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Sources of Filipino Thought

RAMON C. REYES

It may sound presumptuous to speak of "Filipino Thought" for the reason that the Philippines could not very well speak of a tradition such as that of China or India or the Greco-Roman Judaic-Christian West. A more serious reason is that insofar as Truth is one there would seem to be no significance to the term "Filipino Thought," except perhaps for a purely historical interest. And yet comparative philosophy seems to have succeeded in identifying essential distinctive traits which constitute each of these three great traditions. Reality reveals itself capable of diverse perspectives and approaches. Hence, although all thought virtually originates from the formal viewpoint of one reality and one truth, each tradition of thought in the end brings into focus only a facet, valid yet particular, of the whole. Truth does not come once and whole to an individual or even to a people, but only by perspectives, through discursive word and self-renunciating work, in man's continual effort to gain now and then a measure of understanding about himself and his circumstances. In this light, there is significance in speaking of "Filipino Thought." Indeed, for the Filipino, there has to be Filipino Thought or none at all. Like any other people, he must eventually take consciousness of his own particular life and his world, his society and his gods in the light of Truth, and thereby realize his proper being.

In general, the thought of a people develops in two basic stages: first, in the form of what we might call *vital thought* by which immediate experience attains a preliminary structuration and verbalization by way of myth, ritual, song and language, folk-tale, traditional sayings and aphorisms, customary legal,

political and religious codes; secondly, in the form of a more *reflexive*, more mediate type of thought, whether conscious or unconsicous, analyzing, systematizing and justifying a vital thought that has reached a high point of growth and, therefore, of conflict, thereby demanding a reintegration, a critical evaluation of its boundaries and particular strengths in view of the ulterior possibilities of man.

It is in this sense that Heidegger says that a great poet or a great thinker or a great stateman is a prophet, for by his work his people is revealed unto itself, gaining a habitation and a name. To be a thinker then is not to be an isolated heightened human subjectivity who within its enclosed individuality communes with some heavenly muse, and from time to time flashing out with creative sparks of divinity. Socrates may be right in saying that the poet is possessed by the divine, thus "en-theos-iastic"; for indeed he must speak in the light of eternal truth. Nonetheless, that of which he speaks is the very life and work of his world, the bedrock of which his word is the mere outcropping. He must be steeped in the tradition of vital thought. He must be grounded as well on the tradition of past reflexive thought, since today's vital thought is yesterday's reflexive thought recognized to be valid and assimilated into the life and institutions of the community.

Of the three great traditions mentioned above, at first sight the Philippines would appear closest to the West by virtue of its past history of Spanish, American and Christian influence. Yet, closer analysis would seem to point otherwise. In Western thought, what is real is predominantly that which exists, that which is there, other than consciousness, imposing itself objectively on the human subjectivity. In so far as the real is other than consciousness, there is then a need of epistemology, a theory of knowledge to ascertain that man does arrive at the truth out there. The basic relation then between man and reality is that of knowledge. Man is essentially a rational, knowing Subjectivity as opposed to a knowable, intelligible object or Being. Eventually, such a perspective led to the development of a rigorous method of reasoning and discourse —

analysis, logical ingerence, verification. Short of which, man is not certain of possessing the truly real, the *episteme*.

Such an axiom of reality and objectivity appears objectively evident indeed until one places himself within another tradition of thought, as the Indian, and then he finds himself with a completely different problematic and thus a different response. The primary preoccupation is not knowledge or *theoria*, but salvation, union with the Absolute. Furthermore, the Absolute is not Someone or Something, for it is not something objective. It transcends all the categories of human knowledge, thus it is neither existent, nor non-existent, nor both, nor neither. In terms of being and non-being then, the Absolute is Nothing, not in the nihilist sense, for, precisely, it transcends these two correlative categories, but in the sense of a *deus absconditus*. And yet, the Absolute is that which is most immanent in me, that which is the most real in the human self. Immanence, however, does not mean immediate identity and presence. As a famous quotation from a Zen master says,

> From eternity to eternity Buddha and I are separated from each other, yet, at the same time, he and I do not fall apart even for a single moment. All day long Buddha and I live facing each other, yet he and I have never a chance to meet each other.

The problem then is one of gradual renunciation of self and of the world so that the Nothingness of the Absolute could come out in its true reality.

While the West stresses objective knowledge and the Indian devotes itself to the spiritual ascent of man, Chinese thought tends to stress the human reality itself. What is real is ultimately reducible to the nature and quality of human relationships. As "The Great Learning" says,

> Those who anciently wished to exemplify illustrious virtue to the whole world, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their characters. Wishing to cultivate their characters, they first made their thoughts sincere. Wishing to make their thoughts sincere, they first extended knowledge to the utmost. Their extending their knowledge to the utmost lay in the investigation of things.

And the "investigation of things" mean not objective things but human relationships, which are broken down into five

family and social types: between parents and children, between ruler and subordinate, between husband and wife, between elder and younger children, between friend and friend. These relationships must conform with two fundamental requirements: the virtue of humaneness (*Jen*) and that of uprightness (*Yi*). The problem then is basically ethical, how to reform man and society such that human relationships would develop into their true nature, and thus bringing peace and harmony among men.

In the context of these three traditions, the Filipino would probably range closest to the Chinese way. Like the Chinese, our first preoccupation is neither religious enlightenment nor logical objective knowledge, but good human relationships. The Filipino, according to our anthropologists and sociologists, perceives reality basically in terms of his family and the small primary group to which he belongs.

He perceives his family to be composed of his nuclear family, his bilateral kins, his affinal and ritual relatives. The family for him is a locus of emotional intimacy and security, forming a tight in-group (*tayo-tayo*). Within the family group, he also distinguishes between the elder and younger generation, between elder and younger children within the nuclear family. Elders are addressed not by their proper names but by their title owing to the position they occupy in the line of generation. Respect of elders is demanded of the younger (*ang paggalang*), sacrifice and suffering, if necessary, for the sake of the younger is expected of the elder (*ang pagmamalasakit*).

Beyond his family group, the Filipino sees himself belonging to a small, primary group in a dyadic, pyramidal fashion. In other words, he does not identify horizontally with his class which cuts across the whole community, but vertically with his authority figures distinguished by their wealth, power and age. He receives protection and other favors from above and should be ready to do the same towards his ties below. The whole group is held together by reciprocating debts of gratitude between coordinates and between superordinate and subordinate (*utang na loob*).

The Filipino sees his physical environment to be hostile and

beyond his control. Unlike Western objective thought which lends itself naturally to a mechanistic view of nature and complementarily, a functional, legalistic view of society, the Filipino's world-view is animistic, turning to be personalistic after contact with Christianity. The Pre-Spanish Filipinos believed in spirits, *diwatas* and *anitos*, dwelling in rivers, mountains, towns and seas. Some of the spirits were thought to be evil, others benevolent, but in any case all of them needed to be appeased by ceremonies and sacrifices. With the coming of Christianity, the veneration of saints has replaced the *maganito* rituals. And so now we have specific devotions for specific favors: thus a saint for finding lost objects, another saint for finding a good husband, still another for really impossible, hopeless cases.

Nonetheless, the Filipino gives great value to endurance and hard work as means to economic self-sufficiency. This self-sufficiency, however, refers not to the individual self, but to the family to which he owes a special debt of gratitude for having brought him to life and nurtured him.

Should he meet success in life through his hard work and endurance, he should therefore attribute it to luck (*suerte*) rather than to his own effort. Without the propitious humor of the personalistic universe and the past sacrifices of his parents and elders for him his efforts would not have gone very far.

The Pre-Spanish Filipino believed in a Supreme Being, *Batula* or *Bathala*. Like the Chinese "Heaven" however, *Bathala* was seen to be distant from the real affairs of men. As Confucius would say, "Heaven reigns, but does not rule." In other words, the Supreme Being does not directly intervene in the workings of men, but only indirectly through the natural moral laws governing human relationships. In our case, this would precisely consist of the cognate virtues of *pakikipag-kapwatao* (participation in our common lot as fellowmen), among which of course would be *ang paggalang* (respect), *pakikisama* (joining others as their equal), *pakikiramdam* (sensitivity to others' feelings). Beyond this, our religious rituals seem to be expressive of prayers of petition in moments of great distress. Hence, our

typical religious symbols, such as Mater Dolorosa, Christ of Good Friday, the Holy Infant in his poverty and helplessness, various saints in their respective moments of painful martyrdom, seem to be expressive of the attitudes of patience, long-suffering, endurance.

After a brief sketch of the Filipino's *vital thought*, the question arises, how does his reflexive thought come about? It is engendered by the evolution and maturation of the historical situation itself, thus of the vital thought.

The first moments of Filipino thought probably arose toward the end of the nineteenth century, when for the first time we began to think of ourselves as one people, not as Tagalogs, or Pampangos, or Ilokanos, or Bisayans, but as one Filipino nation having common grievances against Spain. This consciousness was brought about by a confluence of factors — the opening of Philippine ports to world trade, thus leading to the development of commercial and specialized agriculture, which in turn made possible the emergence of an educated and moneyed middle-class, the access to independence of the Latin-American countries providing us models of action, the political conflict between conservatives and liberals within Spain itself thus encouraging us in our aspirations for freedom and equality.

It is evident that once the concept of "Filipino nation" emerged, it was bound to put into question the realities of our small primary group attitudes and relationships. We have had to re-think and are still re-thinking the premises of our traditional hierarchical form of social authority and our informal *utang na loob* arrangement for social exchange and redistribution of social wealth. As we realize more and more that the body-politic is more than just a collection of barangays, we shall have to develop a system of authority less hierarchical but more functional and dialectic; on the other hand, a system of production and distribution of social wealth more formal and legal to supplement our system of *utang na loob*. When our social and political thinking shall have been done, we shall probably realize that while the final end of the body-politic is some vision of man, and thus ethical and familial, the means toward that end however

will have to be a power structure and mechanism outside of the family and the small primary group.

Nonetheless, the originality of Filipino thought in this regard will probably remain grounded in that particular vision of man characterized by a deep sense of dependence upon other men — dependence upon his parents and elders to whom he owes his life, dependence upon his brothers, sisters and fellowmen, to whom he is bound by *utang na loob*, and the mutual dependence of husband and wife, as expressed in his bilateral type of kinship system. We shall probably discover that at the root of what the social scientist today categorizes as the Filipino's need for social acceptance and smooth personal relations is the Filipino's awareness that to be man is to be dependent in his very being upon one's beloved, one's fellowmen, one's ancestors.

A second locus of Filipino thought formed around a decision, taken sometime after the Second World War, that the Philippines will not be a mere supplier of raw materials and basic agricultural products. We shall be a modern, industrialized country. Such a decision, however, involves certain consequential sub-decisions that we are now only beginning to realize. Given the opportunity, the Filipino has always been receptive to technical change and innovation. We did produce pharmacists, doctors, surveyors, engineers even during the Spanish regime. The pragmatic Filipino has always valued hard work and study as means of improving his family's economic condition. A decision, however, to industrialize a whole nation implies a methodology and perhaps a theory which transcends a purely pragmatic and empirical attitude toward technical innovation motivated by the simple desire of one's family's social security and mobility. The systematic cataloguing of the various technical skills needed as well as the social organization demanded for the formation and orchestrated utilization of such skills will probably require a radical re-thinking of our personalistic view of nature as well as our very concept of human work.

However, again, in this regard the originality of Filipino thought will probably be precisely in his personalistic view of the universe. When everything has been said and done about tech-

nological and economic innovation and development, the Filipino world-view does not yet see life's task to be accomplished. In his personalistic view of the universe, he seems to signify that ultimately in life we have to reckon not only with nature and human nature, but also with cosmic presences or spirits, seen to be the ultimate origin of the problem of evil. While it is not very fashionable these days to speak of devils and angels, the question is far from closed. In any case, for the Filipino mind, evil is hardly explainable by simple want of order. Faced with a physical cataclysm as an earthquake, or with moral evil in himself and in the other, he feels we are at odds with cosmic presences or realities which ultimately transcend our purely human resources or weaknesses. Which leads us then to another possible area of Filipino thought.

A third possible area of Filipino thought is religion. The Filipino Christian, vis-a-vis his fellow Asians, has long taken pride in the claim that his is the only Christian nation in Asia. However, a greater awareness of the cultural traditions of his Indian, Chinese and Japanese neighbors, a greater sensitivity too to the various religious minorities within his own borders, has led the Filipino to doubt the validity and propriety of his claim. Vatican II has taught him that religion is not fundamentally a culture, nor a set of ethical values, but primarily the belief that God has spoken, and in the case of Christianity, the belief that God has become man, has become present in human history. Having received the "good news", it is the task of each people and each culture to respond to such a historical event in terms of its own cultural spirit and genius. The task then of the Filipino theologian is not an eclectic adaptation of American and European Christian theology, but an authentic reflection on his faith grounded in his own people's experience. Such an experience, as we have seen, will probably upon reflection manifest itself to be marked by a deep sense of ontological relatedness to fellowmen, and secondly by a particular sense of the problem of evil. Because there is evil in the world, and evil which is not merely a lack of order in nature and in man, but a positive violation of order by cosmic presences, man, in struggling with it,

must suffer and God together with him. Psychoanalysis notwithstanding, the Filipino sees the necessity and the salutary effect of suffering in life (*ang pagdurusa*). Which would probably explain why our religious symbols are those of suffering rather than of joy. This valuation of suffering would also throw some light on the Filipino propensity for play and game — his *fiestas*, his *pintakasi*, his *beto-beto* and other *palaro*. Life may be sorrowful, but precisely because suffering is ultimately salutary, there is hope that beyond suffering there is another time and another place, such as in play.

No people, no historical epoch holds the Truth. However, insofar as the Totality is present to each historical moment, in other words, insofar as each historical moment is an eternal now, each culture then gains access to its measure of truth by remaining faithful to the spirit of its own *tempora* and *mores*.