

LANGUAGE AND ITS PHILOSOPHICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

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Leonardo Mercado's *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*¹ is an interpretation of how rural Filipinos, which comprise three-fourths of the country's population, view the world of things, the other world, and themselves as men. The conclusion that the Filipino *Weltanschauung* is non-dualistic is based on the metalinguistic analysis of three major Philippine languages—Cebuano, Tagalog, and Ilocano—and the analysis of the behavior of the speakers of these tongues. Mercado believes that since his work is pioneering, his metalinguistic and behavioral interpretations of facts can only be probable until such time when newer, convincing data either reinforce his interpretations or disprove them.²

Since the book is intended as a treatise in philosophy rather than in anthropology, linguistics, sociology, or psychology, I will analyze certain items in the work which have some bearing on Mercado's methodology and on the activity of the philosopher.

1. **On Language.** That every (natural) language has its own philosophical presuppositions has long been conceded by philosophers and linguistic anthropologists. A child born in a culture imbibes that culture's language and consequently inherits its philosophical presuppositions. Though little is known about the origin of language, we do know that a particular language, because of constant use through the years by a group of people, acquires for its individual words or phrases a standard usage.³ In this sense the group has institutionalized its language. Any word or phrase used not in accordance with the established usage is either stipulative, technical, leniently used, or simply nonsense. It is by virtue of individual words or phrases acquiring a usage (together with the fact that language is intimately linked with thought) that man appears at the disposal of language. Fortunately, however, some people—the philosophers especially—do not only clarify how a word or group of words is used in a given context; they also question and even transcend the philosophical presuppositions of their language. That is why

Westerners like Maurice Merleau-Ponty can present a theory of perception⁴ which is closer to what Mercado considers as Eastern thought, i.e., "incarnational" or non-dualistic and non-linear.

2. **On the Filipino.** Though the term "Filipinos" originally refers to Spaniards born in the Philippines and later, towards the end of the Spanish regime, to Malay Filipinos, Mercado invokes Article III of the 1973 Constitution, except section 1(4), i.e., Philippine citizenship by naturalization, for his working definition of this term: section 1(1) — those who are citizens of the Philippines at the time of the adoption of the Constitution; section 1(2) — those whose fathers *and* mothers are Filipino citizens; and section 1(3) — those born of Filipino mothers and alien father) who elect Philippine citizenship upon reaching the age of majority. Since Mercado rejects section 1(4), he obviously excludes in his working definition naturalized Filipinos who are in fact Philippine citizens by the time of the adoption of the 1973 Constitution. Section 1(2) is erroneously copied (in the 1973 Constitution the relevant phrase is "fathers or mothers"⁵). Section 1(2) means that if a Filipino father or mother of a child marries an alien, that child, without need of election, is a Filipino.⁶ Section 1(3) is self-explanatory.

On the basis of the above working definition, I will discuss the relation between being a Filipino and speaking a particular language, the "modal Filipino,"⁷ and the title of Mercado's book.

(a) *Language and the Filipino.* A Malay Filipino may speak his native tongue, but he who speaks German or English fluently, although he cannot speak Pilipino, may still be considered a Filipino provided his parents are themselves Malay Filipinos and he has not been naturalized. (In other words, he was born and brought up in a foreign land and his parents never used Pilipino in their conversations.) A foreigner, on the other hand, who has an excellent command of Cebuano, Tagalog, or Ilocano is not a Filipino unless he is a naturalized citizen. It appears clear then that speaking a particular language is not in any way connected with being a Filipino.

(b) *The Average Filipino Personality.* It is not clear why the average Filipino personality is that of the rural Filipino is not represent-

ative of the entire nation any more than a Filipino Catholic is representative of religious groups in the country. To contend that the thinking of Filipino Catholics or rural Filipinos, e.g., is representative of the thinking of Filipino Muslims or the educated Filipinos is to be in error. There is perhaps a typical rural Filipino, a typical Filipino Catholic, a typical educated Filipino, or a typical Muslim, but I am inclined to believe there is no such modal or average Filipino personality. (The "average" or "common" man in everyday speech is the *ordinary man* in contradistinction with the intellectual or the scientist. He is not meant to be modal or representative of a country's total population.) In fact this concept is not necessary in the book since it is the Cebuano, Tagalog, or Ilocano language which is important, whether it is spoken by a rural Filipino, an urban/westernized Filipino, a naturalized Filipino, or an alien.

(c) *The Book's Title.* *Elements of Filipino Philosophy* gives one the impression that any philosophical point of view—written by a Filipino—which is not in line with these elements, i.e., not non-dualistic and not non-linear, is Western-based or is simply non-Filipino. The title is to me inaccurate. In any given society foreign cultural elements are introduced, like religions, political ideologies, ideas on education, etc., and sometimes they become part of the culture of that society. Sometimes, however, only a portion of that society is influenced. So we may speak of Filipino Buddhists, Filipino Muslims, Filipino Agnostics, Filipino Marxists, English-speaking Filipinos, and of course Filipino Christians. If a Filipino Christian writes in Hebrew a philosophical point of view based on Christianity, the resulting work is not Jewish but Filipino. If a Filipino communist writes in English certain modifications of the teachings of Karl Marx, the resulting product is not German or British but Filipino. Similarly, if an American Taoist writes his Taoistic views in Pilipino, the finished product is not Chinese or Filipino but American. It follows from these that a Filipino philosophy does not have to be non-dualistic, etc. It is enough that it is written by a Filipino.⁸

The book's title, to be accurate and reflective of its contents, should have been *The Philosophical Presuppositions of Languages Used by Cebuano, Tagalog, and Ilocano Rural Filipinos*.

3. **On Philosophy.** According to Mercado, of the three schools of thought on the definition of philosophy, viz., the Aristotelian and the traditionalists (philosophy is viewed as a science which investigates first principles and causes), the existentialists (who opt for a plurality of definitions), and the anthropological view (which says that each group of people has its own existential postulates), the first two "belong to the educated and the elite" while the third belongs to the masses, but "may also include the scopes of the first two definitions."⁹ To support his preference for the third definition, Mercado quotes A.P. Elkin who maintains that though the inherent and implied cosmologies and metaphysics of preliterate peoples, such as the American Indians, the Polynesians, and the Australian aborigines, may not be appropriately termed philosophical when compared to philosophical systems of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, Berkeley, and Russell; the philosophical activity of these preliterate peoples is actually similar to that of Thales and Heraclitus.¹⁰ Our task is to discover where the similarity lies and to ascertain what it is to philosophize.

(a) *The Philosophical Activities of Preliterate Peoples and the Pre-Socratics.* Western philosophy, we are told, began in wonder. Pre-Socratic philosophers were concerned with solving certain philosophical problems: those about matter, about numbers, and about identity and change. Their activity was therefore a deliberate attempt to answer questions of the kind: what ultimate cosmic reality is there out of which everything comes into being and everything returns? (The Pre-Socratics did not analyze their language in order to discover their existential postulates.) It is thus difficult to see how the Greek philosophical activity can apply appropriately to that (if ever they have one) of preliterate peoples and rural Filipinos.

(b) *The Act of Philosophizing.* The word "philosophy" literally means "love of wisdom," although etymologically it "connotes the love of exercising one's curiosity and intelligence."¹¹ Though in our country, the term "pilosopo," which is derived from the Spanish term "filosofo," has the meaning of a lover of wisdom in some contexts (as in "Pilosopong Tasyo"), it has the meaning of a sophist in other contexts. As a matter of fact, to call a person a *pilosopo* is generally to disparage him. But anyway, to philosophize in its original and primary sense is to

use "reason and observation to gain understanding of the universe."¹² It is a dynamic, deliberate, and rational activity. Later, however, poetical reflection, mystical experience, venerable pronouncements, and the like, provided they present a particular view about man, society, the world, etc., have been assimilated in the meaning of philosophizing. Despite this, cosmogonic myths, though closer to Pre-Socratic cosmologies in that both are brought into being by individuals and are not presuppositions of any language, have not been included since they contain no tacit or explicit arguments purporting to show why the myth in question is *the* explanation, e.g., of the origin of the world. They are, according to Kees Bolle,¹³ simply explanatory transcendent pronouncements. Pre-Socratic philosophies, being themselves natural explanations, carry the implied, if not the explicit, reasons why this or that is the basic cosmic substance of the universe, or these or those are the ultimate realities. (The search for the ultimate stuff is by the way a recurring theme in Western philosophy: Anaximander's "Boundless Infinite" is closer to Immanuel Kant's "noumena," Herbert Spencer's "Unknowable," and Russell's "neutral monism.")

4. On Filipino Philosophy. When someone speaks of German or Chinese philosophy, he does not ordinarily mean the philosophical presuppositions of the German or Chinese language, but he means the individual thoughts of German or Chinese philosophers. If the term "philosophy" is used to refer to existential postulates of preliterate people, it is because in its broadest sense philosophy means "a way of looking at things." The Australian aboriginal philosophy (P₁) is a group's point of view based on language while Greek philosophy (P₂) is a set of individual points of view within the group.

Is there a Filipino philosophy? In the (technical) sense of P₁ my answer is affirmative, but only insofar as there is Pilipino, not Cebuano, Tagalog, or Ilocano. However, this is not the kind of philosophy Filipinos would like to be proud of in that it is not something outstanding. Moreover, it appears as if the Filipinos are reduced to the category of preliterate peoples. Contemporary philosophers of language do not in fact go to the extent of discovering the existential principles inherent in their respective languages (this activity is left to linguistic anthropolo-

gists in particular though, they are not generally interested in national languages but in languages of cultural minorities) and write something like *Elements of French Philosophy* or *Elements of British Philosophy* simply because though language in a sense mirrors thought, it does not necessarily mirror reality.

There is also Filipino philosophy in the (ordinary) sense of P₂ and Mercado acknowledges this in Jose Rizal and Apolinario Mabini¹⁴ except that their significance as philosophers in the History of Philosophy of the World is practically nil. Filipino philosophy (P₂) is still to me at this time in its infancy.

5. On Having a National Language. There is truth in what Rizal (through Simoun) has said: that language is a people's way or mode of thinking. But he has been wrong in saying that Spanish cannot express the natives' ideas and emotions.¹⁵ Although it takes so much time and effort to gain competence in a foreign tongue, the few who ably mastered Spanish expressed their ideas and emotions flawlessly in that language, such as Rizal himself, Marcelo H. del Pil, Graciano Lopez Jaena, *et al.* Ideas and emotions are not one among those (syntactic and phonemic structures) which are tied down with any particular language. A language is simply a vehicle for expressing ideas and emotions. When an idea is novel to the language in question, a new word is coined for it.

It is admittedly impossible to expect every Filipino who has been formally exposed to English in the schools to have mastered it, but like Rizal (whose Spanish is excellent), those who are competent in using English (such as Nick Joaquin) express through it their ideas and emotions cogently.

A person competent in a language thinks in terms of that language. He does not think in terms of his native tongue and then translates it in his head to a foreign language. Half-baked Filipino speakers of English find difficulty in expressing their ideas simply because they translate Tagalog, for example, in their heads to English. In this case the difficulty in expressing their ideas and emotions flawlessly in English has something to do with their competence (or rather incompetence). Rizal has confused one's competence in a language with the language itself. (Thinking in terms of the language one is competent in is different from

translating, which is fitting in a differently-shaped container the solid contents of another container.)

The reasons behind the non-acceptance of Spanish or English as our national language are partly nationalistic (to check "the incursions of a foreign culture" and to preserve "our native traditions, manners, and values"¹⁶) and partly pragmatic (since the great majority of Filipinos have an inadequate grasp of the nuances of either Spanish or English, it is but practical that Spanish as a compulsory subject and English as the medium of instruction in our schools be done away with). I personally believe these reasons are justified. They have, however, nothing to do with Spanish or English *per se* but with the harmful effects of adopting either of them as the common language of the people.

Since the formal adoption of "Filipino" as the national language is in the future,¹⁷ the relevant problem is what Filipino philosophers or Filipino students of philosophy should do at present. My feeling is that they should make use of whatever current language they think they can express their philosophical views better. And this precisely is what I did in my book *Circumstantialism*.¹⁸

NOTES

¹Leonardo N. Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy* (Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications, 1974).

²*Ibid.*, p. 194.

³Read in this connection Thomas Pyles' "Dictionaries and Usage," *Linguistics Today*, ed. Archibald A. Hill (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1969), pp. 127-136.

⁴Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

⁵Editorial Board (National Book Store), *The New Constitution of the Philippines Explained* (Caloocan City: Philippine Graphic Arts, Inc., 1977), p. 7.

⁶*Ibid.* See the explanation of section 2.

⁷Mercado, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 11-12, 192, and 195.

⁸The fact that British philosopher J. L. Austin wrote in French the article

"Performatif-Constatif" which he delivered in March 1958 at Royaumont did not make his philosophical views non-British. The same case holds with the Spanish writings of Rizal, *et al.*, and the English writings of Filipinos of this century.

The inclusion of George Santayana, a Spaniard, in a list of American philosophers (under the category American Critical Realism) is irregular, although this inclusion must have been prompted not by Santayana's having written his works in English but by the fact that he went to Boston from Madrid at the age of eight, studied and graduated *summa cum laude* at Harvard College, taught at Harvard's Philosophy Department, and lived in the United States for at least thirty-five years. It is because of these that some Americans practically thought of him as an American, although he still considered himself a Spaniard and refused to relinquish his Spanish citizenship. His wish before his death was to be buried in a plot reserved for Spanish nationals in the Catholic cemetery of Rome.

⁹Mercado, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 4. See A. P. Elkin's "Elements of Australian Aboriginal Philosophy," *Oceania*, 40 (1969), 86.

¹¹John Passmore, "Philosophy," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 6 (1967), 216.

¹²W.K.C. Guthrie, "Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 7 (1967), 38.

¹³Kees W. Boole, "Myth and Mythology," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 12 (1975), 793.

¹⁴Mercado, *op. cit.*, p. 4. Read his article "The Role of Filipino Philosophy in Filipino Psychology," *Solidarity*, 9 (1975) for additional insights on his technical meaning of Filipino philosophy.

¹⁵Mercado, *Elements...*, p. 41. See Jose Rizal's *El Filibusterismo*, trans. Leon Ma. Guerrero [Hong Kong: Longman Group (Far East) Limited, 1965], p. 50. See also Renato Constantino's "Our Task: To Make Rizal Obsolete" in the collection *The Filipinos in the Philippines and other Essays* (Quezon City: Malaya Books, Inc., 1971), p. 143.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 144. Read in the same collection "The Miseducation of the Filipinos," pp. 39-65, and "Our Captive Minds," pp. 66-80.

¹⁷Editorial Board (National Book Store), *op. cit.*, p. 42.

¹⁸Rolando M. Gripaldo, *Circumstantialism* (Dumaguete City: Silliman University Press, 1977).