Philosophy, Human Poverty, and Democracy

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Abstract. This paper seeks to link philosophy and the social sciences. To be able to do so, I will first explain the distinction between the methods of philosophy and that of the social sciences. To put flesh into my argument, I will examine the problem of poverty using the lens of Thomas Pogge, who provides a definition, description, and explanation of poverty. To understand poverty as a moral as well as a political issue, I will elucidate some concepts introduced by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, and Iris Marion Young, illustrating in the process how their thoughts actually intersect. Finally, I will discuss the meaning of democracy and how, in order to understand it, one must appeal, beyond theory, to everyday experiences. The social sciences, in this regard, can be linked to moral philosophy. The social sciences should not be construed as separate or purely distinct from the philosophical questions that have shaped human knowledge.

Keywords: Philosophical Method, Social Sciences, Problem of Poverty, Democracy

Philosophy and the Social Sciences

I will start by saying that there is a lot to learn from the social sciences when it comes to doing research. But I was trained in philosophy so you know my bias. Nevertheless, I will first take up the complaint of some researchers as to the limit, which instead I would call rigidity, of the methodologies of the social sciences. In philosophy, we have been trained to reflect on the critical questions, to analyze relationships and distinctions, ergo to use logical analysis, as we try to decipher the puzzles of the mysteries of life, religion, or the human mind. In short, we have been taught to think alone about the questions that matter to humans for centuries. There is a dichotomy, in this way, between metaphysics and the empirical sciences. Nevertheless, the science of man has to be studied in a normative way. According to Rezaei & Saghazadeh (2021, 11), "while technical norms are based on empirical evidence, social norms are held to be binding on the man of science."

In view of the above, we realize that education is meant "to develop the power of creativity, not a culture of standardization" (Rezaei, 2021). This serves as a warning, for instance, to those who wish to reduce education to

metrics and numbers, even if the method for reaching such values is scientific. The problem with some policy makers is that they simply assume that all standards are always good because they represent an ideal system. Yet, it matters to ask who designs, makes decisions, and promulgates these standards. It is important to know that many discoveries happened not because scientists or philosophers followed the rules of convention. Rather, many of these things came into light because of the defiance to authority of human genius and the fact that brave human beings have challenged traditional authority. We can mention Descartes, who was the first to write in French, hence defying the standard Latin text for philosophy during his time. Galileo Galilei, for example, was ex-communicated for supporting the theory of Copernicus. Indeed, in the new normal, one can choose to do the practical ends of learning or resist and be a critical thinker (Maboloc, 2020).

Philosophy, of course, also deals with moral problems and issues, which it sees as its exclusive domain. Yet, that is not exactly right. For instance, risk analysis may be crucial before one comes up with a decision (Timmons 2002). But the task at hand is to make moral theory work in a society filled with doubts and uncertainties. Social scientists sometimes criticize philosophers for being naive of the facts and the actual historical realities that people have to confront on a daily basis. However, science and philosophy need not be antagonistic towards each other. There's no need to demean one discipline in order to favor another. For instance, philosophy accuses sociology of limiting things into the function of social organizations and the roles that accompany societal structures. Yet, one cannot take away the fact that social structures help determine and sometimes influence what becomes of human life. There's no freedom that is detached from the actions of people and the circumstances that are produced out of these actions.

Human society is not just a question of values, identity, or purpose. We need to identify the unfair practices, put an end to unjust systems, and fight oppressive policies and mechanisms that undermine the lives of people. We have to resist the control and domination of powerful interests and elitist systems that hide under the guise of social charity and concern for the poor Hence, when it comes to the problem of poverty, we need to analyze actual situations and events that cause the pathological nature or character of modern society. One can mention, for instance, the dynamics of power. As such, it can be argued that human poverty is difficult to eliminate because it is ultimately about powerlessness. To solve poverty, in this sense, will require addressing oppression in society.

Our philosophical methods are based on experience and how we see the world. Seeing the world requires some sort of a binocular, so that our

bespectacled view means that everything depends on our way of seeing or as Thomas Kuhn (1962) puts it, a paradigm. A paradigm is a framework or the way theory sees reality. If there is no anomaly in a theory, why change it? In this sense, paradigms are like ways of solving a puzzle (Kuhn, 1962). If the textbook analysis of a problem is no longer helpful, then we move on to look for other means to understand the world. Indeed, the complaint really comes from the distinction between qualitative or interpretive and quantitative research. Nevertheless, there's a way to transcend the limits where researchers in science and philosophy can work together. It is called transdisciplinarity. Rezaei & Saghazadeh (2021, 26) write:

> The transdisciplinary work is based on a shared framework, shared goals, and shared skills by which participants are allowed to release and expand their roles. By such a process, we can expect that the integration, amalgamation, and assimilation of disciplines, incorporation, unification, and harmony of disciplines, views, and approaches do probably occur.

An explanation may be necessary. I first encountered the interpretive while reading the thesis of the late Dr. Ryan Urbano, the first Filipino scholar to write on Thomas Pogge. He did so as a thesis at Linkoping University in Sweden under the eminent Goran Collste, who espoused a type of global justice that is rectificatory. The interpretive method is based on your experiential assessment of things or events. The problem with it is that the analysis can be tainted with the subjective perception of the investigator. It is in this regard that philosophy researchers begin to complain because they will be told by reviewers to clarify or at least identify an empirical or quantitative method. Indeed, that is understandable. Data is important. Philosophers are used to idiosyncrasies. The way we see things must be based on a whole or some structure, which should be integral. Yet, in order to understand poverty, for instance, you need to look at numbers and not just speculate on the reasons why people are poor. It is in this sense that philosophy can learn or work with the social sciences.

Theories must be applied (Timmons 2002). The application means that philosophical theories can finally be useful when it comes to real world issues and concerns. There is an inherent difficulty, however, because most philosophy researchers are not trained on data analysis. There is no field work, so to speak. Yet, the combination between philosophical reflection and social science, or in the case of Amartya Sen (1999), economics and moral

theory, is critical in order to arrive at new insights, for instance, in the definition of human development. And this is where philosophy can come into the picture. One can think, for instance, of the way Martha Nussbaum (2006) expanded Sen's work by redirecting the latter's attention to Aristotle's concept of human flourishing. Nussbaum, in this regard, gave Sen's work on human development a deeper philosophical meaning hy merging it with ethical questions.

Indeed, while the interpretive method lacks the rigor of empirical data such as indices and other forms of statistics, it reminds us that there are certain aspects of human reality that one cannot capture by means of computing. This is not to say that social science cannot explain the complexity of theory. Rather, it has something to do with the nature of reality. Philosophical reflection is introspective, which means that certain aspects of truth or reality can only be revealed by personal experiences or reflection. One is reminded, for instance, of Gabriel Marcel's *The Mystery of Being*. Our experiences do not only provide the observations needed to make factual judgments. They reveal who we are as human beings. Marcel (1950, 7) describes the philosophical method: "I have written somewhere that metaphysical unease is like the bodily state of a man in a fever who will not lie still but keeps shifting around in his bed looking for the right position." The uneasiness comes in various forms, but for now, this has something to do with what makes one's work meaningful.

For instance, in understanding the Holocaust or Nazi atrocity, one must seriously consider the narratives of the victims, their feelings and sentiments, or the way they see reality, for instance, Laurence Rees's historical narrative, *Auschwitz* or Elie Wiesel's personal narrative, *Night*. Both are powerful in terms of revealing the evils of the Holocaust. Such narratives cannot be reduced to numbers. Nevertheless, this does not mean one method is better than the other. Rather, what has emerged, in order to bridge science to society, is transdisciplinary research. While working on a research goal, it does not mean that two disciplines must work exclusively. Rather, one can learn from the other, so that transdisciplinarity is not about two or multiple disciplines crisscrossing, but rather, it is the pursuit of the same truth with two minds working together to solve a clearly defined problem.

I believe that if there is a problem that today's philosophers should pay attention to, it is understanding human poverty. We now know that it is not just about economic deprivation, or the lack of income (Sen, 1981). It has something to do with freedom, or the lack of ability to achieve those things that one has reason to value (Sen, 1999). By implication, Sen is saying that poverty is not purely an economic issue, but an issue about the lack of a

person's power to be. However, poverty appears to have a broad spectrum. It involves several issues and concerns. For instance, one can mention poverty traps, or the obstacles that impede economic growth (Sachs 2005), unfair international money or trade policies and the corruption that accompanies them (Stiglitz, 2003), or the effect of colonialism (Collste, 2015).

The Problem of Poverty

I will now examine the problem of poverty using the perspective of Thomas Pogge. The German philosopher, who was mentored by John Rawls, provides a philosophical as well as the ethical view on poverty. By definition, Pogge (2023, 2786) says that poverty "has something to do with the lack of access to goods and resources." Pogge (2023) also explains that poverty, by definition, deals with the scale or extent of the deprivation. Poverty is multidimensional, which means that it is related to various aspects of life - social, political, and economic (Pogge 2023). Its relative definition, Pogge (2023) says, can mean "the lack of endowments, including the lack of recognition or social acceptance." The problem of poverty, in this way, encompasses a wide range of problems.

Pogge (2023) reiterates that poverty, by description, has been labeled by economists as simply the "lack of income". While this description does not give a full picture of poverty, it cannot be disregarded, because people who are beneath the poverty trap obviously suffer from a lack of means to improve their standard of living. However, it cannot stop there. The description brings us to its multidimensional character, which relates to well-being achievement, access to health care, and education (See Sen, 1999). As such, poverty can be seen from a "quantitative" point of view and the "qualitative" point of view. The first is about notions of modern progress and how poor people do not enjoy the comforts economic progress brings while the latter is more substantive and deals with the quality of human life (Sen & Nussbaum, 1993).

But what is the explanation for poverty? Pogge (2023) says that the most obvious is that poor people are born to a world in which they experience scarcity. But there's a deeper reason that leads one to think of "global inequalities, wrong structural designs and policies, the lack of opportunities, including tax burdens on poor people (Pogge 2023, 2788) One must also mention the historical roots of poverty, including the case of Mindanao, which can be connected to the presence of unjust structures and bad governance (Maboloc, 2025). In fact, the poverty of people is something that can be seen from patterns of bad political decisions, including wrong

policies. Deprivation, in this way, can be a result of policy failures (Sen, 1981).

Finally, assessing poverty is often grounded on welfarism. Such consequentialist view, Pogge (2023) says, relates to the concept of effective altruism and social justice. The idea of effective altruism is about the issue pertaining to how much of donor money actually reaches the poor beneficiaries. Charities, for instance, need to pay the salaries of employees. They also entail huge operational costs that need to be charged to the funding they receive from donors. The truth is that the same charities cannot also channel funding to governments because of corruption. In contrast, the idea of social justice is related to the design of the basic structure and the concept of just or fair redistribution, including conditional cash transfers and stimulus packages meant to create employment and income.

Put more succinctly, Sen (1999) argues that the focus should be on human capability instead of income because the achievement of certain functionings relies on the person's capability. If we relate this to the efforts of the Philippine Government to remove General Education (GE) courses in the curriculum so that college students can focus on internship in order to become productive citizens, it shows that our leaders actually have a myopic view of the world. In assessing human well-being, it is human freedom and not one's technical skills that tell us how a human person is able to live well. Gasper (2004) has elaborated the various aspects of human development, including the economic as well as culture, the reality of violence and cruel choices that accompany the advent of modern progress. Yet, in essence, when talking about human development, the point is that people desire freedom and that freedom helps them define the purpose of their lives. What that purpose is the government has an important role to play. As such, bad governance results to bad outcomes in the lives of people. Without good institutions, ordinary citizens will have no means to attain decent and dignified lives.

This brings us to the most important question. How do we eradicate poverty? Let me cite one concrete example. In the 2025 General Appropriations Act of the Philippines, around 26 billion pesos was allocated for AKAP (Ayuda sa Kapos ang Kita Program), a form of financial assistance to poor individuals (Tumbado, 3 January 2025). The release of the said budget was timed with the midterm elections in 2025, so that the intent of the allocation was obvious. The same was meant to influence the decision making of the electorate. The beneficiaries were targeted, but mostly local officials at the barangay level were the ones who made the listing that was submitted to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)

and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). While these agencies denied that the release of the dole-out money was tainted with political motives, what people tend to believe say otherwise because the politicians who used the system to influence voters have posted pictures of the distribution online. One politician even said that "mura ta ug Ginoo tungod sa ayuda" (we are acting like God by giving money to the people).

The above is an example of systemic corruption. This is where Rawls (1999) missed the point when he insisted that the redistribution of resources should not go beyond borders. The problem is that some governments are corrupt. As a result, people continue to suffer. Pogge (2006) extends the concept of justice to a global difference principle. The problem of poverty requires a causal analysis. Pogge suggested in his book *Realizing Rawls* the idea of a global redistributive principle. Knowing that the same needs to be applied beyond theory, he recently proposed a model called the Health Impact Fund, an alternative framework that pays researchers in the field of medicine who discovers a successful drug (Pogge, 2023). Instead of selling the drug via pharmaceutical corporations, the fund will pay for the innovative idea of researchers in exchange for patent rights, which when used by big firms, means expensive drugs and burdens to the public. Such an alternative framework is meant to promote innovation without the influence of profit-making companies.

Poverty and Democracy

In understanding the meaning of democracy, we need to know the everyday lives of the people. In this country, democracy, and for this reason, development, is a myth. There cannot be any real development if people do not enjoy their democratic rights, and democracy cannot be achieved if people are not free. What is the root of this lack of freedom? The short answer is poverty, whereas the long one is structural injustice. The future of this country is decided by a few people, many of whom finished in elite schools in Katipunan, Quezon City, well connected and the scions of the rich and powerful in government and the private sector, controlling and dictating what is to become of the country's future. We cannot win the war against poverty since the same structures that caused the historical injustices that people suffer from still persist.

I have argued on several instances that we continue to be controlled by an elitist system that is financed by oligarchs who control the daily lives of Filipinos. The Manila-centric type of governance has limited progress in Mindanao and concentrated the wealth of the country in the capital (Malaya, 2017). The social, political, and economic structures in the country continue

to be dominated by an age-old patronage system of politics and an elitist type of democracy that has excluded Mindanao. In this sense, the problem of poverty is intertwined with the political. Hence, understanding poverty cannot just be about whether one is above or below the poverty line because equality of income is not tantamount to equality of human well-being (Sen, 1999). Thus, one must examine poverty beyond the analysis of the economics of welfare. One needs to unveil the reality of unjust structures and systems that impede human development and deprive people of their happiness.

For example, Mindanao continues to be discriminated and its people labeled as violent – an orthodoxy that ignores its vast socio-economic potential. The Indigenous Peoples (IP) of Mindanao suffer from abuse and exploitation, marginalized by powerful political interests and extractive Indus owned by both big corporations and politicians (Gaspar, 2021). What is happening in Mindanao hence is rooted in the ill effects of colonial rule that displaced its local inhabitants (Maboloc, 2025). The elite type of politics in the country only benefited only the rich and powerful who continue to dominate the everyday life of Filipinos. While doing my research on peace and poverty in Muslim Mindanao, I have personally seen and observed how the common man struggles in life. In my book *The Politics of Peace and the Mindanao Problem*, I wrote:

> ...what we have is a weak state that cannot provide to its people the opportunities for a well-lived life. The state cannot protect nor promote the rights of marginalized Filipinos, nor guarantee the enjoyment of their basic social and economic entitlements, because of systemic and structural problems. For many decades, only those who are in positions of power have benefited from whatever economic progress the country must have achieved. The political elites and dynastic politics have stifled economic growth and development. Mindanao, in fact, has been excluded from the national agenda for a long time. The oligarchic nature of the Philippine economy means that resources are only in the hands of a few affluent families (Maboloc 2025, 98).

Fr. Vitaliano Gorospe, S.J., in 1974, also said the same thing. He asked: "How many Filipinos are really free to take into their own hands their own development and destiny and achieve by their own efforts the full human life to which they aspire?" (Gorospe 1974, 427). Such question above is crucial in the issue of social justice. The ideal of social justice, Gorospe

(1974, 438), argues, "includes the relationship of the person to the material world and to the socio-economic structures of society." Iris Marion Young would express the same idea 20 years later in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, although I doubt if Young ever read Fr. Gorospe's *The Filipino Search for Meaning*. The point here is that there is a universal or a common ground for every human thought and that is human experience. Herein, one finds the juxtaposition between philosophy and the social sciences, between human knowledge and everyday experience.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have enunciated the possible relationship between philosophical research and the social sciences. The juxtaposition must consider the issue of methodology. However, the differences between the two disciplines should not prevent the ability of any research to arrive at sound conclusions, although there are limits as well as advantages to both approaches. Yet, the two can be merged. It is about bridging the social sciences to philosophy, in the same way as we connect ethics, politics, and human society. This can be achieved by means of transdisciplinarity, in which there is a recognition of a common goal, two minds working something out in order to understand human reality. To demonstrate this, I used the problem of poverty and its relation to democracy. I cited Pogge and Nussbaum, among others, as two approaches in which philosophy and ethics are applied to solve moral problems, i.e. economic inequality and social injustice.

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