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Philosophy in a Crisis Situation

RAMON C. REYES

That today we are in a crisis situation is no great news. In fact, the expression has become a cliché. What might seem odd however is to even suggest that philosophy might have something to say about the matter. If there be any truth to the saying that philosophers up till now have but interpreted the world, and that what is needed henceforth is to transform it, the dictum would seem to be most valid and most apt especially in a crisis situation such as we are in, where the need it seems is no longer for thought and reflexion but for prompt action.

Looking at the matter more closely, however, we see that the Greek word *krisis* means the act or power of distinguishing, of separating, the act of dissent and contestation and struggle, the act of decision and judgment, the act of bringing an issue to its denouement and resolution. Our community is indeed at such a moment of its history, at such a turning point, which will be decisive for our manner of life in the years to come. Be that as it may, it has also been claimed that this crisis come upon us is basically an economic one. Yet, it has also been argued that the problem is perhaps more political. And then there are those who say that the crisis is really much deeper, for surely the issue is not merely that of the cost of basic commodities, or the availability of foreign credit or the burden of our international debt. Nor is it simply the matter of elections or the law of succession or the question of Amendment Six, although admittedly such problems are grave matters not to trifle about.

Indeed, the assassination of a man did trigger a national economic crisis and set into motion a sequence of political repercussions. Yet, what makes the event most disturbing, what really makes it a crisis, is that it seems to have hit us more deeply than economic or political problems have done in the past, for it has put into question some of the more fundamental symbols of our culture which constitute our vision of man, by which we view and determine our humanity and project for ourselves as habitation and a world.

In a way, the assassination of Aquino was not very unique. It was only one of a long list of cases of violence against human life that have taken place under the present regime. Aquino's seven-year incarceration was in a sense nothing very special, for even today there are those who linger in detention cells as national security risks. The controlled, dosaged news regarding his death and his ten-hour long funeral was only to be expected of mass media under the dispensation of the New Society.

What was novel and earthshaking perhaps about the Aquino case was that what was supposed to have been nothing but another of those events that we had come to accept as part of the workaday facts of life was all of a sudden no longer acceptable. Enough of these killings and "salvagings". Enough of arbitrary detentions. Enough of the muzzled press. Enough of the principle that economic security takes precedence over political freedom. Enough of the military and dictatorial rule. Enough is enough. And so, all of a sudden, Aquino's life and death have become a test case, a symbolic happening, a matter of social conscience, a historical event, transcending in magnitude and ramifications the personal intentions and powers of Aquino himself. For his life and death have become inscribed in the history of the nation very much like the handed-down written text of an author which attains a status autonomous and independent of its author's subjective plans and intentions.

We are then come to such a juncture in the history of our communal life, when the very situation interpellates us regarding the mettle of our commitment to such cherished values as KAPWATAO, a cardinal principle of our culture encompassing a whole set of cognate values such as the respect for human life, the dignity of the human person, the sense of truthfulness and fairness and loyalty in our dealings with fellowmen, the sense of duty to common

welfare over and above purely personal interests, the sense of honor in the service of country and people. In the light of our acknowledged value-commitments, we are brought to task for the many compromises and cheap accommodations we have struck up with ourselves in the recent past. Thus, repressed internal conflicts with ourselves are summoned up to the surface of our consciousness, bringing into the open the rationalizations and subterfuges of our social guilty conscience.

THE ROLE OF KRISIS

Here perhaps is the special role of philosophy in the crisis situation, namely, critical reflexion. The word "critic" or "critique" comes from the Greek word *krinein*, meaning to sift, to distinguish, to choose, hence to render judgment or sentence, to interpret, to give a studied opinion or estimate. Thus, we see that the two words *krisis* and *krinein* share a common root *kri*, which means to discern, to choose, to sift. Indeed, the moment of crisis is necessarily also a moment of critique, by which the real, critical concerns at issue are brought to light for discernment and decision so that the crisis may lead to proper resolution and denouement. And so, in history we see that moments of human crisis are often also watersheds of critical philosophical reflexion, for at such moments man is driven back by the force of circumstances to struggle with himself, to re-turn on his most fundamental positions regarding the ground and sense of his existence.

Here then perhaps lies philosophy's role at its best, critical reflexion in the midst of a crisis situation, by which man tries to gain or re-gain understanding of the fundamental assumptions underlying his community's manner of living, and, when the situation should require, to bring to light the ideological defenses and blind spots inherent in the community's attitudes and perspectives. In so doing, man thus acquires self understanding, a measure of self-awareness and moral control over his actions and worldly preoccupations.

Such a critical reflexion as assigned to philosophy does not necessarily have to lead to a search for an absolute foundation, such as in some Absolute Idea as it was in Hegel, or in some Transcendental Ego as it was for Husserl.

Notwithstanding past intentions and ambitions, man as philoso-

pher has never quite succeeded in touching any rock bottom foundation that is ultimately self-authenticating or self-justificatory. In his communal role as critic, untangling ideological illusions and uncovering the deep-seated assumptions of the community's world-view, the philosopher never seems to come to some ultimate layer that he can finally claim to be the immediate intuitive stable reality.

As the deconstructionist and the hermeneuticist have shown us, man is never immediately present to reality nor is reality ever immediately present to him. There is always inevitably the medium of language that intervenes — a language where there is no naturally fixed correspondence between word and thing, between sign and referent. Hence, despite common sense impressions, meanings are determined not so much in direct relation, one to one, to a referential world, but rather as elements within a network of significations pre-established by conventional codes and systems. Language then does not provide us a picture of or a window to reality, so to speak, since thought and meaning are relative to these conventionally established matrices of significations.

In this view, philosophical understanding takes on the nature of interpretation. In other words, the philosopher, while remaining situated in language, tries to make sense of his world, which, in turn, presents itself not in some direct intuited fashion but already as mediated through a system of significations, as objectified in traditionally bequeathed texts, in other words, monuments, artifacts, documents and institutionalized attitudes and perceptions, crystallized and fixed in myths, sayings, riddles, tenets of traditional wisdom. As language of the philosopher meets language as objectified in traces and in texts, man sees himself as ineluctably situated within a hermeneutic circle, wherein our whole existence is inextricably bound up in the maze and labyrinth of language. Interpretation then could never come to a point where one finally touches some referential world directly. Rather, since the interpretation remains always within the realm of language, meaning as text is referred to meaning as con-text of interpretation and to further meaning as further re-interpretation. As Jacques Derrida says, meaning is continually deferred and multiplied as one pursues interpretation indefinitely.¹ In other words, interpretation is

1. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by G.C. Spivak (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 15.

achieved by interminable reference from one level of meaning to another, thus by transporting us from one layer to another, literally, by means of *meta-phor* and by other like figures of speech, which enable us to straddle multiple levels of meaning. In this light, Derrida says the very literality or literal meaning of language is its metaphoricity. In brief, there is no literal or intuitive meaning.

If so, philosophical reflexion as interpretation would seem to be caught up in an endless chain of interpretations and proliferating layers of meanings as the philosopher-interpreter gets tangled up in what threatens to be more and more a mere fanciful play of textual meanings or intertextuality. At this point, it may well be said that philosophy could not be any more oblivious of the crisis situation or of any serious human situation for that matter.

It would seem however that language has a more serious vein or function than just the undifferentiated play of textual meanings. Language is ultimately an activity, a doing, a performative, a speech-act, motivated by some practical interest, a will-to-meaning, eventually by a certain moral will-to-freedom, by which the human spirit tries to establish for itself a proper realm or world. In the end, the traditional linguistic community adopts a conventional network of significations not in view of some mere playful deployment of indifferent intertextual meanings, but in view of projecting and making for themselves a meaningful world that they might dwell in, a world of work, of intelligible communication, of beauty, of ultimacy. Thus, while it is true that the intertextual nature of language prevents the interpreter from ever coming to rest in some final, stable, intuitive layer of meaning, the point and power however of language lies not in its capacity to picture a fixed, stable world, but to re-create a world which remains ever in flux, unfinished, thus by symbol and metaphor and trope, to open up new spaces, so to speak, to trans-figure the world, as Paul Ricoeur would say, continually unfolding various ulterior possibilities over and above the worn-out commonly accepted levels of meaning.²

By way of footnote, it may be said that in this perspective, there would be two general types of languages, namely, the operational and the hermeneutical. The operational language is the

2. Paul Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," in *Philosophy in France Today*, edited by Alan Montefiore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 185-87, p. 196.

empirical language wherein, by way of operative theoretical constructs, paradigms, and models, man is able to transform and manipulate the surrounding forces of his world. The hermeneutical language, on the other hand, is that whereby man, whether by way of affirmation or expression or invocation, projects the utmost possibilities of his humanity. Operational or hermeneutical, language, it will be seen, remains as interpretation, in other words, never as the direct mirroring of or window to a fixed, stable reality. Furthermore, under the two cases, language shows itself to be performative, a certain will-to-meaning, a will-to-freedom, whereby man projects and establishes for himself a sphere of significations and possibilities in which he might dwell and find fulfillment.

Language then is not just an objective system of elements, a mere tool for communication. More fundamentally, it is an activity, a creative event in which and through which a world emerges and comes to stand for man.

THE ROLE OF POESIS

Here we see the second role of philosophy in a crisis situation, namely, *poesis*, or the creative role. Taking up the role of language as will-act, as will-to-meaning, the philosopher-interpreter, by way of symbol and metaphor and paradox must open up new possibilities for man in view of a world more humanly habitable, more just, more free, a world where such an event as the death on the tarmac could never possibly happen again. The philosopher-interpreter in his poetic role must dare to say what heretofore has remained unsaid. He must propose possibilities till now untried and perhaps considered impossible. To put it in other words, the critical reflexion with which we start leads us eventually on a dialectical process of negation and elevation of human experience, as Hegel has shown, with the only difference being that whereas for Hegel the movement of *aufhebung* goes on as an inexorably necessary and logical process, for us the movement of the dialectic would depend more on man's discretion or will-act, something very much like moral discernment, wherein man's will to see beyond his former perspective that has been put into question by a crisis event leads him on to the transformation and elevation of his experience.

And so, it was the Aquino event, a moment of negation, which shook us from a certain level of life we had somehow come to accept and adjust to, putting into question our very manner of existence. On the other hand, just as the Aquino event has succeeded in transforming our consciousness and our conscience, we in turn address and question as it were the text or message of Aquino's life and death, and eventually go beyond it, negating it, as it were, going to the very questions that his life and death were answers to, and eventually exploring other possible responses that Aquino himself perhaps had not ventured into toward a more fundamental restructuring of the economic and political bases of our communal life. In the course of this process of negation and transformation, we eventually shall have to create a renewed vision of man, thus, for example, pose new norms for a legal framework that would provide tighter guarantees for human rights, new norms for an economy that would be more equitable in the sharing of the burdens as well as of the benefits, and for a political system more participative, more effectively representative of the various sectors and interests of the people.

Such a dialectic, poetic role for the philosopher-interpreter should not however lead man to any subjectivistic illusion of being a self-possessed creator of meaning. Such transfigurative poetic positions as should issue out of his interpretations will come not purely out of his creative imagination, for that would be mere wishful thinking, but rather out of the potentials lying in some inchoate way, already prefigured in the text or in the historical situation man finds himself confronted with. Speaking in the manner of Wittgenstein, we may say that man is inevitably situated within the horizon of some pre-existing "ordinary language" and "form of life". Hence, the transfigurative possibilities are to be drawn not from the center of man's subjectivity, but from the given situation itself as defined by the community's social and historical past and language. Indeed, such possibilities would remain open and inchoate and would amount to naught independently of man's creative initiative or will-act. Nonetheless, they remain in a sense prefigured in so far as these open potentials, as possibilities of the text or of the historical situation, antedate and set the boundaries to the will-to-meaning activity of man.

As finite and historical, man does not seize and possess himself in the very act of thinking and willing himself, but rather he gains

a certain measure of self-understanding and moral freedom in the process of retrieving possibilities from the concrete objectifications of his past achievements and failures, as bequeathed to him by his social-historical tradition. And so, emerging from the Aquino tragedy, this nation must try to shape its future out of the opportune possibilities of the historical situation itself as defined by the present consciousness and emergent expectations and resources of the people. We must avoid being misled into a fatuous search for ourselves in some lost, pristine, golden age lying supposedly in the distant past, pre-American, pre-Spanish, pre-Chinese and pre-Muslim and pre-Indian traders, for that is apt to lead us nowhere but the stage of our primitive selves, which, besides, no longer exists, nor should we seek our answers in some ideal, utopian, never world in the distant future, so ideal and so perfect that in our furious pursuit of it we may only end up binding ourselves to something like a harsh Procrustean bed where we are most likely to lose not only our legs but our heads as well, as we may learn from the recent past experiences of other peoples.

THE ROLE OF PHRONESIS

Here perhaps is the third role of philosophy in a crisis situation, namely, to show man his historical situatedness, to show him that our task is to espouse the limitations and possibilities of our common destiny, to re-create and transfigure the world by fashioning new symbols and opening up new horizons out of the very materials and traces bequeathed to us by our communal past. Aristotle perhaps expresses it best in his concept of *phronesis*, which connotes a sort of practical wisdom, a certain capacity to think and feel in the situation as befits the man of action.³ DAPAT TAYONG MATUTONG MAKIRAMDAM, SABI NGA NG ATING MGA AMAIN. In fine, man is not primarily a knower, surveying and contemplating his world from above independently of time and history, but a being-in-the-world, one who from the start, pre-reflexively, has been actively involved in a life-world of commitment and praxis, a world of work and political struggle and feeling and value-ing, never arriving at a moment of intuitive, serene, eternal self-presence, for he is ever behind, ever belated in relation

3. Aristotle, "The Nicomachean Ethics," Book VI, v-xiii.

to a past that is always already there preceding him, even as he is ever ahead of himself, anticipating and projecting himself in his possibilities, possibilities which, as we have seen, could have come only from his present situation.

Here then are the three roles of philosophy in crisis situation, namely, as critic, as poet, as one rooted and committed to his life-situation. In a sense they are the roles that each and everyone of us must assume for himself, in so far as philosophy is nothing but every man trying to get a better understanding of himself and his worldly tasks. In recapitulation, as critical reflexion, philosophy leads to a dialectic of negation and creative transformation in view of a better future world, transformation however to be effected *in situ*, to be fashioned out of the gleanings from his past objectivations as handed down to the present by the communal tradition. And so, KRISIS, POESIS, PHRONESIS.