

THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHIZING DURING ELECTIONS: A PHILIPPINE PERSPECTIVE

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This essay documents the Philippine National Philosophical Research Society's (PNPRS) efforts to participate and contribute to improving public engagements as the Philippines prepared for its May 2022 elections. It highlights the key messages and lessons gathered from conversing with and listening to resource persons and my view on what remains of the continuing PNPRS project.

The PNPRS is an organization of philosophy enthusiasts whose primary mission is to promote philosophy as an essential tool and academic discipline in nation-building and global understanding. Philippine elections are noted for intense partisanship marked by emotional and spicy exchanges that even turn to personal attacks among citizens. As philosophy professionals, the PNPRS Board noted the seeming lack of rationality in conversations and found it challenging to actively engage with other people on election matters. In response, the PNPRS decided to dedicate its 2022 public lectures and populate its online sites with election-related materials.

On February 12, 2022, a webinar was organized along the theme: *May papel ba ang pamimilosopiya sa eleksyon, at ano ito?* ("Is there a role for philosophizing during an election, and what is it?") PNPRS collaborated with the Philosophical Association of the Philippine (PAP) 's ISIP-BOTO to host the webinar. PNPRS thus started its series of public engagements to heighten rational discourse and philosophizing in elections. We invited speakers known for their distinct academic expertise and civic standing on the topic. The task is to explore ideas and concepts on rationality relevant to political exercises. The Society wanted to openly encourage philosophy enthusiasts to find ways and approaches to participate in them.

Conversing with Fr. Albert Alejo, SJ.

Fr. Albert Eduave Alejo, SJ, also known as "Paring Bert," is a Filipino Jesuit philosopher, theologian, anthropologist, human rights activist, and Tagalog poet. His areas of interest include corruption, violence, the formation of social conscience, and intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, among others. He is a man of many talents and interests. In music, for instance, he is instrumental in reminding us of the art of

whistling or *sipol*. While serving as a professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, he made himself available to his Philippine community.

I invited Fr. Alejo to be our resource person in one of our online seminars, and I relayed to him the issues and initial questions that the organizers had in mind. To cite a few: How could we overcome cultural impediments, emotional tagging, or biases (such as Solid North, *dilawan*, etc.) to reach rational discourse? Can Filipinos learn how to dispute an issue constructively, especially during elections? Is there something in the Filipino culture that can be stirred to promote rationality in election debates? Two of us discussed these questions through a video call to brainstorm how to approach the topic. My wife, Lisa, joined us, and our discussion, mixed with stories and jokes, made the whole affair light and engaging. However, he declined to give a lecture via webinar. Rather than speaking to a large audience, he preferred to have a more intimate conversation with a small group and together examine the challenge of safeguarding rational discourse and promoting philosophizing during elections. *Usap*, *umpukan*, or *kwentuhan*, and similar terms reflect the Filipino's penchant for friendly and spontaneous engagement involving fewer people. Fr. Alejo found such a setting more fitting than a bigger forum, especially online. The Board immediately warmed up and looked forward to his offered conversation.

The online small group conversation transpired on February 5, 2022 (PST). It was attended by most of the PNPRS Board Members (Jove Aguas, Glovedi Bigornia, Alvin Tan, Fleur Albela, and Rodrigo Abenes), and ISIP-BOTO representative Joseph Guillermo. We had a pleasant conversation, two hours of philosophical conversation peppered with jokes. Fr. Alejo demonstrated the wisdom of conversations or *umpukan* as an effective tool in public engagement. The conversation mood was seriously focused but relaxed as we got to know Paring Bert up close and personal. Although a public figure, he is authentic, realistic, and a private person. The *umpukan* setting encourages people to think better and deeper. Here are more notes and lessons from that event.

Paring Bert reminded us that the COVID 19 pandemic remains the backdrop of this election season. During this time, he observed that rational discourse has been under fire. Scientists are rattled, and experts are under scrutiny. While the World Health Organization prescribed the wearing of face masks, some government officials defied it or added the wearing of face shields. Each country had its policies. Face shields were required in the Philippines. Upon reaching other cities like Rome, travelers were told to remove their face shields. Scientists are supposed to represent rationality. However, the government mobilized the military instead. As if, by extension, such phenomena are affecting the election. Whom should we trust? What is the value of surveys? The time is beset by post-truth and fake news. Rational discourse is needed but is seemingly absent.

The Internet flourished during this time. With restricted physical movement, people talked through webinars, live streaming, and the like. People talked more and more about politics and elections: lawyers, economists, statisticians, surveys, labor, bishops, journalists, Rappler, the military, artists, composers, video producers, poets, etc. However, philosophers are not that visible. Do we still need Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, and their ideas? Where are the philosophy professors? There is a vacancy here. We wonder why people talk and think this way, and we realize that we need to re-insert philosophizing. However, who will speak for it?

In choosing the right leader, what should be our criteria? Should it be the program or platform of government? Can we rely on good platforms alone? What if a committee only drafted them? We are reminded to look into the character and integrity of the candidate. Here, philosophers and philosophical contributions are needed. We must talk about values and what is more important in a person, life, and society. The rise of killings and their stand on killings must be considered. Philosophy says that values and virtues, not just platforms, are important. What makes a good person or a good leader? We need to talk about morals, the inspiration behind making the *polis*, or a city and society. Let us talk about democracy, *cracia* (power or rule). The word "democracy" comes from two Greek words that mean people (*demos*) and rule (*kratos*). We wish someone would come forward to explain. Let them consider *Arete* (excellence), *techne* (art, skill, or expertise). There are so many philosophical lenses and measures that people can use in examining candidates. Philosophers have a lot to say. And so, we expect philosophers to come forward to help out. We are missing the philosophers and scientists. Yes, we are not philosopher-kings; we are not Plato, but we can reappropriate his teachings. We should craft our philosophy in response to the questions of our time because all philosophies emerged as a response to specific historical situations. Scholars and experts in varied fields, not just philosophers, are challenged to translate their theories, principles, and tools into a language that can circulate in the public sphere. They must be reappropriated and explained in a language more people can understand.

It would appear that philosophy discussions remain largely in the classroom, missing in the public sphere. Philosophy remains apart from the culture and Filipino lives. Moreover, people perceive the philosophers like Thomas Aquinas as speaking in the clouds and their concepts are alien, sometimes labeling them even as *panggulo* (nuisance). When philosophers do not participate in the public sphere, philosophy gets left out. Philosophy professionals must be able to reappropriate philosophical ideas for them to be able to be incorporated into the common language. Failure to get across makes one appear elitist, theoretical, and irrelevant. However, understanding and appreciation could follow when someone begins to use them appropriately relevant to the experience of ordinary people's lives.

Listening as we engage with people remains essential. Our ability to truly listen is the key to avoiding rejection since failure to listen to others also leads to resistance to what one has to say. Listening is necessary for us to come up with timely and more relevant arguments. It minimizes one's tendency to be judgmental or over-reactive. Our literature would show that Socrates and Aristotle spent time listening. Aristotle joined "drinking sessions" to listen. Listening opportunities are plenty. Filipinos' daily lives are peppered and enlivened by conversations and *umpukan*. These were just some of the points I gathered from our fruitful exchanges. The actual conversation with Paring Bert was recorded in full. We spliced some nuggets from it for posting online; the first one was shared during the February 12 webinar.

Engaging with Ash Presto

Athena Charrane "Ash" Presto is one of the sought-after speakers in recent times. Ash is a community-engaged sociologist whose main interest is in gender and

development, human rights, and social inequalities. Ash currently sits as an officer of various civil society and youth organizations, including the Youth Against Sexual Harassment and the Young Southeast Asian Leaders initiative, where she serves as the Country Lead for its network of women alumni.

While Ash was willing to share her thoughts via webinar, her schedule would not allow her to appear live on our schedule. As a remedy, we arranged for a recording of her talk with the PNPRS officers on February 9, 2022. Here are the salient points gathered from our conversation with her.

Ash represents the informed youth. Her special task was to share Tips for Engaging with Voters. Her perspective and experience are much enriched as a sociologist, youth leader, and development worker. She was articulate and easily got her message across, sharing her relevant experiences as an individual, a student leader, and a regular family member. Her spontaneity and openness made her believable and credible. Indeed, the Board found her interactive and engaging as she shared her thoughts on the questions. Beyond discussing her practical tips for engaging voters, she also demonstrated them. There was an apparent effort on her side to tone down or camouflage her choices, leading her audience of whatever persuasion to be intrigued and listen closely to what she had to say. For instance, she admittedly left out a candidate in all the picture slides of presidential candidates to avoid being perceived as partisan.

Ash discussed how to deal with fake news, misinformation, disinformation, the importance of considering data about the voters, and most importantly, the importance of getting to know "the other" before engaging them in political conversations. She warned against simplistic categorization of voters and that using socio-economic status alone can lead to erroneous conclusions. For instance, not all economically poor are non-thinkers, misinformed, or less educated. Since Ash came from Ilocos Norte, one may think that regional voters are not that homogenous as individuals can go beyond stereotypes and what they were predisposed to believe. However, this is not the case with her. Still, she recognizes that some voters can be so rabid in their beliefs that they cannot realize the disconnection between the truth revealed in their real experiences and the truths they were told repeatedly since they were young. Realistically, conflicts in opinion can turn liberating as they can turn toxic. Thus, one's mental health is a consideration in deciding whether to continue engaging or distancing from others. For Ash, unfriending or blocking another person is a valid option when rational communication is no longer evident.

In conclusion, Ash sees philosophy as necessary in examining information received from different media, whether it is generally true, absolute, or a mistruth. Philosophy also expands one's views and develops a positive attitude among voters. In how she handled the questions in the open forum, Ash demonstrated that investing one's precious time to participate in election fora and being transparent in sharing one's life experiences can be truly eye-opening for others.

Listening to Prof. Julio Teehankee

Julio Cabral Teehankee is a Professor of Political Science and International Studies at De La Salle University. He specializes in comparative analysis of politics

and development in East and Southeast Asia, focusing on popular participation, governance, democratization, and contested institutions. He has published extensively on the topics of elections, party politics, and political dynasties. His current research includes presidentialism in Asia, comparative constitutional dynamics in East and Southeast Asia, and the post-crisis development architecture.

Professor Teehankee entitled his lecture *Theories of Patronage and the Myth of the "Bobotante."* He explored three questions: 1. What accounts for the voting behavior of the poor?; 2. Are there really "bobotante" voters?; and 3. What are the implications for elections?

The term "bobotante" was recently coined and became a buzz on social media. Election seasons are times for debates and presidential interviews. Some assume that only a minority who are educated from the upper and middle classes are the ones interested in these exercises, also presuming that the majority from the poor are deemed irrational. "Bobotantes" is a pejorative term for "the uneducated and irrational" voters, who are blamed for bad election outcomes by people who think better leaders could have been chosen instead.

Varied and evolving theories of patronage color one's appreciation of Philippine politics and voters, especially during elections. Whether voters are rational or not would depend on such perspectives or lenses. Prof. Teehankee defines patronage as "a divisible benefit that politicians distribute to individual voters, campaign workers, or contributors in exchange for political support." He distinguished it from corruption, where "politicians exchange public benefits for private monetary gains," as "patronage involves the exchange of public benefits for political support or party advantage." One patronage theory describes a network of mutual aid relationships between pairs of individuals or "dyadic ties." The dyadic ties observed in Philippine politics are vertical and unequal, binding prosperous patrons who dispense material goods and services and dependent clients who reciprocate with their support and loyalty. Votes are seen as a manifestation of loyalty.

Another notion is the "patron-client factional framework," which underscores the concept of conflict, command, coercion, and even violence. It is called by various scholars in several ways, such as "caciquism," "bossism," and "sultanism," as it is deemed to be rooted in the past or still existing agricultural economic relationships. This view of politics is popularly known in the Philippines as "warlordism." It is also colorfully labeled by the media as "3Gs," referring to guns, gold, and goons employed by the patron. In this view, the masses are presumed to serve as passive followers or terrified victims.

Marxism is a persistent structural lens that categorizes Philippine society as "semi-feudal and semi-colonial," as it remains primarily an agricultural economy based on feudal relations of production. Feudalism and imperialism have been preventing industrialization and the development of capitalism, which explains the persistence of mass poverty and social inequality. Here, the masses are presumed to be empowered voters.

Another theory describes the emergence of the political machine. The depersonalization of rural patron relations turned elections into a modernized environment where political parties and voters get into transactional relationships. Voter outcomes are influenced by the dispensation of social, economic, and material

benefits or patronage such as jobs, services, favors, or money distributed to voters and supporters conveniently received on such occasions such as *kasal* (wedding), *binyag* (baptism), *libing* (funeral) or KBL. Here, the "selling of votes" can become a rational transaction.

Then there is "moral politics" closely associated with populism. Populism (from the Latin word *populis*) refers to politics where a leader, party, or state claims close affinity with the people. Populists could misrepresent the masses as they can make class appeals or false claims of championing the poor. Thus, some scholars observed that populism as an ideology tends to be misused or abused and could also result in a degraded form of democracy. In the myth of the "*bobotante*," Prof. Teehankee shared academic notions and studies arguing that there is reasoning even in irrational choices of voters. He proposed Popkin's low information rationality and Mark Thompson's community-based electoral behavior of poor voters as alternative views before hastily branding some election outcomes as irrational.

In a 2016 study on the phenomenon of vote-selling, the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC) concluded that vote-selling is a logical choice for poor voters. The surveyed poor included those in rural areas, urban cities, disaster-stricken communities, and those in conflict situations. Generally, they considered giving money during elections as a form of vote-buying. However, poor rural voters may also see it as a help. Those from disaster areas and rural communities may accept the money but retain the choice of voting for the paying candidate or not. Some also see it as a "blessing" or "something they deserve."

Also, in 2016, TV5-SWS Exit Poll cited about 57% of respondents saying that platform is the main reason for their choice of president, and debates helped them select their president (73%) and vice president (69%). A December 2021 survey by OctaResearch showed that 11% said they would change their vote based on candidates' performance in debates.

Prof. Teehankee shared more observations confirming that the poor are thinking voters and that they vote rationally. Given the dominance of the supply side (traditional politicians and dynasties) with voters on the demand side during elections, accepting goods and money in exchange for votes is rational. He advised that one must not insult the consumers in such a political market. The task is to convince them to buy your product. Calling the poor "*bobotantes*" is like blaming the victim. The structural and circumstantial roots of poverty make them dependent on traditional politicians. Candidates and their supporters should understand and converse with poor voters (and voters in general) to appreciate their reasoning. One must avoid referring to them as "*bobotantes*" or terms that presuppose they cannot think or reason.

The Challenge in the Public Sphere

Philosophers are challenged to question ideas and assumptions rigorously rather than accept them at face value. They will always seek to determine whether the ideas, arguments, and claims represent the entire picture and are open to finding out that they do not. Philosophers will identify, analyze and solve problems systematically rather than by intuition or instinct.

A call to moral courage is a daunting task for a philosopher. Ultimately the choice is to make a stand based on one's view of the truth. However, rather than moralizing and recruiting others to switch to one's choice/s, the task of modern-day philosophers is to engage in discussions with other voters actively. In such conversations or *umpukan*, the task is not to campaign but to exchange views, validate and verify claims, and reveal untruths. Indeed, the shared truth is at stake.

We value truth. Furthermore, we deplore the massive disinformation deceiving our people, especially the youth. We need to be mindful of our society and its historical context. Do we value integrity? If so, do we reject candidates who run under a platform of lies and historical distortion? Do we value justice? Then, do we support candidates who uphold truth, justice, and the rule of law in our land? Do we value democracy? Then, do we reject candidates who undermine democracy by misrepresentation and are intolerant of criticism and opposition? How about those that perpetuate influence-peddling in the three branches of the government? How do we take part in the perpetuation of a culture of impunity, patronage politics, and rampant human rights violations? Do we support or reject candidates who have shown support for unjust acts of the state, such as killing thousands, mostly poor and powerless, in the name of a drug war?

We have choices. We have the freedom to act on our choice. However, the weight of our vote is only as valuable as everyone else's vote. Exercise of responsible freedom entails going out in the public sphere, working together with our fellows in carving a choice we have to make as a nation.

The Role of Critical Thinking

The role of critical thinking in nation-building is so essential. As described in Study.com (2021), critical thinking means making reasoned judgments that are logical and well-thought-out. Citizens that are critical and reflective thinkers are empowered. When rulers rely on philosophers for decisions, it is enough for the wise to be discerning. However, in a democracy where no philosopher-king is enthroned, philosophers need not just take care of their thoughts but also their fellow citizens. They, too, must be equipped with the skills needed to answer for themselves and make it their task to engage with others.

A strong country needs citizens who can freely engage in sustained reflective, creative, critical, and independent thinking. SkillsYouNeed.com defines critical thinking as the ability to think clearly and rationally, and understand the logical connection between ideas, thus enabling one to foresee the consequences of choices. Jose Rizal rightly saw education as the solution to social ills because he experienced the power of enlightenment when one engages in critical thinking. When citizens engage in critical thinking, not only will they be able to recognize fake news, but they will also not fabricate and broadcast fake news. One does not have to be a philosopher to be a critical thinker. It just requires using one's ability to reason out and muster the courage to stand for the truth, enabling one to be an active agent in shaping society and history rather than just being a passive receiver of information.

Final Remarks

Truly, philosophizing is essential in everyday discourse. To engage in rational discourse, we need to be equipped with knowledge, understanding, and wisdom even during the non-election season. Classroom engagement and everyday discourse with people contribute to the task of continuously seeking the truth. Teachers of philosophy must continue to teach-think-grow to serve as "facilitators who awaken and enable continuous learning" (Macaranas, 2022).

Win or lose, it is the truth that we search for. However, the question constantly raised is, what is the truth? It is where rational discourse will come in. Engaging with one another daily in rational discourse, not just in webinars, is a good practice. The truth will liberate us. The voter must vote based on informed choice. We have to engage with each other. We must appropriate and attune our language to the public sphere to pursue the common good. This must be done in the best interest of the poor, uneducated, and needy. Philosophers must take this challenge to make a stand.

Our conversations with the people must continue even after the elections; we must never tire of continuous dialogues and engagements. Values and virtues need cultivation. To embrace the truth, fairness, honesty, and respect, we must resist graft and corruption. Where there are grave threats to our virtues and values, we must resist the temptation to resign ourselves and never tire of engaging in discussions to deal with the real issues. We live in challenging times, but philosophers are called to be purveyors of truth and ministers of knowledge, wisdom, understanding, hope, and joy.

As seekers of truth and wisdom, we participate in probing the ways of the people by going to the roots of expressions, words, and beliefs. Let us continue to harness the role of forms, expressions, and hermeneutics in communication and thought development. We must persistently seek to clarify as well as expose persistent problems and confusion in our culture and traditions (Macaranas, 2021).

We need to discern, then we choose and act. It must be discerned prayerfully and critically and acted on with courage and faith. The philosopher must maintain a certain degree of impartiality during public engagements but must never be neutral when it comes to upholding ethics, goodness, and truth in society; our collective voices for wisdom, truth, and justice must be heard. Discern-Choose-and-Act habituates one to not simply accept arguments and conclusions but rather have an inquiring attitude, welcoming more questions, new arguments, and new conclusions. It requires critical thinking that allows us to see what evidence is involved in supporting a particular argument or conclusion. That is why we must always be ready to engage rationally and critically. In this way, philosophy becomes not just rational but practical; it is not just thinking but also acting. Philosophizing is not just speculating in the clouds but engaging in critical and rational discussion in practical matters. As Aguas (2020, 290) said:

By being mindful through critical thinking, we also achieve freedom and liberation from ignorance, blind adherence, and thoughtless conformism. Of course, the practice of critical thinking is not enough because thinking will not result in something concrete if we do not act. Critical thinking translated into wise action is prudence. Prudence is doing the right thing in the proper manner, at the right time, and right place.

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