# philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

**Renante D. Pilapil**

**Recognition: Examining Identity Struggles**

RENANTE D. PILAPIL

# Recognition: Examining Identity Struggles

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One of the challenges of scholarship is bringing oneself into conversation with other disciplines. At a time when multiple perspectives are needed to understand complex phenomena, thinking beyond disciplinary boundaries and thematic concerns becomes crucial to our task of knowledge production. The work of scholars who mediate between disciplinal boundaries or the theoretical realm and empirical context is significant. Such labor takes various forms, which include philosophical analysis, particularly in the field of philosophical anthropology. In this area of philosophical inquiry, notions about the human person are based on empirical work. Renante D. Pilapil, a philosopher based at the Ateneo de Davao University, shows how philosophical anthropology can be deployed in the Philippine context and beyond through his work *Recognition: Examining Identity Struggles*. Based on his doctoral dissertation at KU Leuven, the book provides a critical introduction to the concept of recognition, a term that is readily invoked but rarely utilized as an analytical or constitutive framework in empirical social and cultural studies. Pilapil engages theorists of recognition, particularly Axel Honneth of the Frankfurt school of critical theory.

The book is concerned with the question of how we ought to think about identity claims in the present context, which is marked by a global resurgence of ethnoracial politics and nationalism. Pilapil reflects on how recognition serves as a normative framework to think about identity politics and social relations. Drawing on Honneth, Pilapil understands recognition as the act of not only perceiving but also, more specifically, affirming the preexisting traits, abilities, and moral autonomy of an individual or group. His work examines the normative theory of recognition and explains how its opposite, misrecognition (in the experience of disrespect, being unloved, and disesteemed, among others) dehumanizes persons (61). Moving beyond a philosophical scrutiny of the concept, the author points out how issues of recognition resonate in the Philippine experience through mundane examples presented in each chapter and a test case on the Moro struggles in Mindanao in the final chapter. Pilapil argues that, notwithstanding the problematic implications of the formal recognition of the identity and difference of individuals and minority groups (formal affirmative recognition), it is the

best means available for responding to identity claims of minority groups. In linking recognition to redistribution, Pilapil acknowledges the way cultural identity is bound up with socioeconomic conditions of people. In so doing, recognition becomes a matter of social justice and gains normative bite.

The arguments unfold in six chapters, beginning with a critique of Charles Taylor's assumption about the role of culture as a source of and basis for identity (chapter 1). As Taylor argues, recognition of peoples' cultural identities presupposes their equal worth. Pilapil then raises questions about equality and differential treatment arising from cultural distinction. Drawing from Will Kymlicka, he complicates the notion of cultural difference by pointing out how equal treatment may disadvantage minority groups. Acknowledging the possibility of the majority imposing itself on minority groups, Kymlicka proposes group-differentiated rights. The question of justifying rights on the basis of cultural identity claims is then tackled in the second chapter. Pilapil looks at Mark Tully's contestation approach as a counterpoint to formal affirmative recognition. In this formulation Tully assumes that demands for recognition have no resolution but are always in a state of struggle.

Pilapil argues that Honneth's elaboration of recognition provides a way out of the debate on what grounds it can be justified. In Honneth's theory, social recognition becomes a precondition for having an identity (chapter 3). Its lack or denial is detrimental to the processes of self-realization and personhood (75–79). Hence, Pilapil suggests that Honneth's theory highlights the moral basis for recognition. Honneth situates recognition within the intersubjective nature of human beings. Through particular relationships or spheres of interaction that overlap, humans form aspects of their personhood. In relations of love, which include family and friends, persons develop confidence; with peers they gain esteem; and in legal relations people acquire respect. According to Honneth, social or mutual affirmation in these realms is a precondition for having a self. Thus, recognition is a condition for the possibility of self-realization (77–78).

Chapter 4 shows the normative quality of Honneth's theory through the notion of recognitive justice. Consistent with the Frankfurt School's preoccupation with the everyday experiences of people, Honneth's conception of justice starts from examining situations of social pathology that are evident in actual cases of "oppression, exploitation, subjugation, marginalization, deprivation and discrimination" (87). Pilapil suggests that

thinking about recognitive justice through experiences of misrecognition or disrespect has more weight than a normative view (e.g., John Rawls's) in which principles of justice are readily spelled out. Honneth's argument about the constitutive role of recognition in realizing one's self becomes stronger because acts of misrecognition, such as physical abuse, denial of rights, and denigration of individual and cultural practices, are shown to harm the self and cause humiliation (88). Hence, social justice is about how institutions ensure the conditions for people to realize themselves via recognition. Such a proposition, according to Pilapil, is not without criticism. The remaining sections in the chapter discuss Nancy Fraser's view of the psychologization of recognitive justice and the publicity criterion that is lacking in Honneth's theory of justice. Fraser argues that injustice based on disrespect is reduced to individual rather than social relations.

Pilapil responds to Fraser's criticism of the psychologization of misrecognition by pointing out that she assumes a liberal standard of justice that is based on objectivity and publicity (104). While Fraser's view resonates well within a democratic context in which people are viewed as citizens who are subject to law, it does not take into account the subjective component of injustice. According to Pilapil, Fraser only considers the legal status of individuals, which is satisfied by the criteria of publicity and objectivity. Pilapil clarifies Honneth's notion of injustice in misrecognition by extending the notion of justice to the status of persons as person. He argues: "By virtue of persons' moral autonomy and inviolable dignity, they deserve due recognition for what or who they are, and whose violation, as in experience of humiliation, shame or other moral injuries, can ignite struggles for recognition" (106). He proposes the use of narratives as an accessible way for people, especially those in the margins, to reason and articulate their sense of (mis)recognition in the public domain. Such intervention addresses Fraser's criterion of publicity.

Chapter 5 demonstrates Pilapil's strength in theoretical critique as he engages with Fraser's argument on redistribution instead of recognition. He provides a convincing discussion on how recognition relates to the contemporary problem of diminishing egalitarianism in the distribution of economic resources and opportunities. Drawing on the work of anthropologists and sociologists (e.g., Arturo Escobar, Andrew Sayer, and so on), he explains the importance of recognition as inextricable from the issue of redistribution: "Struggles for distribution . . . aim to modify economic structures but at the same time they are always cultural and moral struggles. They also seek to

change institutionalized patterns of cultural value or to acquire the necessary social conditions for self-realization" (147). Here, the realm of work becomes the site where redistribution and recognition intersect. The implication of Pilapil's synthesis is crucial because he describes theoretically how economic opportunities and the structuring of labor are linked to the ways people are recognized and valued accordingly. Indeed, the theory of recognition moves beyond ethnocentric concerns and resonates in almost every sphere and context of human engagement. In so doing, he demonstrates how philosophical anthropology's theories of personhood and social relations are based on lived experiences.

The final chapter illustrates how recognition is deployed as a normative framework through an analysis of the case of the Moro people in Mindanao. Citing contemporary and historical studies of the area, the author describes the social and economic situation of Moros through the lens of recognition and redistribution. He traces the misrecognition of the Moros and their situation of poverty to processes of colonization, such as "divide-and-rule" policies that have fueled ethnocentrism and conflicts in Mindanao (165). Pilapil admits that his analysis is schematic and limited. He reminds scholars that the use of normative frameworks must be sensitized to the context of its application. While the last chapter does not adequately tackle the nuances of recognition and redistribution among ethnic groups in Mindanao, it opens vistas to explore other contexts. For example, misrecognition equally resonates in the experiences of queer people, persons with disability, and the poor. The theory of recognition can illuminate the ways in which disrespect inflicts moral injuries on marginalized people.

Pilapil's work provides a sterling and erudite account of recognition. His strong grasp of philosophical inquiry manifests in his ability to articulate complex ideas in accessible language. Readers who are unfamiliar with philosophical scrutiny will appreciate his manner of evaluating and elaborating on ideas. Aside from serving as an example of fine scholarship, the book also shows how a philosophical anthropology based on Philippine experience might look like. Pilapil's thorough philosophical analysis makes readers aware of the pitfalls and strengths of the concept of recognition and its related ideas. His work opens our imagination to empirical explorations of recognition in our respective locales and contexts.

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