

Republic of the Philippines Supreme Court Manila

THIRD DIVISION

ERICSON C. CABUTAJE, Petitioner, G.R. No. 248569

Present:

CAGUIOA,* J., Chairperson, INTING,** GAERLAN, DIMAAMPAO, and SINGH,*** JJ.

REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPIES and ROMELIA A. CABUTAJE,

- versus -

Responden

Promulgated:

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nts. JAN 15 2025	

DECISION

DIMAAMPAO, J.:

Petitioner Ericson C. Cabutaje (Ericson) filed a Petition for Review on Certiorari,¹ assailing the Decision² and the Resolution³ of the Court of Appeals (CA), which reversed and set aside the Regional Trial Court (RTC) Decision⁴ and Order⁵ declaring the marriage of Ericson and respondent Romelia A. Cabutaje (Romelia) void on the ground of psychological incapacity, and denying the motion for reconsideration filed by the Republic

On official business.

Acting Chairperson.

^{***} On leave.

¹ *Rollo*, pp. 11–26.

Id. at 108-120. The March 18, 2019 Decision in CA-G.R. CV No. 110422 was penned by Associate Justice Jhosep Y. Lopez (now a Member of this Court), with the concurrence of Presiding Justice Romeo F. Barza and Associate Justice Franchito N. Diamante of the First Division, Court of Appeals, Manila.

Id. at 128-129. Dated July 29, 2019.

⁴ Id. at 88-93. The January 9, 2017 Decision in Civil Case No. 33-408-2012 was penned by Judge Francisco S. Donato of Branch 33, Regional Trial Court, Ballesteros, Cagayan.

⁵ Id. at 105-106. The November 20, 2017 Order was issued by Executive Judge Francisco S. Donato of Branch 33, Regional Trial Court, Ballesteros, Cagayan.

of the Philippines, through the Office of the Solicitor General (OSG), respectively.⁶

Ericson married Romelia in Lasam, Cagayan on January 2, 2003, and they had a daughter named Keirah Angela Cabutaje (Keirah), who was born on February 24, 2003.⁷

While living with Ericson's parents, Romelia was urged by his mother to apply for work abroad. Thenceforth, Romelia went to Taiwan, leaving Ericson to take care of Keirah. Although Romelia was able to send money to them during the first few months, the money remittances eventually became scarce, prompting Ericson to similarly apply for work in Taiwan.⁸

In Taiwan, the spouses rarely met as their workplaces were far apart. Over time, the marriage turned sour, and Romelia became inconsistent in providing financial support to their child.⁹

After several months of marital strife and upon the end of her contract in Taiwan, Romelia left for the Philippines and stayed with her parents. She went to her in-laws' house to fetch Keirah. Romelia left Keirah in the custody of her sister when she went to Hongkong to work as a domestic helper. Since then, Romelia no longer provided financial support for Keirah. Egregiously, she had another romantic relationship with a different man.¹⁰

On August 10, 2012, Ericson filed a petition for the declaration of nullity of marriage before Branch 33 of the RTC of Ballesteros, Cagayan, docketed as Civil Case No. 33-408-2012. He sought to have his marriage with Romelia declared *void ab initio* on the ground that they were both psychologically incapacitated to fulfill their marital obligations.¹¹

In due course, the RTC rendered its Decision, granting Ericson's petition and declaring the marriage between him and Romelia null and void *ab initio* based on Article 36 of the Family Code. The RTC found that the personality disorders of both parties, which were developed during their early childhood, were deeply embedded in their respective personality structures, thus preventing them from performing their essential marital duties. The RTC likewise awarded the custody of their child to Ericson.¹²

⁶ *Id.* at 121–126.

⁷ *Id.* at 108–109; 33, Certificate of Live Birth.

⁸ *Id.* at 109.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Id.

¹² *Id.* at 92–93.

The OSG moved for reconsideration,¹³ but the motion was brushed aside by the RTC in the Order dated November 20, 2017.

However, on appeal by the OSG, the CA reversed the disposition of the RTC, owing to the purported insufficiency of evidence to support Ericson's petition.¹⁴ The CA ratiocinated that the report of Dr. Nedy Tayag (Dr. Tayag), the clinical psychologist, could not be given credence for her failure to personally examine Romelia, and for drawing her conclusions based solely on her interviews with Ericson, Myra, his sister, and Cherry Christine Zunega (Zunega), a mutual friend of the spouses.¹⁵

By the same token, the CA regarded Dr. Tayag's report as inadequate as she supposedly failed to identify the root causes of both Ericson and Romelia's psychological disorders which rendered them psychologically incapacitated to perform their obligations to each other as husband and wife.¹⁶

Crestfallen, Ericson moved for reconsideration, but the same was denied in the assailed Resolution. Aggrieved, Ericson now comes to this Court via the instant Petition averring that the CA seriously erred in reversing the judgment of the RTC.

Ericson insists that the RTC's finding of his psychological incapacity is supported by both factual and clinical evidence. The report of Dr. Tayag, upon which the RTC's Decision was based, had sufficiently shown that he had narcissistic personality disorder, which prevented him from meeting the essential marital obligations.¹⁷ Regarding Romelia's psychological incapacity, Ericson invokes *Camacho-Reyes v. Reyes-Reyes*¹⁸ and *Marcos v. Marcos*,¹⁹ arguing that the personal examination of the party alleged to be psychologically incapacitated is not a mandatory requirement for the declaration of nullity of marriage under Article 36 of the Family Code.²⁰ He intransigently asserts that the RTC Decision is bolstered by the findings of Dr. Tayag, who identified Romelia's and his specific disorders and characterized them as grave, serious, and incurable.²¹

Moreover, Ericson maintains that Romelia's act of abandoning him and their daughter, as well as her disregard of her marital and familial responsibilities, demonstrate her lack of understanding of the essential obligations of marriage. He posits that "[a]ny expected performance 'to live

¹³ *Id.* at 94–103.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 117.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 117–119.

¹⁶ See id.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 16.

¹⁸ 642 Phil. 602 (2010) [Per J. Nachura, Second Division].

 ¹⁹ 397 Phil. 840 (2000) [Per J. Panganiban, Third Division].
²⁰ Bollo, p. 22, and Patitize for Bouissian on Continuous.

²⁰ *Rollo*, p. 22, *see* Petition for Review on *Certiorari*.

²¹ *Id.* at 16–17.

together, observe mutual love, respect, and fidelity, and render mutual help and support' were all thrown in the wind."²²

On the contrary, the OSG asseverates that Ericson failed to establish that the marriage is void due to psychological incapacity. The OSG propounds the following reasons: *first*, Dr. Tayag's findings, anchored on her interviews with Ericson, his sister, and a mutual friend of the spouses, were unreliable as she did not personally examine Romelia; and *second*, Romelia "may have shown emotional immaturity, infidelity, and irresponsibility," but these do not necessarily render the marriage void.²³

The pivotal issue for this Court's resolution is whether the evidence on record sufficiently supports Ericson's petition for declaration of nullity of his marriage with Romelia on the ground of psychological incapacity.

The Court's Ruling

After a judicious rumination of the records, the Court grants the Petition.

Time and again, the Court has given weight to the trial courts' findings and evaluation on the existence or non-existence of a party's psychological incapacity in most cases involving void marriages under Article 36 of the Family Code of the Philippines, in recognition of their unique position of having observed and examined the demeanor of witnesses as they testified in court.²⁴

Article 36 of the Family Code recognizes psychological incapacity of a spouse as a ground to void a marriage, to wit:

Article 36. A marriage contracted by any party who, at the time of the celebration, was psychologically incapacitated to comply with the essential marital obligations of marriage, shall likewise be void even if such incapacity becomes manifest only after its solemnization.

It is the plaintiff-spouse who has the burden to prove by clear and convincing evidence the existence of psychological incapacity.²⁵ The alleged psychological incapacity must also be shown to be grave, incurable, and

²² *Id.* at 19.

²³ *Id.* at 150–153, *see* Comment to Petition for Review on *Certiorari*.

²⁴ See Elizabeth A. Alberto v. Jose Luis R. Alberto, G.R. No. 236827, April 19, 2022 [Per J. Inting, First Division] at 8. This pinpoint citation refers to the copy of the Decision uploaded to the Supreme Court website.

²⁵ *Id.* at 7.

juridically antecedent. ²⁶ In *Candelario v. Candelario*, ²⁷ the Court expounded—

First, **gravity** has to be established, if only to preclude spouses from invoking mild characterological peculiarities, mood changes, occasional emotional outbursts as ground for nullity. Second, **incurability** should also be understood in the legal sense. So long as the couple's respective personality structures are so incompatible and antagonistic that the only result of the union would be the inevitable breakdown of the marriage, the psychological incapacity of a spouse or both spouses is deemed "incurable." Third, **juridical antecedence** or the existence of the condition prior to the celebration of marriage, is a statutory requirement which must be proven by the spouse alleging psychological incapacity.²⁸ (Emphasis in the original)

Applying the foregoing jurisprudential yardsticks to the instant case, the Court finds that the CA erred in reversing the RTC's declaration of nullity of Ericson's marriage with Romelia on the ground of psychological incapacity. Although the Court rejects Ericson's argument that his narcissistic personality disorder impaired his ability to discharge the essential marital obligations under Articles 68 to 71 of the Family Code, the Court nevertheless finds and so holds that their marriage must be declared null and void by reason of *Romelia's* psychological incapacity.

In reversing the RTC, the CA ratiocinated that Dr. Tayag's report, anchored on the testimonies of Ericson, his sister, and a mutual friend of the spouses, fell short of establishing Romelia's psychological incapacity, as she herself was not personally examined.²⁹ This line of reasoning was already rejected in the early case of *Camacho-Reyes* as well as the landmark case of *Tan-Andal v. Andal*, ³⁰ where the Court decreed that direct and personal examination of an expert regarding either of the spouses' psychological incapacity is not an absolute and indispensable requirement.³¹ To form an expert's opinion, information obtained from either party to the marriage may suffice, thusly—

The lack of personal examination and interview of the respondent, or any other person diagnosed with personality disorder, does not *per se* invalidate the testimonies of the doctors. Neither do their findings automatically constitute hearsay that would result in their exclusion as evidence.

For one, marriage, by its very definition, necessarily involves only two persons. The totality of the behavior of one spouse during the cohabitation and marriage is generally and genuinely witnessed mainly by

²⁶ Id.

²⁷ G.R. No. 222068, July 23, 2023 [Per J. Hernando, First Division].

²⁸ *Id.* at 12.

²⁹ *Rollo*, pp. 117–119.

³⁰ 902 Phil. 558 (2021) [Per J. Leonen, *En Banc*].

³¹ *Id.* at 616.

the other. In this case, the experts testified on their individual assessment of the present state of the parties' marriage from the perception of one of the parties, herein petitioner. Certainly, petitioner, during their marriage, had occasion to interact with, and experience, respondent's pattern of behavior which she could then validly relay to the clinical psychologists and the psychiatrist.³²

Indeed, the fact that the information comes from one side alone should not dilute the veracity of the evidence that Ericson presented during the trial, for to do so would punish every innocent spouse suffering in a marriage with a psychologically incapacitated spouse who comes to the court for succor.³³ Ultimately, courts should judiciously assess the merits of each Article 36 petition on a case-to-case basis, including the psychological report, if any, regardless of the fact that only one of the spouses was interviewed by the psychologist.³⁴

For another, the Court clarified that evidence should not only come from the petitioning spouse but also from other sources.³⁵ These include persons intimately related to them, such as relatives, close friends or even family doctors or lawyers who could testify on the allegedly incapacitated spouse's condition at or about the time of marriage or to subsequent occurring events that trace their roots to the incapacity already present at the time of marriage.³⁶ Here, Dr. Tayag prepared her report based on the information gathered not only from Ericson, but also from his sister, and the spouses' mutual friend, Zunega, who knew Romelia prior to her marriage to Ericson.³⁷

The Court elucidated in Tan-Andal thusly ----

Proof of [these] aspects of personality [of the spouses] need not be given by an expert. Ordinary witnesses who have been present in the life of the spouses before [they] contracted marriage may testify on behaviors that they have consistently observed from the supposedly incapacitated spouse. From there, the judge will decide if these behaviors are indicative of a true and serious incapacity to assume the essential marital obligations.

In this way, the Code Committee's intent to limit the incapacity to 'psychic causes' is fulfilled. Furthermore, there will be no need to label a person as having a mental disorder just to obtain a decree of nullity.³⁸

³² See Camacho-Reyes v. Reyes-Reyes, 642 Phil. 605, 627 (2010) [Per J. Nachura, Second Division].

See Cayabyab-Navarrosa v. Navarrosa, G.R. No. 216655, April 20, 2022 [Per J. Perlas-Bernabe, Second Division] at 14. This pinpoint citation refers to the copy of the Decision uploaded to the Supreme Court website.
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³⁴ *Id.* at 15.

³⁵ See Georfo v. Republic of the Philippines, G.R. No. 246933, March 6, 2023 [Per J. Leonen, Second Division] at 17. This pinpoint citation refers to the copy of the Decision uploaded to the Supreme Court website.

³⁶ Id.

³⁷ *Rollo*, p. 40, Report on the Psychological Assessment.

³⁸ See Tan-Andal v. Andal, 902 Phil. 558, 597–598 (2021) [Per J. Leonen, En Banc].

This notwithstanding, when expert opinion is present and made available, courts must give due regard thereto, particularly on the parties' psychological and mental disposition. The presentation of expert testimony to prove that a person is suffering from an incurable mental illness, while dispensable, may be deemed as compelling evidence in resolving the issue of psychological incapacity.³⁹

In the case at bench, given her expertise, Dr. Tayag's assessment of Romelia may be accorded probative value. Unlike ordinary witnesses who must have personal knowledge of the matters they testify on, expert witnesses do not testify in court because they have personal knowledge of the facts of the case. The credibility of expert witnesses does not adhere in their person; rather, their testimony is sought because of their special knowledge, skill, experience or training that ordinary persons and judges do not have.⁴⁰ On this score, the Court acknowledges that Dr. Tayag obtained her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology degree from the Centro Escolar University, her Master of Arts degree in Psychology from the Manuel L. Quezon University and is the Chief Clinical Psychologist for HLT Psychiatric and Psychological Services in Mandaluyong City. She has also served as an expert witness in several psychological incapacity cases.⁴¹

Ergo, in arriving at its conclusion, the RTC correctly relied upon the report of Dr. Tayag, whose findings were based on collateral information from sources who were able to observe the spouses' interpersonal dynamics, i.e., Ericson himself, his sister, and Zunega. Strikingly, Dr. Tayag's report was never controverted by contrary evidence.

All the same, the CA held that the totality of evidence failed to sufficiently prove Romelia's psychological incapacity.

The CA is mistaken. The record shows that Romelia failed to fulfill her marital obligations to observe love, respect, and fidelity, and render help and support to her family, more so to her own daughter, Keirah. Even when she returned to the Philippines after working in Taiwan, she abandoned Keirah to the custody of her sister.⁴² Her fidelity was also in question, considering that she was found to have had a relationship with another man while still being married to Ericson. Patently, her acts are not a result of a mild characterological peculiarity or mood change as there appears to be a persisting failure on her part to be "a present, loving, faithful, respectful, and

³⁹ See Elizabeth A. Alberto v. Jose Luis R. Alberto, G.R. No. 236827, April 19, 2022 [Per J. Inting, First Division] at 9. This pinpoint citation refers to the copy of the Decision uploaded to the Supreme Court website.

⁴⁰ See Tan-Andal v. Andal, 902 Phil. 558, 610–611 (2021) [Per J. Leonen, En Banc]. (Citation omitted)

⁴¹ *Rollo*, pp. 64–65, *see* Judicial Affidavit of Dr. Nedy Tayag.

⁴² *Id.* at 109.

supportive spouse."⁴³ Her acts, taken together, render her psychological incapacity grave and incurable.

As for the element of juridical antecedence or the existence of the condition prior to the celebration of the marriage, while it may indeed be difficult – if not scientifically impossible – to determine the existence of psychological incapacity at the exact point in time that the couple exchanged their "I dos," it is sufficient, however, that as the Court held in *Clavecilla v. Clavecilla*⁴⁴

[T]he petitioner demonstrates, by clear and convincing evidence, that the incapacity, in all reasonable likelihood, already exists at the time of the marriage's celebration. To determine the reasonable likelihood of its existence at the time of the celebration of the marriage, the Court, in *Tan-Andal*, held that "proof of juridically antecedent psychological incapacity may consist of testimonies describing the environment where the supposedly incapacitated spouse lived that may have led to a particular behavior.

Moreover, the concept of juridical antecedence must be understood to include the <u>ordinary experiences of the spouses not only prior to the</u> <u>marriage itself</u>, <u>but more importantly</u>, <u>during their "lived conjugal life"</u> together since, as the law itself states, a marriage can be declared null and void under Article 36 "even if such incapacity becomes manifest only after its solemnization." As the parties have yet to assume any of the essential marital obligations prior to being married, the Court discerns that the experience of marriage itself is the litmus test of self-realization, reflecting one's true psychological makeup as to whether or not he or she was indeed capable of assuming the essential marital obligations to his or her spouse at the time the marriage was entered into.⁴⁵

As aptly observed by Dr. Tayag in her report,⁴⁶ Romelia's personality structure is consistent with histrionic personality disorder with anti-social features, rooted in her childhood, and carried over into adulthood and married life—

[D]eeply scrutinizing the psychological incapacity of the respondent, she is seen to suffer from a clinical condition known as **HISTRIONIC PERSONALITY DISORDER with anti-social features** which is seen by her display of attention-seeking behavior, and aggression as characterized by stubbornness... and inefficiency along with disregard for and violation of the rights of others as seen in various contexts and manifested in the following features:

She was not even bothered if her daughter never gets an ample financial support from her. She did not show any trace

⁴³ See Estella v. Perez, 911 Phil. 570, 580 (2021) [Per J. Lazaro-Javier, First Division]. (Citation omitted)

⁴⁴ G.R. No. 228127, March 6, 2023 [Per C.J. Gesmundo, First Division].

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 21.

⁴⁶ *Rollo*, pp. 35–48.

of conscience but pursue her illicit affair with another man thinking that her husband will not discover everything while he was working abroad.

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This condition of the respondent had started to develop during the early years of her life. Being the youngest child, she grew up spoiled under the clout of her doting parents who are known to be very lenient when it comes to discipline. They will always take the side[s] of their children even if the kids were at fault. Such familial ties and less ideal environment during respondent's molding years are the factors that have contributed a lot to the formation of the negativistic nature that she has attention-seeking, aggressive, and antisocial traits that she had adapted.⁴⁷

Histrionic personality disorder (HPD) is a chronic and enduring condition marked by a consistent pattern of attention-seeking behaviors and an exaggerated display of emotions. Typically emerging in late adolescence or early adulthood, individuals with HPD are often characterized as narcissistic, self-indulgent, and flirtatious.⁴⁸

During the early stages of the parties' relationship, Ericson had already observed that Romelia, being the youngest child, was "spoiled under the clout of her doting parents who are known to be very lenient when it comes to discipline." Later on, this observation was echoed in Dr. Tayag's report as to have been carried over to their marriage, resulting in Romelia's irresponsibility, immaturity, lack of remorse, and insensitivity to Ericson and their child.⁴⁹ Manifestations of her psychological incapacity include *one*, failure to continuously provide financial support to her family; *two*, withdrawal from her responsibilities as a mother (i.e. by leaving her child in her sister's custody); and *three*, engagement in extramarital relations.⁵⁰

Upon the other hand, Zunega, the spouses' mutual friend, stated that when Ericson and Romelia first met in Lasam, Cagayan, "[w]hat took place was a whirlwind courtship. They immediately became boyfriend and girlfriend, even if they barely knew each other."⁵¹ Romelia soon became pregnant, and "[t]hey were forced to get married" as she could no longer hide her swollen belly. Zunega described Romelia as an impulsive woman who

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 45–47.

⁴⁸ Jennifer H. French, Tyler J. Torrico, and Sangam Shrestha, *Histrionic Personality Disorder, available at* https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK542325/#:~:text=Histrionic%20personality%20disorder %20 (HPD)%20is%20characterized%20by%20a%20pervasive%20pattern,late%20adolescence%20or20earl y%20adulthood. (last accessed on May 23, 2024).

⁴⁹ Rollo, pp. 45–47.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 109.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 40.

was eager to "pursue [whatever] she wanted," including leaving her own child.⁵²

To recapitulate, the concept of juridical antecedence must be understood to include the ordinary experiences of the spouses not only prior to the marriage itself, but more importantly, during their "lived conjugal life" together. After all, a marriage can nevertheless be declared null and void under Article 36 even if the incapacity becomes manifest only after its solemnization.⁵³

Due to Romelia's evident disregard and lack of concern for her responsibilities as a wife and mother, Ericson and their child were deprived of moral and emotional support, respect, love, care, and trust.⁵⁴ Taking into consideration her behavior during her short-lived conjugal life with Ericson and her histrionic personality disorder with anti-social features that may well have been forged by her childhood experience, it may be concluded that, in all reasonable likelihood, there is juridical antecedence, i.e., her psychological incapacity already existed at the time their marriage was celebrated. Accordingly, the totality of evidence establishes, at most, her psychological incapacity to comply with her essential marital obligations.

It is primal that the dissolution of marital bonds on the ground of psychological incapacity of either spouse does not amount to a demolition of the foundation of families.⁵⁵ As the Court elucidated in *Tan-Andal*—

In any case, inasmuch as the Constitution regards marriage as an inviolable social institution and the foundation of the family, courts must not hesitate to void marriages that are patently ill-equipped due to psychic causes inherent in the person of the spouses. In the past, marriages had been upheld solely for the sake of their permanence when, paradoxically, doing so destroyed the sanctity afforded to the institution.⁵⁶

Given the foregoing discourse, this Court finds that the severance of Ericson and Romelia's marital *vinculum* will better protect the State's interest to preserve the sanctity of marriage and family as social institutions, the meanings of which have been utterly lost on Romelia.⁵⁷

⁵² *Id.* at 41.

See Clavecilla v. Clavecilla, G.R. No. 228127, March 6, 2023 [Per C.J. Gesmundo, First Division] at 21. This pinpoint citation refers to the copy of the Decision uploaded to the Supreme Court website. (Citation omitted)
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⁵⁴ *Rollo*, p. 109.

⁵⁵ Tan-Andal v. Andal, 902 Phil. 558, 592 (2021).

See Republic of the Philippines v. Ariel S. Calingo and Cynthia Marcellana Calingo, G.R. No. 212717, November 23, 2022 [Per J. Lazaro-Javier, Special First Division]. This pinpoint citation refers to the copy of the Decision uploaded to the Supreme Court website.

⁵⁷ See Rep. of the Phils. v. Mola Cruz, 836 Phil. 1266, 1284 (2018) [Per J. Gesmundo, Third Division]. (Emphasis in the original)

Decision

FOR THESE REASONS, the Petition for Review on *Certiorari* is GRANTED. The March 18, 2019 Decision and the July 29, 2019 Resolution of the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. CV No. 110422 are **REVERSED** and **SET ASIDE.** The marriage of petitioner Ericson C. Cabutaje and private respondent Romelia A. Cabutaje is **DECLARED VOID** on the ground of psychological incapacity.

R B. DIMAAMPA Associate Justice

WE CONCUR:

(On official business but left Dissenting Opinion)

ALFREDO BÉNJAMÍN S. CAGUIOA

Associate Justice

HENRI INTING Associate Mustice

SAMUELH. GAERLAN

Associate Justice

On leave MARIA FILOMENA D. SINGH Associate Justice

ATTESTATION

I attest that the conclusions in the above Decision had been reached in consultation before the case was assigned to the writer of the opinion of the Court's Division.

B. INTING HENR

Associate Justice Acting Chairperson, Third Division

CERTIFICATION

Pursuant to Article VIII, Section 13 of the Constitution and the Division Acting Chairperson's Attestation, I certify that the conclusions in the above Decision had been reached in consultation before the case was assigned to the writer of the opinion of this Court.

FR G. GESMUNDO hief Justice