

Rizal, seen through the philosophical lens

The oracle

The term “philosophical” in this context is used to describe a method of examining a person’s biography from a perspective that is contemplative and reflective, with the aim of finding access to their self-perception. While Rizal did not write an autobiography, he did offer insights into his life and experiences through his letters and diaries. In these writings, he more or less openly talks about his thoughts and reflections on various aspects of his literary and political commitment and the circumstances he encountered. Furthermore, the *experimentum crucis* of his novels is a demonstration of how colonialism can be detrimental to the development of an individual and a community. He did not use the assertive language of a man of action, but usually commented on his aspirations and concerns in an elegiac tone.

In his poetry and novels, he used the freedom of satirical imagination, not to promise salvation from colonial oppression, but to shed light on the shortcomings of the colonial rulers and to encourage self-criticism among his fellow countrymen. His novels can be seen as belonging to the category of ‘punishing and laughing literature’, established by Cervantes with his *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. From a political point of view, Rizal was a reformer. He was opposed to physical violence, but he fought for recognition, for what he considered the “rights of humanity” (*los derechos de la humanidad*) and the “independence of thought” (*independencia del pensar*). In a letter to a

friend, he wrote that the pen is perhaps the most important tool for expressing heart and mind.

From the perspective of the oppressive colonial rulers, Rizal was a doubly stigmatised outsider. He was regarded as both biologically belonging to an “inferior race” and as a critic of colonialist power who favoured violence. As a result, he was exiled for four years, charged with rioting and breach of the peace without any evidence, and in the end sentenced to death by a firing squad. He died at the age of 35 on 30 December 1896 at the gates of Manila.

Although my review of Rizal’s life follows a philosophical guideline, there is also a very old background tradition to be remembered, which is linked to fortune telling and mythical tales. In Rizal’s novel *Noli me tangere*, published in Berlin in 1887, the narrator describes a convivial scene in a beautiful rural setting. The villagers are sitting by the river and enjoying themselves playing cards and board games. The younger ones are engaged in a fortune-telling game in which the numbers on a Wheel of Fortune (*Rueda de la Fortuna*) set in motion by the questioners lead to the numbered answers written down in a list. Ibarra, one of the novel’s main characters, wants to build a school for boys and girls in the village. He asks the wheel of fortune whether his enterprise will succeed. The answer “Dreams are dreams!” (*¡Los sueños, sueños son!*) foreshadows Ibarra’s failure.¹

Many years later, during his exile in Dapitan, Rizal created a parlour game which he called “Haec est Sibylla Cumana”. The name represents the Cumaean Sibyl, whose appearance in Virgil’s *Aeneid* was well known to the Philippine exile. In Book VI (42 ff.) of the Latin epic, Aeneas enters the underworld with the help of the Sibyl and learns from her and his father Anchises what the future holds for him. A pen drawing by Rizal aptly illustrates the appearance of the Sibyl in Virgil’s poem, where her face is discoloured by frenzy and her hair is wildly dishevelled.²

1 J. Rizal: *Noli me tangere*. Berlin 1887, 131

2 Source of the drawing: <https://www.positivelyfilipino.com/magazine/jose-rizal-the-oracle> (29. 11. 2024)



Rizal's pen drawing of the Cumaean Sibyl

Rizal's oracle game consists of several octagonal tops, on the sides of which are inscribed the numbers of 52 questions in a written list which, in vague analogy to the fundamental questions of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, ask about the past and, above all, about the future: "¿Cuál será mi destino? ¿Cuál será mi carrera?" And so forth (*What will be my destiny? What will be my career?*).³ The answers to the questions posed to the player are compiled (with numerous variations) in a separate list – 416 numbers in total – and selected at random.

Rizal was not only familiar with Virgil, he also knew the great Italian poet very well, whom the Roman poet led like another Sibyl through the underworld regions of those unfortunate 'sinners' whom the Christian God had condemned to purgatory or to hell. It was therefore more than just a whim when he wrote to Blumentritt (31 July 1894) from exile using Dante Alighieri's first lines from the *Divina Commedia*: "Halfway through my life / I found myself in a dark forest" (*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura*). He

3 J. Rizal: *Escritos Varios II*. Manila 1961, 318 ff.

could not know, but he had a hunch that he was never going to find his way out of this dark forest.

In what follows, however, I will not take the Sibyl or Virgil as my guide. Instead, I am going to use the following questions, posed by the philosopher Kant (may he forgive me), as a guideline:⁴

What can I know?

What should I do?

What can I hope for?

What is man?

What can I know?

Rizal was born on 19 June 1861, the seventh of eleven children in a relatively well-off family of Filipino tenant farmers. His birthplace, Calamba, and the surrounding lands were owned by Spanish religious orders (who had appropriated them without rights). These same orders, especially the Dominicans and Jesuits, had a monopoly on education in the colony. Rizal's family, on the other hand, had a rich private library of at least 1000 books, including banned works. It was an Eldorado for young José, who, like Giacomo Leopardi, grew up a book lover in the family library.

Rizal received formal education in Latin and Spanish at monastic schools, where rhetoric was a major subject in preparation for the clerical profession. He made a virtue of necessity, devouring the Latin classics (from Virgil to Augustine), successfully practising various literary genres and secular resistance to Catholic drill. At the Jesuit University in Manila, he pursued studies in medicine and *Filosofia y Letras*. At the age of 20, he departed from his homeland, which was experiencing the consequences of late feudalist exploitation under the

4 In *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant writes: "All the interests of my reason (both speculative and practical) are united in the following three questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What should I do? 3. What may I hope?" In the *Lectures on Logic*, he added the question *What is man?* Cf. <https://ekkehart-schaffer.de/kants-fragen-der-philosophie>

Spanish colonial rule. As soon as he arrived in Spain, he looked back on his school days at home and summarised his experiences in the following verdict: “Blame the defect and insensible system of education that, like a thick fog, obscures the intellectual horizon, killing and drowning the most felicitous aptitudes.”⁵ To change this became the focus of his life’s work.

Rizal continued his studies at the Central University in Madrid, where he attended language courses in German, French, Italian, English and Hebrew. He subsequently passed examinations in medicine and in the faculty of arts known as *Filosofia y Letras*. As a medical practitioner, Rizal specialised in ophthalmology, a field that aligns with the values espoused by a late Enlightenment philosopher who sought to enlighten the oppressed. He embarked on a journey to consult with renowned ophthalmologists in Paris, Heidelberg and Berlin. As a writer, he worked on a novel entitled *Noli me tangere*, which alludes to the “social cancer” of colonialism that was eating away at his homeland and corrupting it morally (cancer was considered infectious at the time). In pursuit of both philological curiosity and poetic ambition, he devoted himself to the improvement of his language skills. He engaged with a diverse array of literary works, including those by Dante, Machiavelli, Thomas More, Shakespeare, Voltaire, Herder, Schiller, and Karl Julius Weber, a figure known as the “laughing philosopher.” He read them in the original language and quoted from their writings.

In the European cities where he resided for a period exceeding one day, he visited museums, clinics, educational institutions, religious edifices, and libraries. He consulted a wide range of sources on the Philippines in order to reconstruct the pre-colonial era of his homeland, including the *Biblioteca Real* Madrid, the *Royal Library* in Berlin, the *Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris* and the Reading Room of the *British Museum*. The result was the publication of a new edition of an old Spanish chronicle from the early 17th century, which was sup-

5 The Town Schools in the Philippines (1882) J. Rizal: Miscellaneous Writings VIII. Manila 1964, 11

plemented by dozens of critical and subversive annotations from Rizal's pen.

In the summer of 1886, he began a correspondence from Heidelberg with Ferdinand Blumentritt, a Bohemian grammar school professor and scholar, who at the time was the world's leading expert on the colonial and ethnic history of the Philippines. With a few Spanish exceptions, this correspondence, written in German, is a treasure trove for anyone who wants to find out what Rizal was like. Over the course of their uninterrupted correspondence, which spanned a decade, both letter writers engaged in discourse on a range of topics, including politics, history, philology, and human rights. They repeatedly returned to the crucial question of what the future of the Philippines might look like, how – in other words – justice could replace injustice, equality replace racist humiliation, freedom of self-determination replace spiritual subjugation, in order to build a peaceful world of Filipino-Spanish coexistence on the more than seven thousand islands of the Pacific archipelago. Both fought side by side against racist exploitative colonialism and the abuse of power by the Catholic clergy in the Philippines with sharp polemics published in Spanish and Philippine newspapers.

A short interim: Two years after Rizal's assassination by the corrupt Spanish colonial dictatorship, the United States, following military intervention, purchased the Philippine archipelago, including its inhabitants, from the Spanish crown for the ridiculous sum of 20 million dollars. With the exception of a two-year Japanese occupation during the Second World War, the archipelago remained under American rule until 1946. In the early 20th century, Rizal's work was americanised and his name became the slogan of a national hero cult binding on all Filipinos. This cult is to be ritually renewed every year on 30 December, the anniversary of Rizal's death. Since the 1950s, Rizal's novels have been compulsory reading in all Philippine schools and universities.

But now to the second Kantian question, which Rizal has posed from time to time, even without a philosophical undertone.

What should I do?

He contemplated this question when he sought to publish his books, but lacked both the financial resources and a publisher. Neither in Spain nor in the Philippines was there a publisher with the courage to even consider this potentially dangerous venture. He posed the same question when he placed his family in jeopardy by publishing *Noli me tangere*. He posed the question again each time he sought to identify potential allies who were willing to collaborate with him on his critiques of colonialism and reform politics, as well as on the development of pragmatic strategies for action. He considered what could be done to inspire self-respect and self-confidence in his fellow countrymen, and became an advocate of radical reform through his criticism of colonial oppression published in the *Quincenario democrático La Solidaridad* and elsewhere. The question “What should I do?” resurfaced again when friends who feared for his safety attempted to free him from Spanish captivity.

His responses to these questions, at times, induced a sense of despondency, ultimately resulting in his death and bestowing upon him immortality. He rejected attempts to be freed from custody, citing that he, a lone voice in the wilderness, stood as a person behind every word in his writings critical of religion and power. He exhorted his compatriots to pursue “Bildung”, and he devised a plan for a secular, modern school curriculum. To empower his fellow countrymen, he became an advocate of radical reform through his criticism of colonial oppression published in the *Quincenario democrático La Solidaridad* and elsewhere.⁶ But he was only able to implement his strategies temporarily, as he quickly fell out with his fellow campaigners, and the Spanish administration refused to accept his proposals. Furthermore, he was unable to protect his family from persecution. At best, he could mitigate their hardships through negotiation. Nevertheless, his books were published in “free Europe”, albeit only with the financial backing of his

⁶ *La Solidaridad* was published by the young Filipino *ilustrados* in Barcelona and existed from 1889 to 1895.

friends: the annotated Spanish chronicle in Paris,⁷ the novel *Noli me tangere* in Berlin and the follow-up novel *El Filibusterismo* in Ghent, Belgium.

At the end of the prefaces to his books, Rizal called the place of their creation “Europe” rather than the exact place of publication. Only in Europe, says this signature, could he move freely, i.e. without surveillance; and only there could he write about his homeland and the oppression staged there by Europeans without having to fear persecution and humiliation. He had fled from the violence in his homeland in order to denounce the violence in his country in freedom. But at the same time, with the very work that was born of free thought, he gave his opponents the pretext to deprive him of his freedom and ultimately his life. Ecco, il paradosso della libertà!

What can I hope for?

In 1889, one hundred years after the French Revolution, Rizal began writing a long essay in Paris entitled *The Philippines in One Hundred Years*, a cautious Utopia in terms of content. In order to be able to talk about the future, he wrote, one must know the past. He therefore began by summarising the past 300 years under the yoke of the Spanish colonial regime. The result is a grey history of decay, to which applies what I would like to call, with Paul Ricoeur, a ‘history of unfulfilled promises’.⁸

Five years before this publication, Rizal gave an enthusiastic speech in Madrid in praise of two Filipino artists who were friends of his and who had won a Spanish competition for the best painting. I’m going

7 Sucesos de las islas Filipinas por el Doctor Antonio de Morga, obra publicada en Méjico el año de 1609, nuevamente sacada á luz y anotada por José Rizal y precedida de un prólogo del Prof. Fernando Blumentritt. Paris: Librería de Garnier Hermanos, 1890

8 Paul Ricoeur: Das Rätsel der Vergangenheit. Erinnern – Vergessen – Verzeihen. Übersetzt von Andris Breitling u. Henrik Richard Lesaar. Göttingen 1998

to quote a passage from this eulogy in which the great pathos of hope can be heard, which will only be perceptible as a distant echo in the Utopia-essay written later:

The patriarchal era in the Philippines is waning. The deeds of her illustrious sons are no longer wasted away at home. The oriental chrysalis is leaving the cocoon. The morrow of a long day for those regions is announced in brilliant tints and rose-coloured dawns, and that race, fallen into lethargy during the historic night while the sun illumines other continents, again awakens, moved by the electric impact that contact with Western peoples produces, and she demands light, life, the civilisation that on one time they bequeath her, thus confirming the eternal laws of constant evolution, of change, of periodicity, of progress.⁹

What is man?

This is a question that is not straightforward to answer, to which Immanuel Kant (and not he alone) devoted considerable time and effort. On reflection, it seems that this question is one that is constantly evolving and cannot be ignored. However, upon perusing Kant's *Anthropology*, I came across the philosopher's observation that it is part of the "unfathomable wisdom" of "nature's plan" to "bring about the perfection of man through progressive culture, albeit with some sacrifice of his pleasures in life".¹⁰ The figure of Rizal immediately comes to mind, not only because of the "pleasures of life" he missed and lamented, including the unfulfilled longing for family life. As to Kant, the term "culture" is correctly translated by the Asian as "Bildung"; and Kant's concept of "perfection" corresponds closely to the concept of "perfectibility", which Rizal could find in Herder, whose complete

9 Rizal's speech delivered at the banquet in Madrid in honor of the Filipino painters Juan Luna and Felix Resurrección Hidalgo (25 June 1884). J. Rizal: Political and Historical Writings VII. Manila 1964, 18

10 Immanuel Kant: Anthropologie in pragmatischer Absicht. Ed. Karl Vorländer. Leipzig ⁵1912, 275 f.

works were part of his personal library. Furthermore, progress in the sense of perfection was the hope that Rizal celebrated so enthusiastically in the Madrid eulogy to his artist friends.

In short, the simplest answer to Kant's fourth question could be: *Man is what he, under given circumstances, makes of himself.*

However, this is not the end of the matter, as in Rizal's novel *Noli me tangere* a philosopher responds to Kant's question with a challenge that provokes considerable reflection. The philosopher is named Tasio and is a prototypical outsider figure. The villagers, who are characterised as sanctimonious, regard him as a fool, despite or because of his ownership of a large library and his ability to read and write books. The villagers ridicule him, failing to comprehend his critique of the disdainful violence of the colonial regime and the indoctrination by the Spanish priests. To write his texts, the philosopher uses a secret script, which is designed to safeguard him and his ideas from the persecution by fanatical villagers. He is convinced that an educated posterity will be able to decipher the code, and that they will then realise that not everyone slept in the "night of the ancestors".¹¹ Tasio's hope is that by deciphering his coded works, future generations will be able to liberate themselves from the obscurantism imposed on them by their ancestors.

Even if the philosopher's answer to Kant's fourth question is not prophetic, it is extremely radical. Because together with the Catholic Church's dogma "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus!" (*No salvation outside the Church!*), he also condemns the myth of man as an image of God:

The Creation, i.e. Man, is a contingent and not a necessary being, and God should not have created him, no, if, in order to make *one* happy, he had to condemn hundreds to eternal misery, and all of them for inherited or

11 "Porque no escribo para esta generación, escribo para otras edades. Si esta me pudiera leer, quemaría mis libros, el trabajo de toda mi vida; en cambio, la generación que descifre estos caracteres será una generación instruida, me comprenderá y dirá: "¡No todos dormían en la noche de nuestros abuelos!" *Noli me tangere*. Berlin 1887, 135

momentary faults. No! If that were true, you would drown your son who is sleeping there.¹²

Although the narrator in Rizal's novel does not impede the philosopher's progress, the narrative arc of the story ultimately undermines his efforts to enlighten future generations. No sooner has Tasio died of old age than the bigoted villagers set fire to his house and burn his library and manuscripts. It is a foreshadowing of what will happen to the novel that tells this story.

It was not long before Rizal himself realised that the figures he had invented bore an uncanny resemblance to an oracle, reflecting his own self and foretelling his future fate.

12 "La creación, el hombre es un ser contingente y no necesario, y ese Dios no debía haberle criado, no, si para hacer feliz a uno debía condenar a centenares a una eterna desgracia, y todo por culpas heredadas o de un momento. ¡No! Si eso fuera cierto, ahogue Ud. a su hijo que allí duerme." *Noli me tangere*, 1887, 68 f.