

# Editor's Note

## Towards a Filipino Virtue Ethics<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

**T**en years ago, Jeremiah Reyes, now at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, proposed that the Filipino value system first articulated decades ago by American scholars working in the Philippines, especially Fr. Frank Lynch, S.J., should be transformed into a Filipino virtue ethics that would inform and guide the behavior of Filipinos.<sup>2</sup> He convincingly argued that this transformation should take place in conversation with the Aristotelian-Thomistic ethical system, which as Reyes correctly noted, was the dominant philosophical account in the Philippines during the Spanish colonial period, especially at the University of Santo Tomas.<sup>3</sup>

To continue to move us towards a Filipino virtue ethics, and to commemorate the three significant anniversaries of St. Thomas Aquinas commemorated in 2023-2025, we invited young Filipino-Dominican scholars from the University of Santo Tomas to contribute essays that interrogate specific Filipino values/traits/virtues, in conversation with the classical Thomistic tradition, to this special issue of *Philippiniana Sacra*. Filled with novel insights and intriguing proposals for further research, these essays confirm the intuition that the scholastic framework can help Filipinos better understand how they feel, how they choose, how they think, and how they act.

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah Reyes, "Loob at Kapwa: Mga Unang Hakbang Patungo Sa Isang Pilipinong-Birtud-Etika Gamit Si Sto. Tomas de Aquino," *Asian Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities* 3.2 (2013): 1-26.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah Reyes, "Loób and Kapwa: An Introduction to a Filipino Virtue Ethics," *Asian Philosophy* 25.2 (2015): 148-171.

As the guest editor of this special issue, I decided to write this opening essay to introduce non-Filipinos to the dominant anthropological account that has guided scholarship in Filipino psychology for the last century or so. Centered in the dynamic relationship between *loób* and *kapwa*, in my view, this anthropological narrative is the most accurate and robust portrayal that we have of the Filipino and his place in the world.

### **The Dynamics of *Loób* and *Kapwa***

To understand Filipinos, consider the following scenario: Two random Filipinos meet, say at the Dubai International Airport, what happens next? As Filipinos will acknowledge, it is highly likely that both will be drawn to the other. They will greet each other and will begin to ask each other questions seeking something in common, especially some common relationship, which they share. Where are you from? Who is your family? Where did you go to school? Do you know person X or person Y? The goal of this exchange is to create an attachment. It is best if they both discover that they share a blood relative, even a distant sixth cousin, who happens to live in Manila. Alternatively, if they attended the same school, or even if they know individuals who attended the same university, or even if they have nurses in their families, this seemingly insignificant connection will become the basis for a bond. Immediately, they will see each other as *kabayans* or *kababayans*, two persons who share the same roots, two persons who share the same home. Immediately, they will become “family,” and they will begin to help each other deal with any of the often unforeseen challenges that one may face at an international airport.

How do we explain this dynamic? Scholars who study Filipino psychology, including the young Filipino-Dominicans who have written the essays featured in this special issue of *Philippiniana Sacra*, explain that this dynamic emerges from the relationship between *loób* and *kapwa*. Reyes describes the *loób* as the “relational will.”<sup>4</sup> Though I understand why he says this, I do not believe that the *loób* is merely a will, if by a will, we are referring to a rational appetite. As I experience it myself as a Filipino, the *loób* is a tribal urge, it is a tribal impulse, it is an internal movement that is analogous to the instinctive movement of other primates, including chimpanzees and gorillas, to form a troop or a band. As such, it is experienced as both rational and sub-rational. Thus, I see the *loób* as a habituation of three powers of the soul, as it is understood in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. First, it is a habituation of the *vis cogitativa*, which is that power that helps one instinctively “feel” whether something or someone is “safe” or “not safe.” Filipinos see other Filipinos as “safe” and thus are drawn towards them. Second, it is a habituation of the sense appetite, which is that

<sup>4</sup> Reyes, “Loób and Kapwa,” 154.

power that helps one desire or avoid something or someone perceived as good or evil, respectively. Filipinos see other Filipinos as “good” and thus are drawn towards them. Finally, it is a habituation of the rational appetite, i.e., the will, which is that power that helps one desire or avoid something or someone that is conceived as good or evil, respectively. Filipinos know that other Filipinos are “good” and thus are drawn towards them. This triple habituation generates the felt urge that then moves Filipinos to each other in order to create, and to maintain, a tribe. It moves them to create, and to maintain, a family.

No discussion of *loób* would be complete without an account of *kapwa*, which in scholastic terms, is the object of the tribal urge that is *loób*. *Loób* moves Filipinos towards *kapwa*. Virgilio Enriquez defines the *kapwa* as “a recognition of shared identity, an inner self shared with others.”<sup>5</sup> Katrin De Guia, a student of Enriquez, describes *kapwa* as a “shared self” or a “self in the other,” to emphasize the intimate identification of a *loób* with his *kapwa*.<sup>6</sup>

In my view, *kapwa* is not a “shared self.” Rather it is a “shared selves.” It takes two or more *loóbs* to generate a *kapwa*. Returning to the example of the two random Filipinos who meet in Dubai, each of their *loóbs* moves them to create a *kapwa* between themselves. As Enriquez rightly explains, this *kapwa* is a shared identity, a “shared selves,” which each experiences in himself or herself as the source of a shared bond, a connection, that they have together. Thus, when they help each other to overcome challenges in the airport, these two *kababayans* are working to promote the good of this *kapwa*, this “shared selves,” which each experiences as a force within.

Analogously, *kapwa* can be compared to the Thomistic virtue of *amicitia*, often translated into English as “friendship,” which Aquinas explains, is a habituation of the human person so that he is inclined towards the three acts of friendship, i.e., *concordia* (concord, which is the shared willing with the other), *benevolentia* (benevolence, which is the willing of good things for the other), and *beneficentia* (beneficence, which is the obtaining of good things for the other).<sup>7</sup> Like *amicitia* and like *loób*, *kapwa* is a habituation of the powers of the souls of the individuals in the tribe or in the family, who experience that “shared selves” in each of themselves that is the source of the attachment that binds them together. *Kapwa* is that habituation that moves them to act together to preserve their tribe, to preserve their family.

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<sup>5</sup> Virgilio Enriquez, *From Colonial to Liberation Psychology* (Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 1992), 54.

<sup>6</sup> Katrin De Guia, *Kapwa: The Self in the Other* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 2005), 28.

<sup>7</sup> *Summa theologiae* II-II.31.1. For an extensive discussion of friendship in Aquinas, see Daniel Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

## The Preservation of *Kapwa*

For most Filipinos, a happy life consists of being part of a healthy, prosperous, and loving family. Thus, moved by *kapwa*, the primary goal of many of their actions is the preservation of *kapwa*. Resembling the account of Thomistic friendship, where the virtue of *amicitia* moves individuals to create and to preserve their friendships, this *kapwa* dynamic reveals itself in two ways. First, moved by *kapwa*, Filipinos act to maintain their place within their tribe, especially within their families. Second, again, moved by *kapwa*, they act to preserve and to advance the good of their tribe itself, again, especially the good of their families. Consequently, as we will see in the essays found in this special issue of *Philippiniana Sacra*, most of the virtues found in Filipino society are common good virtues, i.e., they are habituations of the human person that seek to preserve and to promote the good of a group.

In this introductory essay, I would like to highlight one particular Filipino virtue, the virtue of *pakikiramdam*, because it is this virtue above all others that guides Filipino social interactions. In my view, reflecting upon the nature of *pakikiramdam* also directs our gaze to a significant conceptual challenge for those of us who want to articulate a robust Filipino virtue ethics.

*Pakikiramdam* has been defined as “feeling for another,” and it has been described as that trait that gives the Filipino a heightened awareness of the other.<sup>8</sup> This virtue, common in Southeast Asian cultures, is the ability to detect, to interpret, and to perform nonverbal cues during social interactions, precisely to avoid possible conflict and misunderstanding. When a Westerner speaks about her ability to “read a room,” she is speaking about one aspect of *pakikiramdam*. Empirical studies have revealed that this dimension of *pakikiramdam* involves neural mechanisms for ensemble perception that allow us to quickly extract an average impression from a crowd.<sup>9</sup> It involves “reading” faces and body language cues.

As a young Filipino, I learned *pakikiramdam* from my parents and grandparents who taught me how to speak and to act so that I and others do not “lose face.” Here, “face” refers to the social image, the reputation, the dignity, or the honor, of the individual. Filipinos act to avoid embarrassing or shaming others. They help others to maintain their “face,” and in doing so, they preserve *kapwa*. Notably, *pakikiramdam* is a social instinct that involves reading and protecting the feelings of others. It cannot be planned ahead of time because it involves speaking and acting in

<sup>8</sup> Rita H. Mataragnon, “Pakikiramdam in Filipino Social Interaction,” In *Foundations of Behavioral Sciences: A Book of Readings* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1987), 470-482; p. 471.

<sup>9</sup> For details, see Nicholas Davidenko, “How We Read a Room,” *Psychology Today*, June 26, 2019. Available on <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/illusions-delusions-and-reality/201906/how-we-read-room>.

the immediate circumstances of a present social interaction with another. Thus, it is a virtue that emphasizes the affective dimensions of human interaction. In one way or another, *pakikiramdam* is involved in every action undertaken by the Filipino – it informs all the Filipino virtues – because it is the virtue that directs those actions towards the *telos* of a Filipino's life, which is the creation and preservation of *kapwa*.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, *pakikiramdam* can become vicious when the primary social concern of “saving face” overrides and trumps truth, goodness, and beauty. Sometimes, the Filipino is moved by his passions to act in vicious ways – he lies, he steals, or he hurts – because of his preoccupation with “saving face” and with preserving *kapwa*. This is a distortion of virtue. It is a wounding of *kapwa*. In the end, therefore, one of the most significant challenges Filipino scholars face as we move towards a robust Filipino virtue ethics will be to articulate how a Filipino should integrate both his feelings and his reasons – in my view, probably by complementing *pakikiramdam* with the Filipino virtue of *panindigan* – so that he acts to promote the authentic good of the *kapwa*. This will be true whether it be the *kapwa* he shares with his family, his community, his company, his country, or his God.

## Conclusion

As we move forward towards a robust Filipino virtue ethics, one question inevitably arises: Are these Filipino virtues just for Filipinos? I would say no. Though these virtues are prominently on display within the communitarian societies of the Philippines and not so much in the individualistic cultures of the West, I believe that the Filipino virtues that we are exploring and explaining in these pages and beyond are rooted in human nature. As my earlier reference to the primates suggests, these common good virtues capacitate the human agent to live as a social animal in harmony with others of his kind within their particular tribe. With the recent rise of communitarian ideas in Western political philosophy, I propose that Filipino virtue ethics can help contemporary Western philosophers recover a true sense of what it means to flourish among and with others.<sup>PS</sup>

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et La salute Regina quod dicitur

**R**egina quod dicitur  
de de misericordia vita

dulcissima y speranza nostra. Dios

te salute at llamamos los deste

tristes hijos de Eva. Qui suspi-

ramos gimiendo y llorando en

aquella valle de lagrimas. Ca-

pues abogada nuestra, buelue

anosotros estos tus misericor-

diosos ojos. y despues de a...