

Filipino Philosophy: Towards a Nationalistic View¹

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Abstract: In this paper, I propose a nationalistic view of Filipino philosophy whose main contention is to set aside questions regarding definition and criteria for Filipino philosophy, and start doing philosophy in the country that is worth bothering for the Filipino people. In line with that, I first elucidate the nationalistic view by situating it within the debate surrounding the nature of Filipino philosophy. Then, I propose the main line of research by which the nationalistic view can be developed. Finally, I conclude by highlighting the reasons that make this view one of the most fruitful directions that Filipino philosophers may take.

Keywords: Filipino philosophy, nationalism, cultural identity, value of philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

The Filipino philosopher Leonardo Mercado once said, “The love of wisdom is not just a leisurely search for truth.”² It would eventually be clear that what he implies by that statement is that philosophers should not only seek whatever truths may be available for discovery but choose to narrow down on truths that are likely to have beneficial effects on society. In light of that aim, the overarching framework that permeates Mercado’s philosophical project is to bring out a philosophy that is uniquely Filipino. As he himself asserts, his philosophy is “a form of nationalism.”³ For him, the idea of an intellectual, not only personal, nationalism is possible and must be encouraged, and philosophy can pave the ways towards the development of such intellectual nationalism. Philosophy is thus not an abstract discipline whose benefits are merely to those who enjoy doing it but, more importantly, it can be an engine even in some small ways towards nation-building and Filipino identity formation. We may call this the nationalistic view of Filipino philosophy.

In this paper, I seek to develop a nationalistic view of Filipino philosophy, albeit different from how Mercado conceives of it.⁴ My contention is this: when Filipino philosophers speculate about Filipino philosophy, they should not ask what makes a particular philosophy Filipino, but rather what makes that philosophy *worth bothering* for the Filipino people. In other words, my proposed nationalistic view is one that is rooted in the value and practice of philosophy in the country and who is supposed to benefit from it. In this view, philosophy as done in the country should have the real potential to influence the Filipino public consciousness to appreciate the public value of philosophy and see how

² Leonardo Mercado, “What is Philosophy?” in *Filipino Thought* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc., 2000), 9.

³ Emmanuel De Leon and Marvin Einstein Mejaro, “An Interview with Leonardo Nieva Mercado, SVD,” in *Kritike*, 10:2 (December 2016), 4.

⁴ It should be noted, however, that despite the differences my view is heavily inspired by Mercado’s.

such practice of philosophy can throw light on both perennial and current issues that concern Filipinos. This is what makes it *primarily* nationalistic.

THE UNENDING DEBATE OVER FILIPINO PHILOSOPHY

The issues surrounding the nature of Filipino philosophy run into deep and well-explored waters. What strikes at the heart of the discussion is the question: ‘Is there something that we can call Filipino philosophy?’ Corollary to that is the question that concerns criteria: ‘What counts, if any, as Filipino philosophy?’ As far as I know, most Filipino philosophers in the field answers affirmative with regards to the first question.⁵ The ongoing debate and live controversy reside in the answers to the second one. To assist us in the discussion, it is helpful to look at the three categories or approaches of Filipino philosophy, as suggested by the late Filipino philosopher Rolando Gripaldo and examine how each of these approaches answers the criteria for Filipino philosophy. The first category is what Gripaldo calls the traditional approach. This approach

... answers the question, “What is your own philosophy?” It is the truly *philosophical* approach as *traditionally* used by historians of philosophy. It follows the Greek philosophical model. It enumerates Filipino individual philosophers and discusses their respective philosophical ideas.⁶

⁵ One notable Filipino philosopher who has some reservations regarding the affirmative answer is Emerita Quito who claimed that “If the classical Greek definition were to be rigorously applied, namely, that philosophy is ‘the science that studies all things in their ultimate causes and first principles,’ then there is **no** philosophy in the Philippine culture.” It is important to note, however, that this is not Quito’s final view on the matter. See Emerita Quito, *The State of Philosophy in the Philippines* (Manila, De La Salle University Press, 1979), 10.

⁶ Rolando Gripaldo, “Filipino Philosophy: Past and Present,” in *Kaisipan*, (2013), <http://www.academia.edu/6363265/Filipino_Philosophy_Past_and_Present_2013_>.

According to Gripaldo, this approach is embodied by Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, Emilio Jacinto, Manuel Quezon, Jose Laurel, Renato Constantino, R. Esquivel Embuscado, Cirilo Bautista, Claro Ceniza, and Gripaldo himself.⁷ The second one is called the cultural approach, concerned with the question, “What is the people’s philosophical perspective?” or “What are the philosophical views of the people based on their socio-linguistic, cultural, and folk concepts or the like?”⁸ Some of the most prominent practitioners of the second approach are Leonardo Mercado and Florentino Timbreza.⁹ This second approach relies heavily on the methods of anthropology and linguistics. The third and last one is called the nationalist or constitutional approach in which the defining characteristic is the fact that as long as the author is Filipino, then it is considered Filipino philosophy even if “their subject matter has been traditionally described as Western or Eastern, therefore non-Filipino.”¹⁰ While this last approach is on point, its truth borders on the trivial. It is even unclear what makes this nationalistic since it does not necessarily aim in advancing the philosophical discussions on concerns that matter to our nation and its people. As such, the more appropriate term for the third category is the definitional approach since it merely capitalizes on the meaning of Filipino for something to count as Filipino philosophy. In any case, there are ongoing debates among the proponents of each of these approaches or those who attempt to unify a few or all of them.¹¹

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See the following: Leonardo Mercado, *Elements of Filipino philosophy* (Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications, 1976); Florentino Timbreza, *Pilosopiyang Pilipino* (Manila: Rex Book Store, 1982).

¹⁰ Rolando Gripaldo, *Filipino Philosophy: A Critical Bibliography 1774-1997*, 2nd. ed. (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2000), 11.

¹¹ See the following: Roland Theuas DS. Pada, “The Methodological Problems in Filipino Philosophy,” in *Kritike*, 8:1 (June 2014), 24-44; Rolando Gripaldo, *Filipino Philosophy: A Critical Bibliography 1774-1997*, 2nd ed. (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2000), 4-64; Jeremiah Joven B. Joaquin, “Gripaldo and Mabaquiao on Filipino Philosophy: A Critical Assessment of Two Attempts to Establish a Filipino Philosophy,” in *Dalumat*, 1:1 (2010), 121-129.

This neat classification of Gripaldo cuts deep into the issue of criteria, where some, such as the proponents of the cultural approach, seem to emphasize the Filipino in Filipino philosophy while those espousing the traditional approach puts more emphasis on the term ‘philosophy’ in Filipino philosophy. It is not my intention to settle this debate since I think it is a debate that is in principle insuperable. My point in bringing it out is primarily to bring into attention that this particular discussion derails any potential discourse in which philosophy can *practically* contribute.

Two major reasons for this claim are in order. First, this discussion (or perhaps obsession?) on finding a universally acceptable criteria of Filipino philosophy seems misplaced. Rather than trying to settle the issue of criteria, more substantive issues could have been taken up in which philosophy is apt to tackle. To make this clear, let us go back to ancient Greece and see how they practice philosophy. While the etymological definition of philosophy as love of wisdom is a legacy of the ancient Greeks, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle did not so much spend wondering what would count as Greek philosophy or whether their philosophies would count as one; their main concern is to philosophize. If these three great philosophers narrow their concern down to the question of criteria, it is doubtful whether they would have built their perennially influential philosophies and captured the admiration of the world.¹² I am of course not saying that those Filipino philosophers who participate in the debate on criteria only focuses on that issue; I am simply pointing out that the obsession with determining the criteria of Filipino philosophy is no longer a productive way *to do* Filipino philosophy. We must start going beyond that.

Also, the obsessive need for specific criteria does little in helping philosophy build a positive reputation and create lasting positive impacts in the country. Imagine college students who have taken an Introduction to Philosophy and are about to learn Filipino Philosophy. After learning Plato’s metaphysics or Descartes’ epistemology in their Introduction, they

¹² For a similar view, see Roque J. Ferriols, SJ, “A Memoir of Six Years,” in *Philippine Studies*, 22 (1974), 339-340.

are likely to expect to learn in this new class the metaphysics or epistemology or over-all philosophy of particular Filipino philosophers.¹³ But in fact, what they have learned are the views of Filipino philosophers regarding how Filipino philosophy is to be defined and what ought to count as Filipino philosophy. There is something amiss in this scenario. It seems like offering a heavy loaded appetizer to a starving customer while serving an exaggeratedly light meal. What is suggested is for the students to learn the answers of Filipino philosophers regarding the perennial and current issues pertinent to Philippine society and less of these concerns regarding the definition and criteria of Filipino philosophy. Of course, the classroom scenario is all hypothetical but the point I want to make is this: the concerns on definition and criteria should not comprise the whole of Filipino philosophy since it creates the image of philosophers concerned only with questions that they themselves create when philosophy is supposed to address those questions and concerns that would have occupied any typical Filipino: questions such as “Is God really real?” or “Should I lie to save myself from embarrassment?” or “Does the state ever have the right to kill?” As the philosopher Shelly Kagan said:

Philosophical questions are not questions that occur only to those of us who have studied the subject, and are trained professionals. Far from it: Philosophical questions are ones that emerge from the natural state of wondering that all of us engage in, at least in our more reflective moments.¹⁴

Philosophy in the country should be attuned to that natural state of wondering, not deviate away from it. That is how one builds a positive

¹³ It is important to note that some Filipino philosophers have already attempted to build, for instance, a full-blown metaphysics. In this regard, a prominent example is Roque Ferriols SJ, who wrote about the metaphysics of *meron* in his *magnum opus* entitled *Pambungad sa Metapisika* (Quezon City: BlueBooks, 2014).

¹⁴ Shelly Kagan, “Why Study Philosophy,” in *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, 8:2 (2013), 265.

reputation for philosophy in the country and makes impacts to the world beyond the philosophical ivory tower. Our focus then must turn away from asking, “What criteria are necessary for something to count as Filipino philosophy?” and turn our attention more towards the question, “How can one do philosophy in the country in such a way that its timeless relevance is felt by the Filipino people?” In an attempt to answer what makes philosophy worthwhile, Daniel Dennett suggests responding to this question, “Can anybody outside of academic philosophy be made to care whether you’re right?”¹⁵ In line with the nationalistic view, Dennett’s question can be narrowed down to this, “Can any typical Filipino non-philosopher be made to care whether you’re right?”

In the next section, I lay out one major way in which this can be done so that our answer will be yes. I have already emphasized that the concerns regarding definitions and criteria of Filipino philosophy should be superseded by the practice of Filipino philosophy that justifies its value to the country. It should be clear that the value that I want to stress is that of public value whose main beneficiary is of course the Filipino public. It is the bringing out of this value that Filipino philosophers should concern themselves with when doing philosophy. But, one may ask, why is there a need for philosophy to be valuable in this particular way? Is it not enough that philosophy be valuable to those who study it rather than because of its effect on mankind in general, as Bertrand Russell claimed?¹⁶ In order to answer these questions, we need to look on what the nationalistic view entails in practice.

TOWARDS A NATIONALISTIC VIEW

In the previous section, I have emphasized the need to go beyond questions of definition and criteria and focus on doing philosophy in the country such

¹⁵ Daniel Dennett, “Higher Order Truths about Chmess,” in *Topoi*, 25 (2006), 40.

¹⁶ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 153.

that its public value becomes evident and clear. This is important since as Fred Westphal says, “One of the most important problems facing the philosopher is that of determining precisely what his job is and how he ought to go about it.”¹⁷ In this section, I suggest one approach for Filipino philosophers to take so that the public value of philosophy is adequately realized, and it is this: *when doing philosophy, Filipino philosophers should allot sustained focus on issues that either have direct social relevance or at least contain wide social implications*. Listed below are some of the issues that are worthy of any Filipino philosopher’s ink:

- *Marriage and Family*: There are now public calls to legalize divorce and same-sex marriage in the country. These issues revolve around one theme, which is marriage. It is however unfortunate that Filipino philosophers are silent on these issues. Philosophers in the country can contribute to the discussion by analyzing the nature of marriage, the public and social values of marriage, and assessing the arguments for and against traditional marriage, among others all the while putting the discussion in the context and facts pertinent to Philippine culture. Western philosophers have already done this but their discussions are heavily dependent on facts and laws pertinent to Western culture.¹⁸ It is high time that similar projects be done in our own land. Also, as a country known for its close family ties and extended families, it is time that Filipino philosophers deal with issues arising out of the idea of family: What do parents owe their children? Up to what extent can such parental responsibility go? Similarly, do children owe anything to their parents? Is it always morally permissible to bear a child?

¹⁷ Fred A. Westphal, *The Activity of Philosophy* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 10.

¹⁸ See for instance John Corvino and Maggie Gallagher, *Debating Same-Sex Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For a conservative view, see Patrick Lee & Robert P. George, *Conjugal Union: What Marriage Is and Why It Matters* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

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- *Poverty*: As one of the major social problems plaguing the country, poverty ought to be studied by Filipino philosophers, not the least of which has to do with its moral implications. Some of the questions would be: Should we ascribe moral liability to poor couples who choose to bear a child even when doing so is likely to mean a pitiful life for the child? Does the state have the right to limit the number of children a couple can have if such policy can lessen poverty? Should the reality of luck affect the moral responsibility we ascribe to the poor's bad choices and actions? Do the well-off have a moral obligation to extend help to the poor? With regards to the last question, the prominent Western philosopher Peter Singer has argued in the affirmative, stating that a rich person not giving help to the poor is like a man who chooses not to help a drowning child in a shallow pond when it is within the man's power to do so and with little inconvenience to himself.¹⁹ One objection to this shallow pond argument, as it has been called, is that it "encourages an overly simplistic and sometimes harmful narrative about poverty alleviation."²⁰ In line with this, can a similar argument to Singer's be made such that it is rationally persuasive but nevertheless sensitive to the dynamics of Philippine poverty alleviation and to the experiences and views of the Filipino poor? I heartily believe that all these questions (and many others) about poverty are of such nature that philosophy can contribute fruitful and illuminating answers to them.
 - *Gender*: The question of gender is all the rage in many societies, starting in the West but now permeating the Philippine culture, evident in the pushing of the controversial SOGIE (Sexual Orientation and Gender Inclusion and Expression) Bill. It is again

¹⁹ Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1:3 (1972), 231.

²⁰ Scott Wisor, "Against shallow ponds: an argument against Singer's approach to global poverty," in *Journal of Global Ethics*, 7:1 (2011), 19.

surprising that this is a topic that is not adequately discussed and debated by Filipino philosophers. For example, Filipino philosophers may ask about the difference between sex and gender. If sex is taken to mean biological differences while gender means sexual orientation, how essential is this difference? In fact, how important is this idea of gender at all? Another related issue involves determining whether transgenderism is a mental illness. It would do no good to say that the latest version of *Diagnostics of Statistical Manual* already changed gender identity disorder into gender dysphoria so as to disqualify it from being a disorder, since it begs the question of what *should* count as a mental disorder in the first place.

- *Nationalism*: Given the present tensions between the Philippines and China with regards to the West Philippine Sea, it is important that Filipino philosophers have something to say about the matter. For instance, the controversy can be the impetus to study the nature of war: is it acceptable for one nation to fight a war where it has little likelihood of winning? Or is it more morally reprehensible for one nation to bow down to another even when doing so would mean loss of political freedom, among others? In line with this, one may also ask: what are the moral duties of Filipino citizens towards their country? Should a citizen of legal age be exempt from fighting in a war if he has a genuine conscientious objection? Clearly, these questions are of great philosophical import and the possible answers given to them have wide social and political implications.
- *Paranormal beliefs*: Even in such advanced age as ours, many Filipinos still believe in ghosts; others even claim that they don't even believe in ghosts because they claim to experience them. Also, many still believe in the efficacy of quack doctors addressing such phenomena as *kulam*, *usog* and *barang*, among many others.²¹ Are

²¹ These topics have been thoroughly studied by Filipino anthropologists. For a widely recognized account, see Michael Tan, *Revisiting Usog, Pasma, Kulam* (Quezon City:

these paranormal beliefs a case of outright irrationality, or are these people within their epistemic rights to believe as they do? These are epistemological questions that touch on many perennially important topics, such as the nature of truth and testimony, the notions of epistemic rights and responsibilities, methodological naturalism in science, and the strengths and limitations of mainstream as well as alternative medicines.

- *Internet and Social Media*: Time and time again, the Philippines has been declared as among the countries that tops the number of Internet users, cellphone users and most amount of people in social media. This is staggering given that we are still a developing country and we are a small nation compared to say, Canada and United States. Nevertheless, this fact invites fertile philosophical explorations on the nature, powers, limitations, and moral implications of these new technologies, especially in the context of our culture. Philosophers in the country may ask the following: Would certain social media posts count as morally reprehensible or as violation of one's right to privacy? What about those parents who post photos and videos of their child in social media? In fact, is there any account of moral responsibility and accountability that would adequately capture the nature and dynamics of social media posts? Other connected issues also arise, such as the question of property rights in the social media sphere. If I post a photo of myself in social media, does this photo become a kind of public property that anyone can freely use and even manipulate? What does this imply if a particular photo of mine becomes suddenly a viral meme that I find embarrassing?
- *Religion*: The list would be deeply impoverished without the mention of religion and its pervasive influence to many Filipinos.

University of the Philippines Press, 2008). It is again unfortunate that, contrary to the sustained interests of Filipino anthropologists, Filipino philosophers have seldom engaged in these topics.

Correspondingly, Filipino philosophers are well-advised to study religion in all its facets, from religious beliefs, practices and even attitudes. Traditional questions in philosophy of religion are still fertile for philosophical examinations: Is God real? Does the number of genuine believers in the country say something about the rationality or cogency of religious belief? Does the fact of religious plurality entail that religions are best explained naturalistically rather than supernaturally? Other connected issues include the nature of religious influence to matters of politics, the issue of church and state separation, religious fanaticism, and the grounds and limits of religious authorities, among many others.

Needless to say, the list is not meant to be exhaustive. In fact, there seems to be no social issue to which rigorous philosophical thinking cannot productively contribute. As Robert Frodeman claimed, “We have to face up to the fact that societal challenges are often deeply philosophical in nature.”²² Filipino philosophers need to start recognizing the unique role of philosophy in illuminating and clarifying many publicly relevant issues. Social issues are often publicly discussed through the lens of both social scientists and law experts on the one hand and religious authorities on the other. While all these camps have something essential and enlightening to offer, they do not exhaust the possibilities of what can be fruitfully said. Philosophy deals with studying and questioning our most basic assumptions, including those of law, science and religion, while also formulating arguments in the most reasonable way possible and with the barest minimum assumptions. In this regard, Filipino philosophers need to start doing philosophy as public intellectuals intent on examining publicly relevant issues from the lens of philosophy. Doing so justifies their professional existence to the Filipino public. It should therefore not come as a surprise for Mary Midgley to say that, “philosophizing is not just grand

²² Robert Frodeman, “Philosophy dedisciplined,” in *Synthese*, (2012), DOI: 10.1007/s11229-012-0181-0.

and elegant and difficult, it is also needed. It isn't optional."²³ It is high time now for philosophy to have this reputation of necessity in the country.

We may look at practitioners of other fields. Architects design beautiful infrastructures. Medical doctors heal sick people. Scientists expand our knowledge of both the natural and the human world. The importance of these professionals ultimately boils down to the fruits of their labors. Filipino philosophers also need to produce fruits that the Filipino public would deem valuable. Dismissing this goal is to surrender the essentially public value that is inherent in philosophy, not to mention that it exacerbates the misguided view of philosophy as a discipline that has nothing practical or publicly valuable to offer. Ultimately, failing to provide public value is to contravene the requirements for philosophers' social recognition and existence. Why should philosophical studies, conferences and researches be funded, especially by the state, if they have nothing substantial to offer to the public? In fact, why should any Filipino care about it at all? The nationalistic view is proposed primarily to address this concern. By utilizing philosophy to produce something of value to the public, Filipino philosophers justify their professional and social existence.

The nationalistic view of Filipino philosophy is not so much a philosophy *about* Filipinos as it is a philosophy *for* Filipinos: a way of doing philosophy whose primary objective is to enlarge the Filipino public's view regarding social issues that have great philosophical import as well as traditional philosophical concerns that have wide social impact. In line with this, we should already stop asking what counts as Filipino philosophy since it is a question that admits of no absolutely correct answer as much as it derails Filipino philosophers from focusing their work on offering real philosophical value to Philippine society. Rather, what should be asked by any philosopher in the country is this: How can I as a Filipino philosopher do philosophy in such a way that it benefits my fellow countrymen and

²³ Mary Midgley, *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing* (London: Routledge, 1996), 1.

women? Constantly confronting this question is in the end how Filipino philosophy will fruitfully develop.

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