the region. This regional pattern suggests that the challenges facing education in Southeast Asia are not merely local or national issues but reflect broader philosophical and anthropological assumptions that undergird educational systems across the region.

While the full effects can only and ultimately be dealt with by that salvific grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, the role of education is that which paves the way for and points to the ultimate Truth, Knowledge and Wisdom possible for anyone who seeks and are led to seek it, as everyone is actually called to do so with that very endowed faculty.

The Ontological Reality of Ignorance

The problem in society and in the entire human subjectivity? Ignorance is the most formidable opponent of the human subject in this lifetime, next to sin and death. The problem of ignorance, which I claim to be one of the noetic effects of depravity, is not only universal, but it is ontological. Indeed, the human person is capable of change and all that. But the core of the problem always and always remains the same.

This philosophical understanding of ignorance as an ontological reality rather than merely an epistemic deficiency provides crucial insight into the persistent educational challenges facing the Philippines and broader ASEAN region. Contemporary educational reform efforts often assume that ignorance is simply a lack of information or inadequate teaching methods that can be remedied through better curriculum design, increased funding, or improved teacher training.

While these technical improvements are necessary, they fail to address the deeper anthropological reality that shapes human learning and knowledge acquisition.

In fact it's considerably "Plato *etc.*"^[18]. Or if I may extend it far back a bit, "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9 CSB). The old problems might have new skin or be clad with some extra accessory, or masquerade to be something else, but the problem remains the same. This ancient wisdom proves particularly relevant when examining contemporary educational challenges in Southeast Asia.

The Philippines' K-12 reform, implemented to align with international educational standards, illustrates this principle. Despite significant restructuring of the educational system, fundamental learning outcomes have not substantially improved, and in some metrics have declined. The Department of Education (DepEd) noted a decline in registration for the 2023-2024 academic year^[3], suggesting that structural reforms alone cannot address the deeper philosophical and anthropological issues affecting educational effectiveness.

Educational Response to Anthropological Reality

Ignorance invariably creates a chasm between the world as it actually exists and the world as we imagine it should be—or as our communities have constructed it in our collective consciousness. This gap represents one of education's most profound challenges and opportunities. Schools, as society's primary institutions for knowledge transmission and human development, bear the responsibility of bridging this divide. However, this bridging cannot be accomplished merely through conventional experiential learning approaches—field trips that provide brief glimpses of "real world" applications, internship programs that offer temporary immersion in professional environments, or adult mentorship programs that connect students with experienced practitioners. While these approaches have merit and should certainly be part of the educational landscape, they cannot serve as the foundation or starting point for genuine educational transformation.

I firmly believe that education must cultivate learners' capacity to recognize and analyze injustices within society, and that educational institutions should actively promote initiatives aimed at redressing social inequities. This commitment to social justice education represents a crucial dimension of schooling in democratic societies. However, fo-

cus on social justice outcomes, while necessary, addresses symptoms rather than root causes. It represents a response to educational challenges rather than a comprehensive reimagining of education's fundamental purpose and methodology. The contemporary emphasis on social justice education and critical pedagogy—movements that have contributed invaluable insights about power dynamics, systemic oppression, and structural inequalities—nevertheless often fails to address the deeper epistemological and anthropological foundations that must undergird authentic educational transformation. These approaches, while illuminating important aspects of how knowledge, power, and identity intersect in educational spaces, frequently operate within existing frameworks rather than questioning the fundamental assumptions about human nature, learning, and the purpose of education itself.

Observably, this limitation becomes particularly evident when we examine contemporary educational discourse within the Philippines and the broader Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. Educational reform conversations in these contexts have become increasingly dominated by technical solutions—initiatives focused on digital integration and technology-enhanced learning environments, competency-based curriculum frameworks that emphasize measurable skills and outcomes, and standardized assessment systems designed to ensure accountability and comparability across educational contexts. These technical approaches, while potentially valuable as tools, are typically implemented without adequate consideration of the philosophical presuppositions that fundamentally shape how these solutions are conceived, implemented, and received by learners and educators. The underlying assumptions about what constitutes knowledge, how learning occurs, what motivates human beings, and what purposes education should serve remain largely unexamined. This creates a situation where sophisticated technical interventions are layered onto educational systems that may be operating from fundamentally flawed or incomplete understandings of human nature and learning.

For instance, when educational systems implement digital integration without first establishing a clear philosophical framework for understanding how technology should serve human flourishing, the result is often the mere digitization of existing problematic practices rather than genuine trans-

formation. Similarly, competency-based approaches that focus exclusively on observable, measurable outcomes may inadvertently reduce education to training, overlooking the profound dimensions of human development that cannot be easily quantified or standardised.

Therefore, educational institutions must prepare learners to analyze and solve the complex social problems they will inevitably encounter beyond the classroom walls. This preparation requires developing learners' capacities for deep thinking—the ability to penetrate beneath surface phenomena to understand underlying structures, patterns, and relationships. It demands analytical thinking—the systematic examination of complex situations, the identification of component parts and their interactions, and the evaluation of evidence and arguments. And it necessitates creative thinking—the capacity to generate novel solutions, to synthesize disparate elements into new configurations, and to imagine alternative possibilities.

This educational philosophy should prioritise these enduring intellectual capacities rather than focusing primarily on what might be characterised as transient concerns—social skills that may vary across cultural contexts, current trends that may quickly become obsolete, or technological competencies that may be superseded by rapid innovation. While these elements certainly have their place in education, they should not constitute the core of educational purpose. This hermeneutic also becomes particularly relevant and urgent within the ASEAN context, where rapid economic development and accelerating globalization create both unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges for educational systems. The region's economic dynamism offers possibilities for educational innovation and resource mobilization that were previously unavailable. Simultaneously, the pace of change and the complexity of global interconnectedness create pressures that can push educational systems toward reactive, short-term solutions rather than thoughtful, long-term transformation.

Lastly, the rise of what educators commonly term “21st century skills”—critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity—represents a well-intentioned attempt to address the changing demands of contemporary society. These skills are indeed valuable and should be cultivated within educational environments. However, the current emphasis on these competencies often lacks the philosophical

foundation necessary for deep and lasting educational transformation. When these skills are developed in isolation from a clear anthropological understanding—a comprehensive view of human nature, purpose, and flourishing—and divorced from ultimate educational purpose—a clear vision of what education should accomplish in human lives and society—they risk becoming merely functional competencies. In this degraded form, they serve primarily economic or political ends rather than contributing to genuine human flourishing and the development of persons capable of living meaningful, contributory lives.

This represents a fundamental perversion of educational purpose, where what should be means toward human development becomes ends in themselves, and where educational institutions become primarily servants of economic and political systems rather than cultivators of human potential and societal wellbeing. The result is education that produces individuals who may be technically competent but lack the deeper wisdom, character, and sense of purpose necessary for both personal fulfillment and positive social contribution.

The Purpose of Education in Light of Human Nature

I believe that in light of the problem of ignorance, the purpose of schooling is to help learners understand themselves, appreciate their distinctive talents and insights, and find their own unique place in the world. Why? Because the learners must know that as they grow up, they will see that while this life is for them, this life is not about them. This understanding proves crucial for addressing the educational challenges facing Southeast Asia, where rapid economic development and globalization often create educational systems focused primarily on economic productivity rather than human formation and flourishing. The emphasis on STEM education, while important for economic competitiveness, must be balanced with deeper questions about human purpose and meaning.

As James Sire would say, [this life] is not a closed system. There is a beginning and there is a destination. Whoever began this time-space-matter-energy continuum whence the Goldilocks zone is situated, within which our “pale blue dot” of a planet resides is the same “Whoever” that will be at the end of the continuum for checks-balances-audits-and-accounting. Some might call that entity in other nouns, but

it is clear to me it must be Yahweh—the triune God, who Is. This theological framework provides educational philosophy with ultimate coherence and purpose that secular educational philosophies, however sophisticated, cannot provide. The challenges facing education in the Philippines and ASEAN region often stem from competing and contradictory philosophical foundations that create confusion about educational purpose and methodology.

With that end in mind, the problem of ignorance is to be addressed, not by making these young minds believe that they are “captains of their ship” and the “master of their soul”. It will be a huge disservice to them if they are to be made believe that they can be in full control of their life, as tried to be projected by the delusion that they can and are in control of the curriculum. The contemporary emphasis on student-centered learning, while containing valuable insights about learner engagement and motivation, often assumes an anthropological understanding that is both unrealistic and potentially harmful. The philosophical foundation of much contemporary educational theory assumes human autonomy and self-sufficiency which contradicts both empirical evidence about human learning and development and theological understanding of human nature and purpose.

The Communal Nature of Educational Responsibility

Ignorance is so pervasive that those who have it do not know that they have it or worse, they are. Human subjectivity is contingent, and to it, is universal ignorance. They must know it, so as for them to know some aspects of it; and then they will know how far more and how much more they will have to strive in order to combat it in their adult life and with other people. For that, ignorance is never bliss.

This philosophical understanding has practical implications for educational policy and practice in Southeast Asia. The declining enrollment rates across the region, coupled with persistent learning deficits, suggest that current educational approaches may be inadequately addressing the fundamental human need for truth, meaning, and purpose in learning.

Thus, education should be a responsibility of the family and community rather than delegated to formal and impersonal institutions, such as schools. The effort to educate, with this presupposition, is and must be inexorably holistic,

collective, and collaborative. This principle challenges the increasing institutionalization and bureaucratization of education across the ASEAN region. While formal educational institutions serve important functions in providing systematic instruction and credentialing, the delegation of educational responsibility primarily to schools and away from families and communities has contributed to the educational crisis evident across the region. The traditional Filipino concept of “*kapamilya*” (kinship/filial priority) and the broader South-east Asian emphasis on community responsibility provide cultural resources for reimagining educational practice in ways that align with both local values and sound philosophical principles. However, these traditional approaches must be integrated with contemporary educational insights in ways that maintain their essential character while addressing current challenges.

4.2. Iteration of the Apparent Being of the Agents in/of Education

The Ontology of Learners in the Southeast Asian Context

As humans they are, given their own metaphysical dualism already, learners are to be seriously interacted with, in a manner as if they are being entrusted with the society they will surely become citizens of. This philosophical understanding of learners as complex beings bearing both material and spiritual dimensions provides important insight into educational challenges facing the Philippines and broader ASEAN region. The current learning crisis in Philippine education, where 9 out of 10 children aged 10 years old were unable to read simple texts^[2], cannot be adequately addressed through purely technical or methodological interventions. The persistent nature of these learning deficits across different educational reforms and increased resource allocation suggests deeper anthropological and philosophical issues affecting how learners are understood and engaged in educational settings.

Since learners achieve the aspired holistic education effectively through social interaction, schools should plan for substantial social interaction in their curricula. They are to be taught how to be socio-politically literate, and learn how to improve the quality of life for all people, by gaining and attaining insights as to how they can improve their own

quality of life first. From this, they can start becoming that man or woman for others. This emphasis on social interaction and civic formation becomes particularly relevant in the ASEAN context, where issues like the climate crisis, societal inequality, and digital polarisation require educated citizens capable of thoughtful engagement with complex social and political challenges^[4]. However, such civic education must be grounded in clear anthropological understanding rather than merely functional skills training.

Academic Standards and Human Dignity

So, with all due respect to the intent of “education for all” or the “mass promotion” that we have been witnessing for a considerable length of time already, I do not think that any learner should be promoted from one grade to the next until they have read and mastered certain key material. I think that the penchant for education is not bad or fruitless in and of itself. What I think detrimental is allowing any AVOIDABLE incompetence to go by unchecked just because learners are seen to be the next workforce of the society and, thus, they must be given an easy “pass” so they can hastily land the job their “banking families” want them to have for that “return of investment” the latter aspire^[19].

This critique addresses a significant challenge in contemporary Philippine and ASEAN educational systems, where economic pressures and family expectations often compromise academic integrity and genuine learning. The phenomenon of “grade inflation” and social promotion has become increasingly common across the region, driven by various factors including family economic pressures, institutional concerns about retention rates, and misguided understanding of educational equity.

I do not think the school and the entire education system should ever condone it. For all its worth, perhaps it is what Mark Twain meant when he said that “schooling hinders one’s education”. Learners, I believe, must be given all the time they need to learn in context and so then to be assessed accordingly, to see if they have really imbibed what it means to be a ready contributor to the mortification of the evils of ignorance and poverty—of the mind and of the economy. The tension between educational quality and access has become particularly acute in the Philippines, where close to 4 million students were not able to enroll for this school year^[2], while simultaneously, those who enroll often receive inadequate education that fails to prepare them for

meaningful contribution to society.

This dual challenge—ensuring both access and quality—requires philosophical clarity about the nature and purpose of education that goes beyond merely technical or administrative solutions. The philosophical framework of Pre-suppositional Epistemology provides tools for understanding how these seemingly competing demands can be addressed through educational approaches that maintain both high standards and genuine care for individual learners.

Democratic Participation and Authentic Learning

Therefore, learners should be active participants in the learning process, involved in democratic class decision making and reflective thinking. If that is not to be the case, then all I see is that the school and the educational system become cohorts in the preponderance of ignorance in the society that it so-called wishes to serve. The emphasis on democratic participation in educational settings reflects insights from John Dewey’s progressive education movement, but must be understood within the proper anthropological framework to avoid the relativism and subjectivism that often characterizes contemporary applications of democratic education. The goal is not to create educational environments where learner preferences determine curriculum or standards, but rather to engage learners as active participants in the pursuit of truth and wisdom.

This understanding proves particularly relevant in Southeast Asian educational contexts, where traditional pedagogical approaches often emphasize rote learning and teacher authority while contemporary reform movements sometimes swing toward extreme student-centeredness that lacks adequate structure and direction. The philosophical framework developed here provides a middle path that maintains both appropriate authority structures and genuine learner engagement.

The Ontology of Educators in Contemporary Context

Educators, more than teachers, are of equal significance, at least in the paradigm I have been espousing. I think it is a big hypocrisy to take a student-centered curriculum equivalent to non-relevance or the less-relevance of the educator. Au contraire, the more the curriculum asserts to be student-centered, the more it must—ought to—pay a keen attention to the educator. This insight addresses a significant confusion in contemporary educational discourse,

where “student-centered” approaches are often interpreted as diminishing the role and authority of educators. The current challenges facing education in the Philippines and ASEAN region are often exacerbated by this misunderstanding, which leads to inadequate educator preparation, diminished professional authority, and confusion about educational goals and methods.

I say such is the case, because the educator, albeit not the sole-source of learning, is and will always be the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) in any learning occurrence. If the educator is only as competent and confident as his/her learner, transition and transcendence from ignorance either cannot happen or will take time to happen. The concept of the More Knowledgeable Other, drawn from Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory, provides important insight for understanding educational challenges in Southeast Asia. However, this concept must be understood within a proper philosophical framework that recognizes both the reality of knowledge and truth and the appropriate relationship between educators and learners.

Educator Competence and Professional Authority

In both cases, the educator becomes an accessory for maintaining ignorance, or in the language of Fiske (in Schoen)^[20]: the great impediment to learning is man’s prolonged infancy. Why? Because not to train the learners in the way of the maturing human person is abandoning them to the ways of nature. But, “[n]ature is impartial and not at all charitably inclined”. This philosophical understanding becomes particularly relevant when examining the challenges facing educator preparation and professional development in the Philippines and ASEAN region. Between 2009 and 2023, the average passing rate for teacher qualification examinations has declined, while only 52% of day care teachers and workers have a college degree or equivalent qualification^[21].

These statistical realities point to deeper philosophical and practical challenges in how societies understand and support the educational profession. The decline in educator competence and professional preparation cannot be addressed merely through increased training programs or higher salary scales, though these technical solutions are necessary. More fundamentally, there must be clarity about the nature, purpose, and authority of the educational profession.

So, in thinking that the true meaning of learning and democracy is relegating the learners to their own un-/malad-

justed way is the real humanistic and human-oriented learning, the educator does the very opposite of the intent since no human is in higher esteem by nature than is its lowest creature.

Academic Rigor and Intellectual Formation

Thus, educators (and schools) should emphasize purposeful academic rigor, discipline, hard work, and respect for authority. So much is my persuasion of that, that whether inside or outside the classroom, teachers must stress the relevance of what pupils are learning to real and current events, for that is what trans-classroom care means. This emphasis on academic rigor and intellectual discipline addresses significant weaknesses in contemporary educational practice across Southeast Asia, where concerns about student self-esteem and engagement often lead to diminished academic expectations and standards. The philosophical foundation developed here provides justification for maintaining high expectations while simultaneously demonstrating genuine care for learner development and flourishing. The connexion between classroom learning and contemporary events proves particularly important in the ASEAN context, where rapid social, economic, and political changes require citizens capable of thoughtful analysis and engagement. However, this connection must be grounded in solid intellectual foundations rather than merely current trends or popular opinions.

Classical Education and Contemporary Relevance

Inspiration is replete, since that is the very core of the narrative and poetic visions of Dante, Shakespeare, Anouilh, and Von Goethe. I am short of saying that educators must be adept with classics and that they are to teach from the classics, because important insights related to many of today’s challenges and concerns are found in these Great Books. The emphasis on classical education proves particularly relevant for addressing educational challenges in Southeast Asia, where educational systems often struggle to balance global knowledge with local cultural values and traditions. The Great Books tradition provides resources for developing educational approaches that are both intellectually rigorous and culturally relevant.

While these are not necessarily photocopies, for there are hardly totally identical experiences across time and history, human subjectivity, the educators must accentuate, is vulnerable to the same anthropological patterns. Using the learners’ contextual and higher order learning skills, edu-

cators can employ intertextual analyses where the learners can see for themselves the beauty and horror of humanity. This pedagogical approach addresses the challenge of making classical education relevant to contemporary Southeast Asian students while maintaining its essential character and insights. The recognition of universal anthropological patterns provides a bridge between classical wisdom and contemporary application that avoids both antiquarianism and presentism.

The Integration of Wisdom and Contemporary Application

Or as in the words of Frankl: the intelligent human person who invented innovations, is of the same essence of those who innovated the gas chambers of Auschwitz. If I may reiterate, I hold that the educator's main goal is to help learners unlock the insights learned over time, so they can gain wisdom from the great thinkers of the past. This sobering recognition of human potential for both good and evil provides crucial insight for educational practice in contemporary Southeast Asia, where rapid technological development and economic growth create both opportunities and temptations. The educational challenge is not merely to prepare students for economic productivity but to form human beings capable of wise and ethical engagement with contemporary challenges.

Teaching should mean both maintaining and updating Great Books, since "Greatness" is a relative quality. And by relative, I mean, relative to the level of learner facing the particular socio-historico-cultural epoch. In the end, I am convinced that effective educators help learners to discover and develop their personal values, even when those values conflict with traditional and contemporary ones, as they help learners constantly reexamine their beliefs and worldviews.

This dynamic understanding of educational content and methodology provides a framework for addressing the tension between timeless wisdom and contemporary relevance that characterizes effective education in any cultural context, but proves particularly crucial in the rapidly changing societies of Southeast Asia.

The educator's responsibility extends beyond mere content delivery to include the cultivation of critical thinking capabilities that enable learners to engage constructively with competing worldviews and value systems. This becomes especially important in the pluralistic societies of the ASEAN

region, where diverse religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions interact within shared educational spaces.

4.3. The Institutional Framework: Schools as Communities of Truth-Seeking

The Nature of Educational Institutions in Contemporary Context

Educational institutions within the Southeast Asian context face unique challenges that reflect broader philosophical confusions about the nature and purpose of formal education. The persistent learning crisis evident across the region suggests that institutional structures and approaches require fundamental reconsideration rather than merely technical adjustments or resource reallocation. Schools should function as communities of inquiry where learners and educators together pursue truth, wisdom, and understanding within appropriate structures of authority and accountability. This vision stands in contrast to both authoritarian models that suppress genuine inquiry and libertarian approaches that lack adequate direction and standards. The philosophical framework developed here provides guidance for creating institutional environments that support authentic learning while maintaining necessary order and purpose.

The current institutional challenges facing Philippine and ASEAN education systems often stem from competing and contradictory philosophical foundations that create confusion about institutional purpose, authority structures, and assessment methods. The Department of Education's noted decline in registration for the 2023–2024 academic year^[2] reflects not merely administrative challenges but deeper questions about the perceived value and effectiveness of formal educational institutions.

Curriculum Design and Philosophical Coherence

The curriculum represents the institutional embodiment of educational philosophy, translating abstract commitments about human nature, knowledge, and purpose into concrete learning experiences and expectations. Current curriculum approaches across Southeast Asia often lack philosophical coherence, attempting to synthesize incompatible educational philosophies without adequate consideration of their underlying assumptions and implications. A coherent educational philosophy requires curriculum design that reflects a clear understanding of learner development, the nature of knowledge, and ultimate educational purposes. This means mov-

ing beyond merely functional approaches that focus on skill acquisition toward more comprehensive approaches that address intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions of human development. The emphasis on 21st century skills that characterizes much contemporary curriculum reform, while containing valuable insights about the changing nature of work and citizenship, often lacks the philosophical foundation necessary for deep and lasting educational impact. Skills divorced from clear understanding of human nature and purpose become merely functional competencies that may serve economic or political ends without contributing to genuine human flourishing.

Assessment and Human Dignity

Assessment practices reveal institutional commitments about human nature, learning, and educational purpose perhaps more clearly than curricular statements or mission documents. The widespread practice of social promotion and grade inflation across the region reflects philosophical confusion about the relationship between compassion and academic standards, often resulting in approaches that serve neither learner development nor societal needs. Authentic assessment must balance recognition of individual differences and circumstances with maintenance of academic integrity and meaningful standards. This requires philosophical clarity about the nature of learning, the purpose of credentialing, and the appropriate relationship between individual needs and institutional expectations.

The current emphasis on standardized testing, while providing important data about systemic educational effectiveness, cannot adequately capture the full dimensions of human learning and development that quality education should address. Assessment approaches must be sophisticated enough to evaluate not only cognitive development but also character formation, practical wisdom, and civic engagement.

4.4. Practical Applications and Implementation Strategies

Addressing the Philippine and ASEAN Educational Crisis

The philosophical framework developed here provides practical guidance for addressing the specific educational challenges facing Southeast Asia while maintaining theoretical coherence and long-term vision. The implementation

of Truth-Centered Liberal Education requires systematic attention to multiple dimensions of educational practice and policy.

Teacher Education and Professional Development

The decline in teacher qualification examination passing rates across the region^[21] requires comprehensive reconsideration of educator preparation that addresses both technical competency and philosophical foundation. Effective teacher education must cultivate not only pedagogical skills but also intellectual virtue, moral character, and clear understanding of educational purpose. Teacher education programs must integrate rigorous academic preparation with practical experience, philosophical reflection with technical training, and individual development with communal responsibility. The goal is to prepare educators who function as More Knowledgeable Others capable of guiding learner development while continuing their own intellectual and moral growth.

Curriculum Reform and Content Integration

Current curriculum approaches across the region often lack philosophical coherence, attempting to address multiple competing demands without adequate integration or prioritization. Truth-Centered Liberal Education provides frameworks for curriculum development that maintain both intellectual rigor and cultural relevance, both universal principles and local application. Curriculum reform must begin with clear articulation of educational purposes and priorities, followed by systematic development of learning experiences that support these purposes while maintaining appropriate scope and sequence. The integration of classical sources with contemporary applications, universal principles with local contexts, and theoretical knowledge with practical wisdom requires careful attention to both content selection and pedagogical methods.

Assessment and Accountability Systems

The tension between educational access and quality that characterizes much contemporary educational policy requires assessment approaches that maintain meaningful standards while recognizing individual differences and circumstances. Truth-Centered Liberal Education provides a philosophical foundation for assessment practices that serve both individual development and institutional accountability. Assessment systems must evaluate not only cognitive development but also character formation, practical wisdom,

and civic engagement. This requires moving beyond merely standardized testing toward more comprehensive approaches that capture the full dimensions of human learning and development while maintaining sufficient rigor and consistency to ensure meaningful standards.

Family and Community Engagement

The philosophical emphasis on communal responsibility for education requires systematic efforts to engage families and communities as partners in the educational process rather than merely consumers of educational services. This engagement must address both practical and philosophical dimensions of educational partnership. Effective family and community engagement requires clear communication about educational purposes and methods, appropriate structures for participation and input, and recognition of the diverse backgrounds and perspectives that families and communities bring to educational partnership. The goal is to create genuine collaboration that serves learner development while respecting appropriate boundaries and responsibilities.

5. Conclusions: The Path Forward for Southeast Asian Education

Synthesis and Future Vision

The philosophical investigation presented here demonstrates that the educational challenges facing Southeast Asia require fundamental reconsideration of educational purposes, methods, and structures rather than merely technical adjustments or resource reallocation. The persistent nature of learning deficits, declining educational quality, and institutional ineffectiveness across the region suggests deeper philosophical and anthropological issues that must be addressed through comprehensive educational reform grounded in a sound philosophical foundation.

The Truth-Centered Liberal Education framework developed here provides a coherent response to these challenges by integrating insights from various educational philosophies within a comprehensive understanding of human nature, knowledge, and purpose. This framework addresses the specific challenges facing Southeast Asian educational systems while maintaining universal applicability and theoretical coherence.

The implementation of this philosophical framework requires sustained commitment from educational leaders,

policymakers, educators, families, and communities to fundamental transformation of educational practice and culture. This transformation must address both technical and philosophical dimensions of educational change, both individual and institutional development, both local and regional coordination.

The Imperative for Philosophical Clarity

The analysis presented here demonstrates that educational practice inevitably reflects underlying philosophical commitments about human nature, knowledge, and purpose, whether these commitments are explicitly articulated or remain implicit and unexamined. The choice is not between philosophical and non-philosophical approaches to education, but between coherent and incoherent philosophical foundations, between examined and unexamined presuppositions. The current educational crisis across Southeast Asia reflects, in large measure, the philosophical confusion and inconsistency that characterizes much contemporary educational theory and practice. The attempt to synthesize incompatible educational philosophies without adequate attention to their underlying assumptions has resulted in educational approaches that are internally contradictory frameworks for thinking clearly about educational purposes and methods that can inform diverse approaches while maintaining commitment to truth, wisdom, and human dignity—all harkening to the profound nuance of Truth-centeredness, *i.e.*, as Jesus of Nazareth claims: “I am the way, the truth, and the life...” (John 14:6 CSB (Emphasis mine)).

The time for such fundamental reconsideration has arrived. The educational challenges facing Southeast Asia are too significant to be addressed through merely technical solutions, and the opportunities for positive transformation are too valuable to be squandered through philosophical confusion or practical drift. Theoretically and practically ineffective. The path forward requires commitment to philosophical clarity and consistency that provides a coherent foundation for educational policy and practice. This philosophical work is not merely a theoretical exercise but a practical necessity for addressing the educational challenges that face the region and for developing educational approaches that serve genuine human flourishing.

Future Research Prospects: The Call to Educational Transformation

The philosophical framework developed here issues

a call to fundamental transformation of educational understanding and practice across Southeast Asia. This transformation requires recognition that authentic education serves purposes that transcend merely economic or political utility, that address fundamental human needs for truth, meaning, and purpose. The implementation of Truth-Centered Liberal Education requires educators, policymakers, families, and communities who understand education as fundamentally concerned with human formation and flourishing rather than merely skill development or knowledge transmission. This understanding must inform educational practice at every level, from classroom instruction to policy development, from curriculum design to assessment implementation.

The challenges are significant, but the opportunities are equally substantial. The rich cultural heritage of Southeast Asian societies, combined with contemporary educational insights and resources, provides a foundation for educational transformation that can serve as a model for other regions facing similar challenges. The key is maintaining commitment to both excellence and equity, both tradition and innovation, both local identity and global engagement within a coherent philosophical framework.

The future of Southeast Asian education depends not merely on increased funding, improved infrastructure, or better technology, though these technical improvements are necessary. More fundamentally, it depends on recovery of clear understanding of education's ultimate purposes and methods, grounded in realistic understanding of human nature and oriented toward authentic human flourishing. This philosophical work represents one contribution to the broader conversation about educational transformation that must engage educators, scholars, policymakers, and communities throughout the region. The goal is not to impose particular solutions but to provide a call for educational leaders and communities committed to the hard work of philosophical reflection and practical implementation necessary for authentic educational transformation.

Ultimately, the philosophical framework articulated in this investigation opens numerous fertile avenues for empirical inquiry and theoretical development that could substantially advance our understanding of educational transformation in Southeast Asia and beyond. Longitudinal ethnographic studies tracking the implementation of Truth-Centered Liberal Education principles across diverse cultural

contexts within the region would provide invaluable insights into how universal educational philosophies interact with particular cultural traditions, revealing both successful adaptation strategies and potential resistance points. Comparative research examining how different Southeast Asian nations interpret and implement truth-centered approaches could illuminate the relationship between educational philosophy and cultural identity, while cross-regional studies comparing Southeast Asian implementations with similar efforts in other developing regions could identify transferable principles and context-specific adaptations. The intersection of contemplative pedagogies rooted in Southeast Asian spiritual traditions with contemporary cognitive science represents a particularly promising research frontier, potentially yielding insights into how ancient wisdom traditions can inform modern understanding of learning, attention, and human development. Additionally, rigorous assessment methodologies must be developed to evaluate educational approaches that prioritize wisdom, character, and integral human formation rather than merely measurable academic outcomes—a challenge that requires innovative research methodologies capable of capturing the deeper dimensions of human flourishing that technical assessments typically overlook. Perhaps most crucially, interdisciplinary research teams combining educational philosophers, cultural anthropologists, cognitive scientists, and practicing educators could investigate how the philosophical foundations explored here translate into specific pedagogical practices, institutional structures, and policy frameworks that honor both the universal aspects of human nature and the particular cultural contexts in which education occurs. Such research would not only validate or refine the theoretical framework presented but also provide the empirical foundation necessary for large-scale educational transformation guided by philosophical clarity rather than mere pragmatic expediency.

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