

FREEDOM IN RIZAL'S PREFERENTIAL DEATH: AN INQUIRY USING STEINER'S MORAL IMAGINATION

EMILIANO C. DE CATALINA
Cebu Doctors University
Cebu City

I. INTRODUCTION

In the year 1861, two persons were born, one in the west in February, the other in the east in June. The *thought* of the Western man sheds light on the *deed* of the eastern man. The notion of *moral imagination* of the Austrian philosopher, Rudolf Steiner,¹ sheds light on the *freedom* in the death of the Philippine's foremost national hero, Jose Rizal.

This paper is an inquiry into the *freedom* involved in the death of Jose Rizal in Bagumbayan. The problem it attempts to answer may be stated as follows:

¹ Rudolf Steiner was an Austrian philosopher. He was born on February 25, 1861 in Donji Kraljevec in Austria and died on March 30, 1925 in Dornach, Switzerland at age 64. Steiner studied mathematics, physics, and philosophy at Vienna Polytechnic School from 1879 to 1883. In 1891, he earned his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Rostock in Germany with thesis on Fichte's concept of ego (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Steiner). Steiner wrote two books on Goethe's philosophy: *The Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World-Conception* (1886) and *Goethe's Conception of the World* (1897). During the years 1886 up to 1897, Steiner wrote what he considered to be his most important philosophical work: *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1894). In this work, he expounded his view on human beings as spiritually free beings. Steiner was also the founder of *Anthroposophy*, a spiritual movement that is "based on the notion that there is a spiritual world comprehensible to pure thought but accessible only to the highest faculties of mental knowledge" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 11, p. 241. 1992 ed.)

Was Jose Rizal truly free in his death in Bagumbayan?

If, on the one hand, Rizal was truly free, then his death can be correctly regarded as a noble sacrificial death for the country, or, if, on the other hand, he was not free, but was only forced to accept the death sentence, then his death can be rather regarded as an ignoble death for the country; thus, in this case, it shows that he has been wrongly elevated to being the foremost national hero of the Philippines.

To answer this problem, this paper uses Rudolf Steiner's notion of Moral Imagination. Thus, it exposes of this notion. Next it analyzes Rizal's letter entitled, "*To be opened and published after my death*" in the light of the notion of moral imagination. And, lastly, the conclusion follows.

II. RUDOLF STEINER'S NOTION OF MORAL IMAGINATION

A. UNFREE AND FREE SPIRIT

In his discussion on the notion of *moral imagination*, Steiner first speaks of *unfree* and *free spirit*. On the one hand, the *unfree spirit* is one who chooses a particular idea from his world of ideas and makes it the basis for an *action*. But the reason why the *unfree* spirit does this "lies in the world of percepts² given to him, that is, in his past

² Rudolf Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, trans. Michael Wilson, (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1964). In his book, Steiner uses the term *percept* for the immediate objects of sensation/observation. "It is then," Steiner says, "not the process of observation but the object of observation which I call the percept" (p. 43). Percept then includes not only physical objects but also emotion, and even thinking itself, when it is object of observation. He uses this term in order to avoid ambiguity in the usage of language. He avoids the use of the term *sensation*, "since this has a definite meaning in physiology which is narrower than that of the concept of percept" (p. 43). Steiner also describes the term concept as "*an ideal element added to the object*" (p.41). For example, I make an observation of this paper, an object, in front of me. When this object disappears from the field of observation, what remains is the ideal counterpart of the object. For Steiner, this ideal counterpart is the concept of the object. Thus, for Steiner

experiences. He recalls, before coming to a decision, what someone else has done... or what God has commanded to be done, and he acts accordingly.”³ In this case, Steiner is saying that the *unfree* spirit’s action is based on the percepts given to him, that is, on what he has experienced about the actions of other people or what God has told him to do. The *unfree spirit*, therefore, just simply acts following what he saw people doing before or what God has told him to do. These percepts are the impulses of his action or what move him to action.

On the other hand, the free spirit also has percepts as in the case of the unfree spirit, but such “prior conditions are not the only impulses to action. He makes a completely first-hand decision.”⁴ He is worried only little as to what others have done or decreed; for he has purely ideal reasons in selecting a particular concept from among his world of concepts (or ideas⁵), and then translates it into action. Here, Steiner is saying that, unlike the unfree spirit, the free spirit does not simply follow what others have done or decreed, or what God has commanded without examining it first and then making a decision to act accordingly, or not at all. In other words, the free spirit does not act out of blind impulses but rather act out of *rational*⁶ impulses. Here, he is said to be acting freely. Hence, a free spirit.

concept and percept are counterparts, the former being the *ideal* counterpart, the latter being the *real* counterpart.

³ Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 98.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ For Steiner, the term *idea* does not differ from *concept* qualitatively. *Idea* is “but fuller, more saturated, more comprehensive concept” (41).

⁶ Concerning thinking activity, Steiner is concerned with the difference between unconscious and conscious motives of action. And thus he emphasizes the role of *thinking* in human action. Steiner says:

That an action, of which the agent does not know why he performs it, cannot be free, goes without saying. But what about an action for which the reasons are known? This leads us to the question of the origin and meaning of thinking. For without the recognition of the thinking activity of the soul, it is impossible to form a concept of knowledge about anything, and therefore of knowledge about an action. When we know what thinking in general means, it will be easy to get clear about the role that thinking plays in human action. (p. 26)

There is a difference between the two. The *unfree spirit*, on the one hand, acts from given percepts accordingly. In this case, the decision that leads him to act accordingly is *not originally* his own; it is actually that of the other, and he simply uses that decision of the other for his own action. The *free spirit*, on the other hand, acts from given percepts, but the decision that leads him to make an action is said to be *originally* his own. If it happens that he acts according to what others have done or decreed, or what God has commanded to be done, he does this only after making a *first-hand* decision, that is, to act accordingly, or not at all. If and if the free spirit conforms to given percepts, he makes it sure that he does it out of his completely *first-hand* decision. Here lies the difference between the *unfree* and the *free spirit*.

B. MORAL IMAGINATION

We now turn to the notion of *moral imagination*. Steiner asserts that moral imagination is important for the *free spirit's* action. He describes this as follows:

Man produces concrete *mental pictures*⁷ from the sum of his ideas (or concepts) chiefly by means of the

Here, Steiner says that thinking is his starting point. "Through thinking, concepts and ideas arise." When an object, for example a tree, disappears, what remains is the ideal counterpart, that is, the concept. Concept cannot be the starting point since it presupposes thinking; rather, thinking precedes the concept and is thus the starting point.

According to Steiner, what human intelligence is aware of, before thinking is set into motion, is the pure *content of observation*. In pure content of observation, the world is but an aggregate of disconnected *objects of sensation*, that is, object of pure, unthinking observation. And thinking stands over against it, ready to begin its activity (p. 43). Here, it is clear that for Steiner there are two stages involved: first is observation in which objects of sensation are gathered; second then is thinking on the objects of observation. In other words, Steiner seems to be saying that thinking is separate from the observation of the percept. In observation, the subject gathers objects of sensation, then, after observation, thinking is set into motion, or what is called the thinking process.

⁷ For Steiner, mental picture is but a picture of the object in the field of observation. He says, for example, that "when the tree disappears from my

imagination. Therefore what the *free spirit* needs in order to realize his ideas, in order to be effective, is *moral imagination*. This is the source of the *free spirit's* action. Therefore it is only men with moral imagination who are, strictly speaking, morally productive.⁸

Here, for Steiner, man's faculty of imagination is the tool used to produce mental pictures from his ideas (or concepts). Such imagination is *moral imagination*, and, from this, it follows that the mental pictures produced by moral imagination are *moral mental pictures*. So, to be morally effective or productive, the *free spirit's* action, then, must spring from his moral mental pictures produced by his moral imagination.

Moreover, concerning the important role the notion of moral imagination plays in man's free moral action, Steiner says:

Whenever the impulse of an action is present (for example, thou shalt do good to thy fellowmen! Thou shalt live so that thou best promote thy welfare!), then for each particular case the concrete mental picture of the action must first be found. For the *free spirit* who is impelled by no example, this translation of the concept into mental picture is necessary.⁹

Here, Steiner shows that conceptual form could hardly, if not at all, be the source of the *free spirit's* action. It is because, for example, the concept, *Thou shalt live so that thou best promote thy life*, does

field of vision, an after-effect of this process remains in my consciousness – a picture of the tree. My self has become enriched; its content has absorbed a new element. This element I call my *mental picture* of the tree" (Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 45). And as to the relation between mental picture and percept, Steiner, for example, says: "my concept of a lion is not formed out of my percepts of lions; but my mental picture of a lion is very definitely formed according to a percept... I cannot convey to someone a vivid mental picture without the help of his own perception. It is the particularized concept which points to the percept" (63). And "the link between concept and percept is the mental picture" (98).

⁸ Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 98. Cf. also <http://www.countercurrents.org/teltumbde150211.htm>

⁹ Ibid.

not clearly show what concrete action should be done. Thus, for Steiner, this concept has to be translated first into *concrete mental picture* by the use of moral imagination. After the conceptual form is translated into concrete mental picture, it then becomes clear what concrete action is to be taken.

Now, Steiner describes what is meant to be free, a *free spirit* that is not bound by external influences, be it actions or decrees of other people, or that of God. Steiner says:

To be free means to be able of one's own accord to determine by moral imagination those mental pictures (motives) which underlie the action. Freedom is impossible if anything other than myself (mechanical process or merely inferred extra-mundane God) determines my moral ideas. In other words, I am free only when I *myself* produce these mental pictures, not when I am merely able to carry out the motives which another being has implanted in me.¹⁰

For Steiner, then, moral imagination is the very tool used in the exercise of one's being free. For freedom lies in being able to produce mental picture which serves as the springboard of one's action. And since moral imagination produces mental pictures, it is an essential part of moral action. Thus when a person, of his own accord, produces mental pictures by his moral imagination, his *act of producing* is the very exercise of his freedom.

So, in Steiner's view, a person then is said to be free when his act of producing mental pictures is determined by himself; he is not merely carrying out another person's ideas imposed on him. If one's moral idea is but a dictate of another being and he is but just carrying it out, then he is not free in the sense that his *act of producing* mental picture—which is the source of his action—by the use of his moral imagination does not actually spring up from, and thus take place, *inside* him. Therefore, for Steiner, being free is determined from the *within* not from the *without* of a person, i.e., by some other being.

Man, for Steiner, is the very origin of what is to be *free* action, and, in this free action, *moral imagination* is an essential factor.

¹⁰ Ibid., 102.

III. RIZAL'S LETTER: "TO BE OPENED AND PUBLISHED AFTER MY DEATH"

We now turn to Rizal's letter. We analyze this letter in the light of Steiner's notion of moral imagination discussed above. This analysis seeks to determine whether Rizal is truly free in his preferential death in Bagumbayan, or not.

First, we reproduce a portion of Rizal's letter¹¹ here:

The step that I have taken, or am about to take, is undoubtedly very risky, and it is unnecessary to say that I have pondered on it a great deal. I know that everyone is opposed to it but I realized also that no one knows what goes on in my heart. I cannot live knowing that many are suffering unjust persecution because of me; I cannot live seeing my brothers [*hermanos*] and their large families persecuted like criminals. I prefer to face death and gladly give my life to free so many innocent persons from this unjust persecution.

Moreover, I wish to show to those who deny us patriotism that we know how to die for our duty and for our convictions. What matters death if one dies for what one loves, for one's country and for those whom he loves?

I have always love my poor country and I am sure that I shall love her until my last moment. Perhaps some people will be unjust to me; well, my future, my life, my joys, everything, I have sacrificed for love of her. Whatever fate may be, I shall die blessing my country and wishing her the dawn of her redemption.¹²

¹¹ As far as this letter of Rizal is concerned, this paper has a limitation. That is, it only relies on the English translation of the letter. This writer has two difficulties in this case: first, he has no access to the original Spanish version of the letter; second, he himself knows only very little Spanish.

¹² Ambeth Ocampo, *Rizal Without the Overcoat* (Pasig: Anvil Publishing, 1990), 11-12. See also Emiliano C. de Catalina, *Rizal: A Textbook for College Students*, (Cebu City: Niña Educational and Book Supply, 2007), 53-54.

C. RIZAL AS FREE SPIRIT

Based on Rizal's letter above, the important facts may be summed up as follows:

1. Rizal has taken a step.
2. Rizal has pondered on it a great deal.
3. Rizal knows that everyone is opposed to it.
4. Rizal knows what is going on in his heart.
5. Rizal prefers to face death.
6. Rizal wants to free other people from unjust persecution.
7. Rizal is willing to die for his duty and convictions.
8. Rizal is not afraid to die for his country and for what he loves.
9. Rizal has sacrificed his life for the love of country.
10. Rizal dies blessing his country, wishing the dawn of her redemption.

Now, here, Rizal took a step (fact 1). It should be noted, however, that this letter of Rizal was written in the context of his imminent death. In Steiner's point of view, then, Rizal had percept given to him from the outside, i.e., his death sentence. It follows that here the word *step* refers to his acceptance of the death sentence. But before taking the step, Rizal *pondered on it a great deal* (fact 2). This shows that there was a lot of *thinking* about such taken step.

Besides, Rizal was also *thinking* about the other people's opposition to his taken step (fact 3). Yet, he was also *thinking* about what was going on in his heart, which was unknown to others (fact 4).

Rizal's *pondering (thinking)* a great deal on it (the death sentence) thus shows that he made a *completely first-hand decision* to take such a step, or to accept the death sentence. He did not just simply receive the *percept* given to him and merely acted on it accordingly,¹³ like an unfree spirit. If Rizal's completely first-hand

¹³ It should be noted that Rizal could have pled for his life. It is based on the fact that Rizal was very close to the Jesuits. In fact, when Rizal was an exile in Dapitan, he had correspondence with Fr. Pablo Pastells, the superior of the Jesuits in the Philippines at the time. Fr. Pastells wanted to bring back Rizal to the Roman Catholic faith. Rizal could have saved his life if only he made an appeal to the Spanish government through the Jesuits who were influential at the time. The things required for Rizal to do in order to save his

decision happened to be in accordance with the percept given to him, i.e., his death sentence, it had to be his very own decision, and not a mere following what others imposed on him. In this case, in Steiner's point of view, Rizal, therefore, is a *free spirit*.

Now, after pondering a great deal on the percept given to him, the death sentence that is, in its conceptual form, e.g., *Thou shalt be wiped off* – Rizal translated it into *concrete mental picture* by the use of his *moral imagination*. And, according to Steiner's notion of moral imagination, this mental picture is the source of Rizal's action, as free spirit.

D. RIZAL'S MORAL IMAGINATION

The question then is that what was the concrete mental picture produced by Rizal's moral imagination, which underlay the course of action he took, or was going to take? Based on the facts drawn from Rizal's letter and summarized above, it is the one in number 5 that gave the concrete mental picture which underlay his course of action. In Rizal's consciousness, then, this concrete mental picture clearly gave him the concrete course of action to take, that is, "I prefer to face death by firing squad in Bagumbayan." And, again, Rizal, by himself, determined this concrete mental picture using his moral imagination; and he arrived at this only after *pondering on it a great deal*, as a free spirit.

In addition, Rizal also had some other concepts in his world of concepts. One of these is, to free other innocent people from unjust persecution¹⁴ (fact 6). After pondering on it a great deal, Rizal translated this conceptual form into a concrete mental picture by his moral imagination. And, here, the mental picture being produced by

life would have been basically two: first is that Rizal must retract his religious errors, and second is that he must also retract the words he had spoken and written against the Spanish civil and ecclesiastical authorities and reconcile himself to mother Spain. (Cf. Raul J. Bonoan, SJ, *The Rizal-Pastells Correspondence* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila Press,). See also de Catalina, *Rizal: A Textbook for College Students*, 127-138.

¹⁴ Here, Rizal was aware that other innocent people suffered unjust persecution by the Spaniards because of him. They were persecuted because of Rizal's defiance of the Spanish authorities.

his moral imagination still gave him the same course of action, that is, “I prefer to face death by firing squad in Bagumbayan.” For Rizal, this concrete course of action would free innocent people from unjust persecution: those who suffered under Spanish regime.¹⁵

Another fact is that Rizal upholds his duty and convictions (fact 7) and his country and what he loves (fact 8). And, again, after pondering on these a great deal, he translated these conceptual forms into a concrete mental picture by his moral imagination. And again, here, the mental picture produced by his moral imagination still gave him the same course of action: “I prefer to face death by firing squad in Bagumbayan.” For Rizal, he was willing to die for his duty, convictions, country, and for what he loved.

In Rizal’s letter, it is shown also that the course of action he took, or was going to take, is a kind of sacrifice (fact 9). For example, he made some sacrifices in terms of his love affairs, in terms of his profession as a medical doctor, in terms of his being an engineer, etc. These sacrifices culminated in a concrete course of action springing from the mental picture produced by his moral imagination. Again, his course of action was: “I prefer to face death by firing squad in Bagumbayan.” And so he died, sacrificing his life for his country and his fellowmen.

Rizal spoke of his own death in his poem, *The last Farewell*.

I die just when I see the dawn break,
Through the gloom of night, to herald the day;
And if color is lacking my blood thou shalt take,
Pour’d out at need for thy dear sake,
To dye with its crimson the waking ray.¹⁶

IV. CONCLUSION

¹⁵ See William H. Scott, *Slavery in the Philippines*, (Manila: DLSU Press, 1991). See de Catalina, *Rizal: A Textbook for College Students*, 85-98.

¹⁶ Gregorio Zaide and Sonia Zaide, *Jose Rizal: Life, Works, and Writings of a Genius, Writer, Scientist, and National Hero*, (Quezon City: All-Nations Publishing 1999), 296. See also Rizal’s essay entitled, “Love of Country” (trans. Nazario P. De Mesa) in *Selected Readings from Rizal* by Ricardo C. Bassig, (Caloocan: Philippine Graphic Arts, 1959).

To conclude this presentation, I would like to go back to the problem that this paper attempts to answer.

Was Jose Rizal truly free in his death in Bagumbayan?

Now, in as much as Rizal did make a completely first-hand decision as shown above, in as much as Rizal had the concepts in his consciousness translated into a *concrete mental picture* that underlay his course of action, in as much as Rizal determined the concrete mental picture by himself as source of his action – then, in the light of Steiner's notion of moral imagination, it can be seen and concluded that Rizal was *truly free* in the course of action he took: *To let himself die in Bagumbayan by firing squad.*

Furthermore, the freedom involved in Rizal's death was also corroborated by the documented fact that, when Rizal was about to be shot, a medical doctor, Felipe Castillo, was asked to check Rizal's pulse. The doctor was amazed in finding that, instead of having an abnormally fast heart-beat, which is a normal reaction, Rizal rather had a sober heart-beat, indicating the absence of fear of death.¹⁷

This fact shows that Rizal really had a completely *first-hand decision* to die, that Rizal determined, of his own accord, the *moral mental picture* which underlay his course of action. Thus, even at the very moment that he was about to be shot by the rifles of a squad, he remained doggedly free. And because he had a completely first-hand decision to die (as free spirit) and because he was not merely carrying out the decision of other people (the Spanish authorities) imposed on him (as unfree spirit), Rizal was able to be in the state of being *dauntless* despite being in front of his own imminent death.

Thus, Rizal truly attained *freedom* and, thus, in Steiner's point of view, he was a *free spirit*; and, by the use of his *moral imagination*, he effectively and productively determined by himself the *moral mental picture* that underlay his course of action, i.e., his free preferential death in Bagumbayan by firing squad.

Rizal's death is a noble self-giving sacrifice.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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