

Mabini's Political Deism: A Glimpse of His True Decalogue

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ABSTRACT

The following essay is an attempt to review, albeit, briefly, one of the founding documents of the Philippine revolution, Apolinario Mabini's *True Decalogue*. Though not exhaustive and carries no pretension of historical proficiency, the essay rather seeks to situate the document within its internal hermeneutic structure, no doubt shaped in the background by the immediate demands of the revolution, as did the intellectual and political currents from out of Europe that reached the archipelago via commercial and trade routes in the early 18th century. Mabini later lamented the fall of the revolution which in many ways was anticipated by the open and subtle warnings of the *True Decalogue* in the face of circumstances as well as internal conflicts, betrayal and corruption that haunted its leadership and demoralized its many unsung heroes. In light of this unfinished revolution, the *True Decalogue* continues to appeal to our time.

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*This is the psychological Trinity – reason, will and conscience.*¹ In three compelling words, the sublime paralytic sums up a political philosophy for his nation. Or was it a nation he sought to reclaim from a revolution that would miss its only chance? If it is always the people who decide the fate of a nation, are they to be blamed for the misfortunes of history? It was only a matter of time before the full volition of this history would unravel a *fait accompli*; a volition, which is said to be, for all times, that of a people's will. Accordingly, whether they decided it or not, the weight of the future bears much upon them.

Aware of the importance of reason and justice (combined, they form a will with conscience in Mabini's own terms), the acknowledged brains of the Philippine Revolution takes the guidance, direction and control of a people's will as the revolution's chief immediate task.² As inflexible as he already is in defending the psychological ground of this task, he is even more impassioned in binding a people's destiny to a trinitarian structure of time—reason, will and conscience. This triadic structure of time finds its living complement in the power of intense assemblage, such as a people. This power, echoing Rizal's *La Liga*, is archipelagic in both nature and direction; in unity, a "compact, vigorous, homogeneous body."³ If an archipelago is always threatened by furious climate that constantly disturbs its agricultural and fishing economy, it is only right that its people should give each other "mutual protection in want and need."⁴ All the more if it is an alien sea, the war machine of the Atlantic whose hunger for spices in the Pacific, and later, for colonies, plateaus to remake a foreign geography, grew as intensely as to hunger more than just the earth, but also the blood of a population, women to rape, brains to corrupt; in short, a people whose

1 Apolinario Mabini, "The Political Trinity," in *The Philippine Revolution (With Other Documents of the Period)*, Vol. II, An English Translation of *La Revolucion Filipina* (Manila, Philippines: The National Historical Institute, 2007), 54-58.a

2 Ibid.

3 See http://joserizal.nhcp.gov.ph/Writings/Other/la_liga.htm for online text of *La Liga Filipina*.

4 Ibid.

destiny is to be sealed, three times by foreign powers, including a close neighbor in recent times, reaching our shores.⁵

Mabini argued that in order to defy a destiny superposed from a foreign sea, a revolutionary, presumed to be most able and courageous, must approach an alien power with every rational step available and possible. But he also advised against too much reason taking place in the mind of a 19th century revolutionary. Reason does not aim to self-reproduce. One must rather take a leap of faith, which is what reason intends of the revolutionary.

It is not enough that a revolutionary must renounce his life and forsake the comforts of his family and home... he must also renounce his freedom for the moment.⁶

To emphasize the perseverance of faith in waiting for the right moment, around the time "the proverbially patient Filipino people have finally felt unable to contain their popular indignation, provoked and agitated by the continuous abuses of the Spanish Government,"⁷ Mabini, through his writings, launched a political experiment. First, in order to neutralize the propensity of the will to throw a geography into suicidal collapse, about the time the brains of the Revolution warned against the "wide and easy road of violence and larceny"⁸ in the wake of Rizal's martyrdom igniting, at least to his mind, a fatal revolt, Mabini sought to underscore the deifying role of reason. Second, in order to temper an equally undesirable rationality, reason without will, the revolution itself must be

5 The vestiges of colonialism continue to influence Philippine post-colonial life. It is in this context that E. San Juan Jr. sustains interest in Rizal's works and idealism as he takes the examples of General Antonio Luna and Apolinario Mabini who in their time viewed Rizal as an important inspiration to the Philippine revolution. See E. San Juan Jr., *Rizal In Our Time: Essays in Interpretation*, revised edition (Mandaluyong, Philippines: ANVIL PUBLISHING, INC., 2011), vii-xvi.

6 Mabini, "To the Filipino Revolutionaries," in *La Revolución Filipina (With Other Documents of the Epoch)*, Vol. I (Manila, Philippines: The National Historical Institute, 2007), 101.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

retooled whose *raison de'être* was first enshrined in *La Liga*, radicalized later in the Katipunan's *Decalogue*.

Mabini attempted to reshape the *Decalogue* in his *True Decalogue* by giving the revolution a second but absolute and radical beginning in terms of the revolution's role in giving birth to the Republic. In general, Mabini sought to bring the revolution back to the immanence of faith which he intended to be secular in both substance and form. He compared the second point with that of the founding act of Moses, a law-giver, unmistakably a secular force of faith, who "before proceeding to the land of promise, believed it was necessary to control the conduct of the people."⁹

The words of his *True Decalogue* would thus ring in praise for the natural law invoking God as the universal figure of justice. In his later writings, around the time the threat of US imperialism was becoming a reality, he described the conflict between divine and human law, "between the force of nature and the artificial force of men," as that from which "the nature of all just revolutions could be deduced."¹⁰ As a practicing deist, Mabini proclaimed that 'God and always God' will win, "only we do not know when."¹¹ In this light Mabini revealed his absolute belief in the rational direction of justice, if not immediately attainable in the present then in the future to come: "If we are good and persevering, we will see our victory; if we are wicked and inconsistent, our children or our grandchildren will attain it."¹² Yet Mabini also spoke of rectification, acknowledging that reason is not enough; it can exceed its own insight, producing errors in its wake: "We take note of our errors because we know that correction of errors has to redound to the benefit and honor of the country."¹³

Better if a just revolution would begin planting the seeds of God's victory, a task measured by the will to perfection measured by one's ability

9 Mabini, "To My Compatriots," in *La Revolución Filipina*, 102.

10 See Mabini, "Truth In Its Place, in *The Philippine Revolution*, 78.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Mabini, "Lamentable Error," in *The Philippine Revolution*, 101.

to censure his or her mistakes. Once again, the role of conscience is crucial in which belief in the honor of God—He who fulfills His promise to His people—is where reason commits itself to fulfill a quasi-divine task.

In the time of revolution, the task is to make one's country happy, one's country "which God has given...in this life,"¹⁴ a gift that reason should honor with the will to make Her "the kingdom of reason, of justice and of labor."¹⁵ This is the conscience of the revolution. It is only fitting that the revolution should place the happiness of one's country above one's own, as Mabini asserts. If it is said that God's law promulgates itself in the conscience of men, and it is for His worship that men advance "the independence of thy country,"¹⁶ it is God then who dictates in one's conscience that the kind of happiness the revolution must achieve is not for any person's happiness, honor and glory. The anti-personalism of the *True Decalogue* thus expresses itself most forcefully when Mabini declares his preference for 'a Republic' rather than 'a monarchy':

[For] the latter exalts one or several families and founds a dynasty; the former makes a people noble and worthy through reason, great through liberty, and prosperous and brilliant through labor.¹⁷

The *Ninth* commandment of the *True Decalogue* is evocative of a mood for war, yet a just war, cloaked beneath the sacred duty to one's neighbor who, Mabini argues, also has a sacred duty to the other, a reciprocal arrangement whose infraction is for the law of nature to address:

But if [the other] is remiss in this sacred duty and makes an attempt on your life, your freedom and your properties, then you should destroy him and crush him, because the supreme law of self-preservation must prevail.¹⁸

14 Fourth Commandment of the True Decalogue, See Mabini, "The True Decalogue," 104.

15 Ibid. Fifth Commandment of the True Decalogue.

16 Ibid. Sixth Commandment of the True Decalogue.

17 Ibid. Eight Commandment of the True Decalogue.

18 Ibid. Ninth Commandment of the True Decalogue.

Justice is sacred in the sense that it is in the administration of people, natural ecologies and things that God communicates His will to man concerning His creation, which insofar as it is His by providence should be accorded by men a sacred duty to love and protect. But God communicates His will only to a just person, a person of conscience.¹⁹ He does not communicate to one whose conscience is either deficient, careless, or nonchalant, which by virtue of justice's highest demand, as justice is God's will, is a grave misdeed to creation. A careless conscience, opposite of 'an honest peasant' whose conscience guides his restraint concerning the right time for leisure in exchange for the right of the seed to see the light from the sun,²⁰ is an oversight that will have consequence on collective destinies. A minor misdeed in humanly terms, a conscience whose provenance is also dependent on circumstances which one does not choose in advance but whose outcome, nonetheless, may unduly challenge the sacredness of creation whose internal unity is also sustained by the law of chance. Chance is also sacred which, notwithstanding its affinity to freedom, also requires of the exercise of freedom utmost prudence, especially when situations demand more than simple conviction. When situations demand this kind of justice, they express the supremacy and sovereignty of things vis-à-vis the illustrious notion of human autonomy.

Where misdeeds are to be redressed as is right and expected of justice to stipulate, the supreme law of self-preservation casts a balancing act: God wills preservation as justice's last determining instance. It is there where the law of contingency, of chaos and chance, which plays out the struggle between divinity and mortality, between infinity and finitude, God and men, all the same, between humans and nonhumans (or natural ecologies of things), etc. allows time to lay out a trial space for freedom, that is, to exercise extreme care. God wills chance so that an order will become conspicuous to creation. God wills time for man to reckon with human willing. From the comforts of his wheelchair, Mabini writes his most compelling oration on political deism:

19 Ibid. Seventh Commandment of the True Decalogue.

20 "The way an honest peasant has to sacrifice his time for leisure and rest in order to work ... so he will not have to work in his old age"(Mabini, "To the Filipino Revolutionaries," in *La Revolución Filipina*, 101).

Great nations are continuously waiting to grab the first opportunity to control the means of livelihood of weak countries. God does not prevent that, because he has given human beings the freedom to work, making them responsible for their actions. But he will use their insatiable avarice, as a means to spread civilization and use it as an instrument to humble the powerful and exalt the humble. Current and future wars will work for the aggrandizement of the race which now struggles under ignominy and slavery. When the young race, full of energy and of love, inherits the experience of an already old and decrepit one, knowledge will increase much more and, in a manner of speaking, humanize sentiments as required in the dreamed-of universal balance.²¹

In the Last Commandment of the *True Decalogue*, Mabini can be interpreted as arguing for a curious idea of a neighbor. The key to this interpretation is how Mabini identified a 'unifying knot,' by all means a nonhuman concept (to which the revolution is tied by only one destiny) that binds a human neighbor to a nonhuman (the entire congress of interests, sorrows, and aspirations, molecular flows of intensive desire that attach themselves to a human being; without them, the human is empty; what we call human attributes are not in themselves, taken independently, human).²² This unifier is the fictional idea of a nation whose objective reference is to be found not in some stable, permanent essence, rather in the continuing mobility of the revolution, its truth-making and law-giving, its performance of truth as something that one holds to be true. In this truth-making one cannot afford to be careless to assign it the common meaning of mere willing, where truth and belief convey the same deliriousness, the same agitation, but also the same hope for the future to come. It is the future that sustains the fictional, albeit, tenuous unity of a nation. In the same register, the revolution is not of this world, rather a desire whose greatest satisfaction no present can ever give; an otherworldly aspiration, because, once again, not of this world, whose end no present can ever think in advance. Rather, the future thinks on behalf of the present.

21 Mabini, "Short Comments on an Open Letter," in *The Philippine Revolution*, 91.

22 In the modern light, we can interpret this complex arrangement as articulating a theory of interobjectivity in which objects "serve as comrades, colleagues, accomplices and associates in the weaving of social life" (See Bruno Latour, "On Interobjectivity," in *Mind, Culture and Activity: An International Journal*, Vol. 3, 4 [1996], 235).

Lastly, assuming the revolution could even get there and reunite with the object of its pure conviction, the future, our curious companion is still less human, still empty as far as the present is concerned. To restate Mabini's conceptual innovation, the future is the companion, a friend, a brother to whom the revolution is tied by only one destiny. But, as he warned elsewhere, cognizant of the vagaries of time and the opportunities and tribulations that make and unmake a revolutionary, destiny lays a difficult narrow path, the "narrow road of honor and virtue."

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