

## ON FILIPINO SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

Christopher Ryan Maboloc, M.A., M.A.E.  
Ateneo de Davao University  
Davao City

### INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the fundamental distinction between the western humanist tradition in Philippine moral education and the idea of a Filipino social conscience. I argue that western morality, which emphasizes on the power of the individual as an autonomous subject, is incompatible with the Filipino experience. There is a need, in this sense, to reshape the tradition of moral education in the Philippines and draw from the richness of traditional Filipino values and the core experience of our sense of solidarity in the family. The youth's moral education, if it is to become the very foundation of a just society and of a society that respects human rights, should make manifest the value of a deeply embedded spirit of a social conscience.

This paper puts into contrast the humanist and the communitarian traditions that have inspired the search for the Filipino spirit. In terms of method, I will use Western philosophers and Filipino thinkers, hoping that the end result would enable us to play with the response to the question, and provide an opening to the window that leads us forth to the many possibilities of social change. The task at hand is to be able to translate the ideas of this paper into action. But it is worth mentioning here that my intention is to create a kind of consciousness that will serve as a guide to our people, including those who are in positions of authority. The paper simply puts a basic claim to our attitudes toward moral education, which is to a great extent predominantly western in value, scope and spirit.

It is fitting, I believe, to begin with Bertrand Russell's humanistic conception of education. Noam Chomsky quotes Russell, who writes, "the humanistic conception regards a child as a gardener regards a young tree, i.e., as something with intrinsic nature,

which will develop into an admirable form, given proper soil and air and light.”<sup>1</sup> The individual and his glory, his assertiveness and free will, characterize the humanist tradition. This liberal spirit of humanism is anchored on the search for the meaning of the self – the apodictic ego, the very foundation of our epistemic judgments. John Kavanaugh succinctly puts it this way, “if I am to become a philosopher, then it is I who must philosophize.”<sup>2</sup>

### **The Western Humanist Tradition**

In his 1950 Nobel Prize lecture, Russell says, “the main thing needed to make the world happy is intelligence. And this, after all, is an optimistic conclusion, because intelligence is a thing that can be fostered by known methods of education.”<sup>3</sup> From the point of view of social justice, making education accessible to all guarantees one basic entitlement of people under any democratic system – the empowerment of their autonomy. The right thing to do, it can be said, is to introduce people to conditions that will ultimately improve their status in life. For people to make better choices, they need to learn. Intelligence, in this sense, is something that we can propagate in individuals. This also means that people, in the pursuit of just terms of social cooperation, cannot be dictated upon. John Rawls writes in *A Theory of Justice* that “a person’s sense of justice is not a compulsive psychological mechanism clearly installed by those in authority in order to insure his unswerving compliance with rules designed to advance their interests.”<sup>4</sup> The capacity of people to enter into an agreement that will mutually protect them is based on a commonality of human interests. This proceeds from the fact that rational people can agree, if and only if their autonomy, the ground and norm of that consensus, is not compromised. Thus, justice is invoked for the sake of the moral inviolability of the individual, which means that no man or woman should be made less free when others pursue their happiness.

The humanist tradition asserts the primacy of human freedom. It asserts the judicious use of human reason. Rawls states further that, “moral education is education for autonomy. In due course everyone will know why he would adopt the principles of

justice and how they are derived from the conditions that characterize his being an equal in a society of moral persons.”<sup>5</sup> Through and by means of his or her education a person secures his place in the whole scheme of social and political relations. Rawls adds that “equally if not more important is the role of education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of his society and to take part in its affairs, in this way to provide for each individual a secure sense of his own worth.”<sup>6</sup> In the same manner, giving value to individual autonomy means that “the radical reconstruction of society must search for ways to liberate the creative impulse, not to establish new forms of authority.”<sup>7</sup> This implies that the individual should not be constrained in his or her desire to pursue the good, which ultimately translates to his or her greater self-realization. In the eyes of the youth, any form of authority can connote control and manipulation. They perceive some rules as mechanisms that constrict human possibilities rather than empower. Some of these are the policies which we find in the bureaucracy, academic institutions, and the church. Ultimately, these things collide with the notion of individual freedom.

Justice in the liberal sense is meant primarily to serve and to promote the welfare of the individual. Institutions are built to make human life more free. They are established to disentangle the individual from the sources of un-freedom, i.e. poverty and fundamentalism. For liberals, freedom ultimately defines the value of one’s humanity. Wilhelm von Humboldt, according to Chomsky, enunciates the meaning of this freedom by saying “whatever does not spring from a man’s free choice, or is only the result of instruction and guidance, does not enter into his very being, but still remains alien to his true nature; he does not perform it with truly human energies, but merely with mechanical exactness.”<sup>8</sup> To reduce human life to what is merely mechanical and material is to make life less human. For instance, although the knowledge and skills that students learn in the classroom should be applicable to the demands of the outside world, students should also possess that creative edge, that initiative which will enable them to make good decisions in life and thereby grow as persons.

But programming what our children are to study, which is a certain kind of reductionism, is nothing but oppressive and anti-humanist. Quite realistically, Russell, for

instance, tells us that “the soil and the freedom required for man’s growth are immeasurably more difficult to discover and to obtain.”<sup>9</sup> There are many challenges to moral education that lie ahead and these are enormous in terms of scope, examples of which are the fundamentalist attitude of some cultures and the glaring material inequalities in the world which conceal the broader horizon of human reality.

Chomsky claims that for Russell, “education should not aim at a passive awareness of dead facts, but an activity directed towards the world that our efforts are to create”<sup>10</sup>. This activity does not refer to the mechanical or the functional. It is above the creative ways in which man asserts himself in the world. The humanist tradition picks this insight from Humboldt, who according to Chomsky, pursues the spirit of humanity in the idea that “to inquire and to create – these are the centers around which all human pursuits more or less directly revolve.”<sup>10</sup> The humanist tradition, in this sense, relies on the creative impulse of the individual in order to transform an otherwise inconvenient world. This creative impulse is like a wellspring of possibilities. It can be a source of new values which the individual can create for himself as he engages with the world. These values become his moral powers, intrinsically defining his notion of the good.

Humboldt adds, “all moral culture springs solely and immediately from the inner life of the soul, and can only be stimulated in human nature, and never produced by external or artificial contrivances...”<sup>11</sup> The basic idea here is that a free man is in charge of the affairs of the world, his inner nature dictating the tempo and the ends to which all human intelligence is devoted. External authority, Russell contends, only tends to “make man an instrument to serve its arbitrary ends, overlooking his individual purposes.”<sup>12</sup> The strength with which man relies on is nothing but his creativity, his power to change an otherwise meaningless existence. The world is a big place, and there is no sense in being envious of others, for possibilities are infinitely endless for the human spirit. This is the ultimate claim of human reason. The expanse of the universe, most of which is unknown, is the playground for the human imagination.

## On Moral Sentiment and Reason

But the above humanist tradition, anchored on a strong affinity to moral individualism, I believe, has been a failure. Instead, I would argue that we should appeal to moral sentiment. Moral sentiment, I believe, is first experienced in the family. It is therefore communitarian in nature. In the family, we treasure the meaning of brotherhood. This brotherhood manifests our sense of solidarity. As Filipinos, it is this sense of solidarity that has defined for us the basic meaning of our humanity. Thus, I assert that there is a need to re-claim this basic meaning, the bond of solidarity that ties all of us as “one” – as a nation, a family, a people.

Let me explain the meaning of communitarianism. For Michael Sandel, there is no such thing as an “unencumbered self.”<sup>13</sup> The self is always informed by values which are found in the community. These values are norms that have developed through time. They are in our traditions. They become our way of life. In time, we become these values. As opposed to the liberal attitude, the individual’s sense of self is encumbered by these values which tradition, culture and the community define.

The above serves as the background in our task of putting into question Western rationality. Richard Rorty, in the essay *Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality*, argues that “moral philosophy has systematically neglected the much more common case: the person whose treatment of a rather narrow range of featherless bipeds is morally impeccable, but who remains indifferent to the suffering of those outside this range, the ones he or she thinks of as pseudo-humans.”<sup>14</sup> Our moral problems are not due to our lack of moral wisdom but rather they continue to disturb us because of our lack of moral concern for our fellow human beings. There is no inadequacy in terms of our intellectual preparation, even in moral judgment. But the fact of the matter is that our sense of solidarity has been replaced by individual pride and greed. The individual is put above all – the family, the nation, and others become secondary.

The Jesuit Vitaliano Gorospe in 1974 writes, for instance, that “one of the major challenges of the seventies is a morality that is communitarian, socially and nation-oriented, a morality with a social conscience.”<sup>15</sup> More than three decades thereafter, people have not matured in terms of a social conscience. They have become very eager victims of consumerism and the manipulative tendencies of technology. The life people live has become inauthentic. For instance, instead of making the effort to say what we feel and value the presence of the other, we simply “text” what we want to say to our beloved. “Texting” develops many relationships. But it also commodifies these relationships. Thus, contemporary human life has become less socially aware. Technology serves many human interests, but it also deprives humans of their authentic social nature.

The world is not just. But the problem is not just theoretical or technical. The problem is prejudice. Prejudice defeats the role of justice in society. Moral education can change this. Rawls tells us that “resources for education are not to be allotted solely or necessarily merely according to their return as estimated in productive trained abilities but also according to their worth on enriching the personal and social life of citizens, including here the less favored.”<sup>16</sup> The problem with liberal education is that although it is founded on the respect for the value of each person, the social conscience of that person is diluted by an emphasis on moral autonomy.

Rorty notes, “to rely on the suggestions of sentiment rather than on the commands of reason is to think of powerful people gradually ceasing to oppress others, or ceasing to countenance the oppression of others, out of mere niceness, rather than out of obedience to the moral law.”<sup>17</sup> But he adds that his “doubts about the effectiveness of appeals to moral knowledge are doubts about causal efficacy, not about epistemic status.”<sup>18</sup> Rorty argues that humanism has created the rational egotist whose concern as an individual is self-knowledge. This is, possibly, the kind of knowledge that elevates the individual from the peripherals and would make him or her finally see the truth. The hope is that after one sees the truth, one will finally understand the good. In finding the good, it is expected that one finally finds the very purpose of one’s life in the achievement of that good. But Rorty

tells us that Plato simply “got moral philosophy on the wrong foot. He led moral Philosophers to concentrate on the rather rare figure of the psychopath, the person who has concern for any human being other than himself.”<sup>19</sup> While people ask themselves about the meaning of human nature, thousands of children die every hour due to hunger and hundreds of thousands of children beg on the streets, their dreams dimmed forever by the concern of others for being and becoming.

### **Filipino Social Philosophy and Morality**

The above seems to be the case for moral education in the Philippines because of what the educator Celeste Botor considers as a western way of solving things. She notes that “the supra-structure of the present Filipino culture is of Western origin. Confidence in the ability of the individual to solve his problems, respect for individual achievement, and stress in personal rationality, technological expertise, stress on social responsibility, and personal legal rules are traits observable in urban centers.”<sup>20</sup> There seems to be an over-emphasis on the individual and on the merits of his or her achievements. The poor child, who wanders the streets clothed by violence, is often blamed for his miseries. This becomes clear when those who are in power discuss which mechanisms of just distribution are to be established for the common good. A child uncared for, most especially with their disturbing number in our dangerous streets, should obligate any government to act and respond in the name of justice. However, the thing people ask is this – *who cares?*

In contrast to the above, Botor notes that the “the infrastructure of traditions and customs found in the rural areas relies on primary groups to solve individual problems, respect for social structure rather than personal achievement, and emphasis on primary group interest rather than individual interest.”<sup>21</sup> It is not enough to enshrine justice and equality in constitutional essentials. Rather, in a very practical way, it is something that we should value in the way we actually live. This is necessary in order to save the Filipino family. It has long been shattered to pieces, disturbed by modern society’s lack

of values. The family, as that fertile ground of love, care, and understanding, should re-claim and re-assert its primordial importance in creating and advancing a just world.

The spirit of the Filipino family as a coherent social unit can be seen from the notion of harmony. In truth, according to Leonardo Mercado, “the Filipino is less-individualistic because he wants to be in harmony with his fellowmen...it is a harmony which also explains the Filipino’s communitarian nature.”<sup>22</sup> This assertion emphasizes the solidarity that is essential to our ways of doing things, a social philosophy that has been lost in favor of the modern and individualistic western lifestyle. For Mercado, western modern philosophy defines the person in terms of his conscience, liberty, free disposition of self, that is, of insofar as he decides for himself and freely disposes of himself.<sup>23</sup> Of course, this is a view that encompasses the social aspect of man, but which, according to Mercado, is a definition from the individualistic viewpoint. For Mercado, the Filipino looks at the person from the viewpoint of harmony. For instance, the Filipino, however poor, sees to it that he or she makes that gesture to be in harmony with his fellowmen, something which we find in the value of hospitality.

Now, what does it really mean to commune with others? What does it mean to value strangers but who are nevertheless one of our own people? Perhaps, the value of human life does not seem apparent in the eyes of those who feel nothing for the abandoned children, the uncared for in orphanages or the homeless. The reason is simple – these children are not their children. Thus, it is almost impossible for them to show love and affection. In contrast, our communitarian values of love, care, and understanding,<sup>24</sup> tell us that we belong to one community, that we are one people, that we are one family. The stranger becomes a fellow, the other becomes my fellow. Thus, it is the family’s sense of value that enables the young to see the importance of caring for the many unwanted lives around us. Such is the case because the experience of being loved and being cared for ultimately opens our soul to the pain and suffering of people who are in need. Values, therefore, need to be seen, just as love also needs to be shown in a very concrete sense. The essence of a value, Gorospe says, is not a tendency in things which points to their purpose, but value is seen by intuition or insight.<sup>25</sup>

Without love, it is easy to reduce the person into a mechanical function or an elementary purpose. For instance, in the case of many old people in the western world, a world founded on consumerism and material wealth, meaning is to be equated with productivity. A person who ceases to contribute to the over-all good of society through his productivity becomes a burden, a liability and is therefore dispensable. In such a situation, it is the consumer society that dictates whether or not others deserve their humanity.

I pray to God that such is not the kind of world that we are preparing our students for. But the point is that we train students to become rational egotists, whose question, Rorty asserts, is “why should I be moral?”<sup>26</sup> The right question, Rorty would say, is rather “why should I care about a stranger, a person who is no kin to me, a person whose habits I find disgusting?”<sup>27</sup> It is not knowledge of the good that obliges one to do the good. Rather, it is one’s personal commitment, the effort on the part of the individual to do things as a gesture of kindness or love. Gorospe echoes this idea when he says that “it is really one’s personal orientation or prior commitment which determines what is real for a person. The persons whom I understand, love and am committed to are very real to me...the nature of the real is personal or better still, inter-personal.”<sup>28</sup>

The task at hand is for people to begin to realize that the person next to him is a real human being. Just as an egotist desires achievement and the novelty of his or her ideas, a person, born poor and less endowed with creative skills, also desires to live a life that is free. For Gorospe, the “new meaning of freedom is equality and participation.”<sup>29</sup> He says:

Every man is the equal of every other so far as human dignity is concerned and ought to have the opportunity to become free by social, political, and economic participation in society. Individual freedom is understood as the basic human freedom to become fully human. But we cannot fully develop as human persons unless we contribute our share towards the development of the human community.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, our hope is that moral education will make people recognize the dignity of each and every human being, and with that what follows is respect for human rights. Thus, moral education should serve the very foundation of a just society. The recognition of the rights of others indicates that people live in this world through mutual respect and tolerance. It then tells us there is a common culture, the “culture of human rights”, which is universal in the sense that it is about each and every individual human being, and that it is, to a very great extent, an idea that concerns the very purpose of justice in society. Education consists first and foremost in the recognition that a “human rights culture” begins in the very way parents treat their children, translating such into a kind of solidarity. It is a kind of solidarity that seeks to promote the greater good of the community. Ultimately, the basic concern in the pursuit of such good is the creation of a society that is just. In the advent of this “human rights phenomenon,”<sup>31</sup> what follows is the capacity of each person to value others just as he or she values himself or herself. Moral education, therefore, should enable men and women, especially our youth, to recognize the value of each and every single life – not only of one’s own.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Chomsky, Noam. *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom*, 1971, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> Kavanaugh, John. *Human Freedom in Philosophy of Man: Selected Readings*, 1986, p.20.

<sup>3</sup> Chomsky, 1971, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*, 1971, p. 452.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Russell, Bertrand. *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, 1916, p.25. Chomsky, 1971, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Kymlicka, Will. *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Rorty, Richard. *Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality in On Human Rights*, 1993, p. 124.

<sup>15</sup> Gorospe, Vitaliano. *The Filipino Search for Meaning*, 1974, p.35.

<sup>16</sup> Rawls, 1971, p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> Rorty 1993, p. 130.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 119, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Rorty 1993, p. 123.

<sup>20</sup> Botor, Celeste. *Essays in the Philosophy of Education*, 1997 p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> Mercado, Leonardo. *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, 1974, p. 100.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 102-103.

<sup>24</sup> By “understanding”, I do not mean the western definition. Rather, I refer to that basic attitude of the Filipino to accommodate differences, shortcomings, and gaps in order to keep the relationship intact.

<sup>25</sup> Gorospe 1974, p. 46.

<sup>26</sup> Rorty 1993, p. 133.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Gorospe 1974, p. 191.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 420.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Rorty 1993, 132

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Botor, Celeste. *Essays in the Philosophy of Education*, Manila: Rex Bookstore, 1997.

Chomsky, Noam. *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1971.

Gorospe, Vitaliano. *The Filipino Search for Meaning*, Manila: Jesuit Educational Association, 1974.

Kavanaugh, John. *Human Freedom in Philosophy of Man: Selected Readings*, edited by Manuel Dy Jr., Quezon City: Goodwill, 1986.

Kymlicka, Will. *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Mercado, Leonardo. *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications, 1974.

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard, 1971.

Rorty, Richard. *Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality in On Human Rights*, edited by Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley, New York: Basic Books, 1993.

Russell, Bertrand. *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1916.