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## A Memoir of Six Years

ROQUE J. FERRIOLS S.J.

### PRE LOGUE

It was the beginning of schoolyear 1969-1970 and it occurred to a certain character that it was time the Ateneo college offered the entire philosophy core curriculum with Pilipino as the medium of instruction. That character is me. It is now April of 75.

Tagalog was beginning to be very much in the air in the late sixties. One attended public functions at which luminaries of church and/or state spoke bad Tagalog or fumblingly read prepared Tagalog statements. There was a desire to be with Tagalog. There was the usual strong wind for England (and/or America?): speak English, speak to the world, educational, scientific, literary, civilized, und so weiter. The Tagalog ground swell was noiseless, invisible, but tangy enough to cause tremors in the delicate nostrils of both civil and ecclesiastical politicians — those connoisseurs of hidden currents. When respectable people can talk Tagalog in public as badly as I do and be applauded for it, it must be high time for such as me to speak Tagalog in public without having to fear the censorious eyes of some pure Bulakanese.

There were difficulties to begin with. After the lord highs had allowed the experimental [sic] classes (I tried to explain: my classes are not experiments, they are for real, my students are usually human beings, never laboratory rats; but the classes were still called experimental) the scheduler failed to schedule them. "To give you a chance to pick the best times," with a sinister twitch of the eyelids. As a result we had classes during meal times: 7:00 to 8:00 A.M., 12:00 M. to 1:30 P.M., 6:00 to

7:30 P.M. We were tolerated in private, boasted of in public, while we made such rules as: one may eat and drink during class, just so he does it quietly — no chicharon or popcorn, no breaking of bottles — for as the soul regales itself it is not just that the body be left out in the cold. Class members are volunteers. The members of that first year were very game indeed.

#### SEVEN QUESTIONS

Of the many questions I am asked I choose to examine seven. Seven is a symbol of completion and I hope to give a complete picture of what I am *not* trying to do and a complete inkling of what I *am* trying to do.

1. *Are you trying to develop a Filipino philosophy?* The answer of course is No, but one must try to be as clear as possible: there are many ways of wasting time — blowing bubbles against the wind is one, trying of set intention to develop a Filipino philosophy is another. No one can create a Filipino or anything else philosophy except by accident. Chuang Tzu did not try to develop a Chinese philosophy. He simply awoke to the Way within him and around him, tried to awake even more, knew that what he lived could not be put into words — When all that can be said has been said, the most important thing cannot be said — yet felt compelled to say all that he could say. Hundreds of years later what he said still lives and is called Chinese philosophy. He is surprised. It is the Way that matters to him, not the label.

What more German than Hegel or Nietzsche? Yet neither are in agonies to be Germanic. They are too fascinated by the striving to see into, by the visions that occasionally break at them, to engage in dramatics about identity. At the beginning of *Discours de la methode*, Descartes says half proudly half apologetically that he is writing it in French. For the rest of the work he simply philosophizes. No symptoms of an anguished thrust to Frenchness. He is too French for that.

As a philosopher is so he philosophizes. And in his philosophizing all the tension, combat, exoticness, rootedness of who he is begin to show their inner truth; even to the extent, if he is

blessed, of being of help to other people. But this happens only if he keeps his eyes away from mirrors.

2. *Are you trying to help make Tagalog the National Language?* No. I have put in my time listening to and participating in endless debates on this topic. Until now, when I can, I try to provide a forum for interesting views on the matter. But life is short and debate is endless.

When I try to philosophize in Pilipino, it is with intent to live and to help awaken other people into living. Each language is a way of being alive that is irreducible. Yes, the things languages do, overlap and, if one just wants to do things with words, he can learn to reduce one manipulation to another. There are those who spend their lives producing vast linguistic networks of mutually reducible manipulations. But he who has touched the heart of a language, even if only for a split second, knows that it is an irreducible way of being alive. Each language has unrepeatable potentials for seeing and feeling, its very own genius, its own nuance. The more languages you really feel, no matter how in a glass darkly, the more you live.

No, Pilipino is not my favorite language. But it is a good language.

3. *Is this the wave of the future?* This question is usually asked by those who are steeped in whatever products of American mass media reach our shores. Many of the askers are in process of giving up the religion of their fathers and converting to the religion of being "with it" or "in" or "on". The question is often asked with this context: You are doing this to be with it are you not? How can this help me to be in? So, to the question whether Pilipino is the wave of the future, I answer: I do not know and it does not matter.

4. *What texts do you use?* For these six years, mostly in English, with a few notes in Tagalog. There are plans afoot to change this, but for now the answer stands. This answer gives rise to many other questions of which I choose three, namely, a), b), c).

a) *Is not this confusing?* Actually no. I do not know why. So learn for yourself. Come to our classes. Not for just a few

audited periods — and then: Ah yes, I know what it is all about; I was there . . . No. To understand how it is one must come regularly for a long time. Understanding comes only with day by day reflection, by an inexorable daily increment of infinitesimal amounts.

No, the real difficulty is not the use of two languages, one for reading, another for lecturing, discussing, writing. One adjusts to that more simply than he expected. After all whole generations of Catholic priests were raised on Latin texts plus lectures in some vernacular or other. The real difficulty is the difficulty of philosophy. To discipline and intensify whatever powers of rationality and intuition one has been gifted with. To use them.

b) *Is this living by seing and feeling in the Tagalog nuance?* It depends. Some students succeed (despite their teacher's raging efforts to stop them) in spending the year substituting a facsimile of Tagalog thought for a facsimile of English thought. No understanding. No think. In the first year when we had indecent class hours this hardly happened. Now we have become respectable and the danger of no think has increased.

And yet, for six years most students have responded gamely to the un-ideal situation. They have made a beginning of a more intense being alive in the Pilipino mode. They have begun to explore the ramifications of this mode. Some have even become more alive in their various native modes: Ilocano, Bisayan, Bikol, atb. They have also become aware of certain limitations in English (which most did not expect) and of certain creativities in Pilipino (which most, alas, did not expect either).

c) *Ah, so you use Taglish or (giggle) Enggalog?* No. In these aforementioned barbarities, one who knows Tagalog and English becomes too lazy to speak either well. He collapses into using whatever English or Tagalog word comes fastest to mouth. The result is found fascinating by kindred souls.

It is different when one speaks a language from its genuine center and, from that center, creates new words by stealing (a good talker never borrows, he steals) from other languages. Or, still from that center, spices his speech with this or that foreign expression for the sake of clarity, for the sake of showing off,

for the countless sakes among which we humans move. And this brings us to question five.

5. *How do you translate philosophical terms?* That is really no problem. Most English philosophical terms are really Latin words (subjectivum, objectivum, intuitio, praedicatum) somewhat mispronounced and misspelled (subjective, objective, intuition, predicate). Or Greek words similarly distorted (metaphysics). The Germans sometimes use Latin and Greek (subjektiv, Metaphysik) or create their own terms (Mitzumachung) or do both at the same time (Objekt, Gegenstand). We followed the German model.

But this question was not usually asked as a request for suggestions on how to proceed or for information on how we proceeded. Usually, it was asked rhetorically, as a way of saying: You cannot do this. Sometimes so bitterly as to mean: You cannot do this to me. Often the question was a cover for a presupposition that what English and Spanish are allowed to do cannot be allowed to Tagalog or any Filipino language. So intuition is "derived from" the Latin. Coffee and alcohol are "derived from" the Arabic. But sumballong is a "corruption of" the Spanish, istrok "corrupted from" the English.

Another form this question took was: How do you say "being" in Pilipino? Asked with a facial aha-this-shows-you-cannot-do-philosophy-in-Pilipino expression. There are many ways of answering that question. One is: As inadequately as in English. The English word "being" does not really express the central deed of metaphysics. Another answer is: What philosopher have you in mind? "Being" in Bertrand Russell is a different word from "being" in Heidegger.

Finally, question five, more than the others, is surrounded with an aroma of something rotten in the state of Denmark. The question proceeds from the hidden conviction of the asker that nothing profound has happened in any Filipino language, that translations of foreign terms are not mere ornaments or helps but the very life blood of Filipino thought. Can there be any depth, he asks, in a Filipino center? The Lord save him from his own superciliousness. He himself cannot.

6. *Is your experiment successful?* No, it is not an experiment. An experiment is a repeatable procedure, repeated over and over. If found to work, the people involved pat each other on the back. We are a success! The procedure is then canonized and again repeated over and over. In philosophy, there are repeatable elements, but there is no repeatable procedure. The whole is always new and it is the whole which is the heart of the matter.

But is whatever you are doing a success? I hope not. Nothing kills philosophy more instantly than evaluations in terms of success or failure.

7. *Are you still doing it?* The questioner is usually an English speaking academic, fifty to sixty years old. He is taken up with obvious facial preparations to assume a grief stricken pose the moment he hears the, he hopes, inevitable No. Chagrin as he hears Yes. The asker feels threatened by this continuing effort to philosophize in Pilipino. Unnecessarily. It seems clear that the English speaking academic will have a role in the Philippines for at least fifty more years — probably longer. So, if you are fifty, this brings you to one hundred if you live long. Calm yourselves, ladies and gentlemen. You are old now, you do not have to prove anything anymore. If you have not yet proven whatever it is, you never will. No more room for *that* kind of anguish. And this is only your freedom from. When you start looking for your freedom for, your discoveries will become even more fantastical. Also sprach Zarathustra when he was fifty.

End of seven questions.

#### POST LOGUE

A little over half a hundred years ago — according to reliable hearsay — I saw first light on floor twelve, PGH. Later I saw more and more light in Sampalok. Not the storied Sampalok of San Anton and Bustillos, an area steeped in centuries of lore and legend, but North Sampalok around P. Leoncio and Maria Clara, as little known then as now. Ricefields, houses here and there, feet running on pilapils, carabaos, dragonflies. When the rains came, watersnakes. Then you rafted or slogged through

the flood. Men feeling through mud for dalag or catching hito and martiniko with their nets in the clean flowing water. A row of long-skirted fisherwomen on a pilapil, bamboo rods aslant, left hands holding rattan-lipped cloth bags for their catch. Near sundown a veiled one joins them. She is a leper. Her family is hiding her from the sanidad. They want her with them. They do not want her exiled to Culion.

In the sixteen years I grew there, the earth became less province, more and more city. The farmers moved elsewhere or became carpenters, plumbers, masons, sculptors of saints' images, barbers, photographers. And people from elsewhere became more and more. We were among the first of these.

At home the grown-ups talked to each other in Ilocano or Spanish. To the children they talked — condescendingly, I felt — something they called Tagalog. In the grassy roadways children of former farmers and of comers from elsewhere played together and talked to each other in something we called Tagalog.

Then it was time to go to school. Trying to make friends in the playground, I talked to my peers in something I thought was Tagalog and was laughed at. In North Sampalok nobody felt superior to you if you spoke a different accent or mixed Ilocanisms with your Tagalog. Not three kilometers away, the little sons and daughters of the Tagalese were enforcing elitist norms. Slowly I came to know that my language is not Tagalog but North Sampalokese.

Twenty five years after I had left home, I was in Wao, Lanao del Sur. A man a little older than me called me by my name. After a few minutes of talking I too could call him by his name. He was an old neighbor. How did you know I was here? I recognized you on the altar when you were saying Mass. He had a farm in one of the barrios. He could not live in our old neighborhood after it had become too dense. We talked in North Sampalokese.

In six years one comes to know that, for human thinking, North Sampalokese is better than Plato's Greek.

In six years might one also come to know that, without his knowing it, another language had all along been his heart's



blood? Could it happen that he awoke to the old sounds and spoke them new and found his lost soul new in a new and always growing world? But that is another story.