

Between What Was and What Will Be: Big History Insights from the Philippines

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What Was

... like a child bravely taking the initial steps,

we tremble at the possible mishaps and

later delight at the glaring feat ...

Being a Philosophy professor for eighteen years and then a Big History professor for three, I fell in love with Philosophy long before I fell in love with Big History. But, similar to St. Augustine's attribution of his relationship with God, I also say: 'Late have I loved thee, beauty so ancient yet so new.'¹ This exciting love affair with Philosophy and Big History is a marriage that came along and brought forth many splendid realizations. It introduced a dimension that

existed from the very start but was never really pondered upon nor ventured into simply because they were never seen as part of a coherent whole. I used to be intimidated with numbers and chemistry but, suddenly took a different liking, once I was re-introduced to them in a big-history way.

I was intrigued by future-studies scholar Joseph Voros' remark: '... Big History provides an ideal basis for engendering futures / foresight thinking ...'.² I wondered, what is so special about this academic endeavour? Lo and behold, through Big History, I am wearing a different and better lenses now; I hope I am looking at things better than how I looked at them before. A big-historian sees it this way: Today, it is necessary to go back to yesterday, link it to what we have in the here-and-now, and see how it can change our tomorrow. Between what was and what



Figure 1: Holy Angel University, Angeles City, Philippines. Photo courtesy of Holy Angel University Office of Public Relations.

will be, that is the best position for us to be at. We are spectators of what has transpired and what is to unfold, but with a chance of altering or modifying them for the better, now. Everything is connected. In fact, more than being connected, we are interconnected, interdependent, interwoven, intertwined.

How can someone take all of this in? My reply will echo that of journalist Sydney Harris, ‘... [T]he whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows.’³ My take on his statement is that mirrors reflect an image of the self. It may focus on the mundane and superficial aspects at times. I’m not saying it is altogether useless, because many are convinced that the best assessment begins with the self. But, if the intent is to merely focus on ‘me’ and ‘myself,’ we might fall prey to dwelling on the microcosm – a minute (but important) part of the entire picture, from the cosmos to atoms.

Instead, I suggest that we look out into the ‘many windows’ and the many ‘possibilities’ of reality. The windows then can represent a whole new paradigm or perspective we thought never existed, a whole new picture of reality. Hopefully, a bright and delightful window for *awakenings* that will prod us to *act* and do something, anything, towards change – change that transforms and inspires. The beauty about Big History is that, it is an ever-evolving subject; it evolves as we discover new things around us.

Our first attempt to introduce Big History at Holy Angel University (HAU), a Catholic University in Angeles City, Central Luzon (Philippines), received a lot of push and pull. The idea had been initiated by HAU President Luis Calingo, and, in 2017, the first big-history course was taught to selected classes, so we could see how it would be welcomed by the students and the teachers. The next year, it was officially offered to around 3500 first year students as a six-unit general education course, aptly called ‘The First Year Experience.’⁴

As big-history coordinator for the academic year 2019–2020, my efforts were geared towards pedagogical training, a learning plan and educational resource development, along with assessment tools revision. Every teacher’s discipline and expertise were utilized and incorporated into the learning plan, so as to ensure we had a full grasp of Big History within our wider institutional framework. At HAU, we welcome novel things without compromising our Catholic roots. It is our spiritual belief that welds all these realities together. The late Dr. Calingo left a profound

legacy to our university and the Philippines as a whole. His vision to introduce a phenomenal course like this paved the way for many ‘firsts and feats.’

What Is

*... a child, more confident and competent,
walks along with others – amazed and
dumb-founded ...*

Educator and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. elucidates these bits and pieces of inspiring accounts when he said: ‘A moment’s insight is sometimes worth a life’s experience.’⁵ When we are jolted from our seats and suddenly feel a gush of newfound realization, we are presented with a chronicle of life itself; its paradox and purpose. An architecture student in our course wrote about such insights, in relation to the concept of beginnings:

Big History is one of the most peculiar subjects I came across in the entirety of my school years, because I initially thought that Big History pertained to just the history of how the world started. But as I attended more and more classes, I came to the realization that Big History teaches us one extremely important thing that most of us overlook ... The beginning ...

I remember doing a particular plate [assignment] that required us to make a three-dimensional cube using these complex patterns that were stressful to look at on the reference paper. I spent a good day racking my brain, trying to make sense of these patterns. It was only when I started that I realized that every complex pattern started from a line and every line started from a dot. A singular dot on the tracing paper.

I was dumbstruck, telling myself that I focused on the complexity of the patterns too much that I forgot an essential question: “What is the basis of this cube?” It then hit me, that such complexity came from a single dot. Humans underestimate beginnings, and most of the time, we overlook them. But if we think about it more, the “dot” is present in every aspect of our lives.

An author’s “dot” is their initial idea for a story they later developed and published. A

doctor's "dot" is their first readings on a patient's status and evaluating the treatments needed for the patient's wellbeing. An architect's "dot" is their design concept for a building to be later discussed with the engineers. A tree's "dot" is a small seed that sprung.⁶

Big History is the 'dot' that prompted me to think even deeper, loftier. From beginnings, we delve into what beginnings can produce, the birth and death of stars. Indeed, it is a beautiful disaster that is a prelude to another wondrous phenomenon. We take part and marvel at these events every single day. This brings us to a deeper appreciation of the things we know, yet take for granted. We are a speck of dust; minute yet significant, vital, essential. That smallness points to a grander existence that created us – to marvel at the world (not destroy it). I am hoping that through the study of Big History you get to appreciate how lucky you are, how you are a part of the entire story, you are a witness to the grandeur of the cosmos.

With the death of a star comes the birth of abundant and important chemical elements. But the sad reality about resources being abundant and free is that we assume we have full control over them. We develop a mindset of taking more than what we need because 'it is free anyway.' We reached a point where we waste and abuse them, thinking they will never become scarce. I pose the challenge on you as a big-historian, be the spark that will ignite others to see themselves as stewards rather than masters, as co-creators rather than destroyers of the abundance bestowed upon us. I hope we won't wake up wondering why resources are nowhere to be found and what used to be free and abundant already has a big price tag – our planet, our own lives.

So, what is it like teaching and learning Big History in a Catholic institution that welcomes students of diverse religious backgrounds? Development-scholar Jayeel Cornelio's study of Catholicism in the modern Philippines notes how young people have a more individualized approach, seeing it as a personal and experiential relationship with God. This new perspective 'involves a solid, enduring commitment and a strong view of their own Catholic, religious identity.'⁷ They are accepting of varied approaches to understanding and professing their faith.

I have observed this too, how, in the physical and virtual classroom, students' views are respected simply because it matters. It is not solely about looking at one's religious belief but, assessing what ideas and convictions may and

can help improve their own. Big History, I think, provides an avenue for diverse ideologies to converge. They are, after all, part of the unified whole; these are unique and varied ways to concretize what is abstract. Call it a 'dot,' 'God' or an 'ultimate threshold' –all these are humans' attempt to know and explain where we all came from.

Interconnected, interdependent, interwoven – much of what we think and do is contributing to a larger reality. We can see how the human condition reflects society as a whole. How planet Earth is a vital factor to complete the solar system. Each component is diverse yet unified. For now, we can take a peek into what we can fathom (at the very least). Imagine the wonders awaiting us, be struck by the awe-filled wonders of galaxies and other celestial bodies. But even if we may know them or not, even if we may witness it during our lifetime or by the next ones to come, the fact remains that a creative being intricately positioned and orchestrated them to make a masterpiece. We are a part of that masterpiece.

What Will Be

*... like a child, we remain yearning to know;
wanting to take strides ... in spite of, because of ...*

We may find answers to a few of the questions, but, mostly, the answers are nowhere to be found. Be delighted with not having the answers most of the time, because it heralds the probability of knowing more in the future. This is an invitation to every human person in the cosmos to give Big History a try. You might initially take the role of a spectator. In time, you will find yourself taking part in writing the 'narrative.' You will always find yourself being part of the whole story. Just like our big-history experience here at HAU, may you find the courage to take the first step. I hope you will plunge into the waters rather than merely testing it because it is worth the toil. And once we do that, we begin our journey towards being a big-historian and, most importantly, educators.

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Endnotes

1. Augustine 1997: 262.
2. Voros 2018: 263.
3. Harris 1978: 7D.
4. Holy Angel University 2018.
5. Holmes 1860: 301.
6. This report came from Hedy Hazelene Pico, BS Architecture, March 2021, Holy Angel University, Philippines.
7. Cornelio 2016: i (frontmatter).