

Public Reason and Philosophical Discourse

Michael Roland F. Hernandez, PhD

Ateneo de Naga University
mrhernandez@gbox.adnu.edu.ph

Abstract

The legacy of Zosimo Lee, the renowned Philosophy professor at the University of the Philippines does not lie in the number of publications or citations that his students attribute to him but in the personal witnessing he gave to the philosophic life. This paper articulates a line of thought that reflects upon the implications of his advocacy for public reason within the context of social and political discourses in the Philippines. Following Lee's take on the Rawls-Habermas dialogue, this paper argues that public reason provides a normative guide for what may be considered as properly philosophical. In the context of the Philippines, where social and political discourse are often mixed with vulgarity, sophistry and fallacies, Lee's insistence of a pedagogy of reasonableness remains a welcome guide for current discourse directed at the common social good. His life example is an invitation for all philosophers in the country, regardless of age, to consider the principles of respect, philosophical vocabulary, good will and the social good, as guideposts in achieving healthy philosophical discourse that can aim towards the Truth and the Good.

Keywords: Zosimo Lee, Rawls-Habermas, public reason, pedagogy of reasonableness, philosophical vocabulary

Introduction

Although I never sat as a formal student in any of Professor Zosimo Lee's university classrooms, I was granted the distinct privilege of having him sit on my doctoral dissertation panel. In the high-stakes, often tense environment of an academic defense, what remains most vividly etched in my memory is the gentle authority of his presence—the calm, soft, and profoundly reassuring cadence of his voice whenever he spoke. While his critique of my doctoral work focused elegantly on broad brushstrokes of structure and thematic argument, it was the non-adversarial grace of his demeanor that truly commanded the room. He did not seek to dismantle; he sought to elevate. True to his enduring legacy as a premier Filipino public intellectual and philosophical pioneer,¹ his manner of communication did more than

¹ In 2012, the Philosophical Association of the Philippines honored Zosimo Lee as a "Philosophical Pioneer" in order to acknowledge his efforts in the development of philosophy in

just critique—it exemplified exactly how philosophical discourse ought to be lived, breathed, and cultivated as a transformative educational experience.

I begin with this short anecdote about Professor Lee’s magnanimity and kindness because his life was a resounding exemplification of his fundamental philosophical commitments. He was kind to everyone, well-loved by many and his ideas complement his personality based on what he practiced. In our current technological age when the failure of rational dialogue has led to countless avoidable deaths as seen in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, Israel against Palestinians and its allies, the US against Iran and many others, Lee’s life-example and promotion of the efficacy of dialogue as a way to achieve peace in our social and political environments, stands as powerful image of what philosophical discourse can do if we want to promote the achievement of a fruitful and peaceful social life.

Given the above, this paper seeks to examine the idea of public reason as Zosimo Lee has expounded it, pace John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, as a grounding principle for philosophical discourse. In the Philippine context, where social media (particularly Facebook) takes center stage for the exercise of discoursing public opinion, this idea can outline necessary guideposts for the maintenance of a civic, respectful, and fruitful philosophical dialogue. It argues that the concept of public reason is a limit that can definitively decide whether a discourse can still be considered as philosophical or not. Amidst the crisis of communication infecting academic and philosophical discourse in this modern technological age, a reminder of our fundamental philosophical commitments is necessary so that philosophers in the Philippines can live up to truth and the justice demanded by their philosophic vocation. Against the temptation to descend into modern sophistry, Lee’s commitment for the restoration of healthy philosophical and public discourse invites us back to a given “pedagogy of reasonableness” that can combat the irrationality of name-calling and public bashing that we often see in discussions occurring within Philippine social media.

Given the above, we demonstrate the thesis of this paper—that public reason ultimately determines what may be considered as a philosophical discourse—by 1) first, presenting the philosophical architecture of public reason, tracing its foundation from Rawls and Habermas to Lee’s comparative framework; 2) second, exploring how public reason provides a structure for regulating public discourse; and 3) lastly, by outlining four normative guidelines, viz., respect for the other, philosophical vocabulary, epistemic goodwill, and a common desire to achieve the common social good—as guideposts for rehabilitating public philosophical discourse in our modern times.

the country, citing his distinct legacy in the Philippine academe particularly in the University of the Philippines where he served as Dean of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy (2004-2010).

Defining Public Reason: John Rawls

Zosimo Lee is popularly known as a Kantian and Rawls scholar. However, he cemented his legacy by pioneering the deployment of Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children (P4C) and Community of Inquiry (COI) framework in the country. Although these two systems are not the focus of the current paper, it is important to note that Lee's overall philosophical vocabulary owes much to them. Keeping this in mind, Lee's articulation of the idea of "public reason" can be seen as a localized reformulation of John Rawls' idea and of Jürgen Habermas' critique of the same.²

In order to understand this better, we can trace the contemporary formulation of the idea of public reason in Rawls' attempt to address the fundamental dilemma of modern constitutional democracies: "how is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?" (Rawls, 1996, p. 4). For Rawls, "the idea of public reason specifies at the deepest level the basic moral and political values that are to determine a constitutional democratic government's relation to its citizens and their relation to one another" (Rawls, 1999, p. 132). Its core definition lies in its being a "characteristic of a democratic people;" being "the reason of its citizens, of those sharing the status of equal citizenship;" and by being ultimately aimed at "the good of the public" (Rawls, 1996, p. 213). Public reason is public in three ways: 1) as the reason of the citizen as such; 2) as directed to the good of the public and fundamental justice; and 3) by virtue of its public nature and public content based on a given "society's conception of political justice" (p. 213).³

In other words, public reason is a conception of reason that everyone within a given liberal and modern democratic society may be able to accept. This is a notion of reason that ideally fits a society which aims to cultivate just and well-ordered citizens. In this way, public reason is not reducible to rhetorics or to the language of pure scientific logic. On the contrary, Rawls explains that within a democratic polity, "public reason is the reason of equal citizens who, as a collective body, exercise final political and coercive power over one another in enacting laws and in amending their constitution" (1996, p. 214). It is therefore concerned with the legitimation through the law and about the basic questions of justice necessarily connected with it.

Given the above, public reason, for Rawls, does not apply on the level of personal thoughts and actions but only the stage where the fundamental questions of our political life

² For an initial description of public reason, see Quong (2022).

³ Rawls explains that public reason has five different aspects which we are not going to touch upon given the scope of the current paper: "(1) the fundamental political questions to which it applies; (2) the persons to whom it applies (government officials and candidates for public office); (3) its content as given by a family of reasonable political conceptions of justice; (4) the application of these conceptions in discussions of coercive norms to be enacted in the form of legitimate law for a democratic people; and (5) citizens' checking that the principles derived from their conceptions of justice satisfy the criterion of reciprocity" (1999, p. 133).

affect our being-with others. Thus, the exercise of public reason may be limited to activities such as “political advocacy in the public forum,” voting in elections, and even how citizens can act on the fundamental issues affecting their social and political life (1996, p. 215). As a consequence, Rawls asserts that every citizen has a “duty of civility” (1996, p. 217) which they must fulfill if they wish to argue better in the public sphere. Accordingly, this means that citizens must not only see things from an egocentric standpoint (or what Rawls labels as “comprehensive doctrines”) (Rawls, 1999, p. 131)⁴ but must offer reasons that every other rational citizen must be capable of accepting (or agreeing with) at least potentially. Rawls clarifies this further:

Central to the idea of public reason is that it neither criticizes nor attacks any comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, except insofar as that doctrine is incompatible with the essentials of public reason and a democratic polity (Rawls, 1999, p. 132).

In essence, what Rawls is advocating is a certain limit of “reasonableness” which might allow all citizens to participate in the shared constitution of public reason. This limit ensures that a “criterion of reciprocity” is available for all citizens, assuring them of goodwill and informed decision as they continue to participate in the public sphere. Rawls stresses that these “limits of public reason are not, clearly, the limits of law or statute but the limits we honor when we honor an ideal: the ideal of democratic citizens trying to conduct their political affairs on terms supported by public values that we might reasonably expect others to endorse” (1996, p. 253). In this way, public reason guarantees the exercise of a political decision that is accessible and (potentially) mutually acceptable to all. Summing up, Rawls is insightful in claiming that:

[the] point of the ideal of public reason is that citizens are to conduct their fundamental discussions within the framework of what each regards as a political conception of justice based on values that the others can reasonably be expected to endorse and each is, in good faith, prepared to defend that conception so understood. This means that each of us must have, and be ready to explain, a criterion of what principles and guidelines we think other citizens (who are also free and equal) may reasonably be expected to endorse along with us (Rawls, 1996, 226).

Discursing Public Reason: Jürgen Habermas

The above conception of public reason by Rawls, however, is not without its critics, especially from contemporary theorists of democracy. Foremost of these is Jürgen Habermas who, in his lengthy review of Rawls’ book *Political Liberalism* lamented that the introduction of “normative contents into the very procedure of justification” indicated “a

⁴ Rawls explains in a footnote of this essay that he uses the term “doctrines” for comprehensive views of all kinds” while the term “conception” is reserved “for a political conception and its component parts, such as the conception of the person as citizen” (Rawls, 1999, p. 131).

certain unclarity about the precise character of what is in need of justification” which resulted to “an indecisiveness as to how the validity claim of the theory itself (i.e., justice as fairness) should be understood” (Habermas, 1995, p. 119). For instance, the concept of the moral person, i.e., as someone who has “the sense of fairness and the capacity for one’s own conception of the good,” and as what “also underlies the concept of the fair cooperation of politically autonomous citizens, stands in need of a prior justification” (p. 119). Here, what Habermas seems to suggest is that there is a failure on Rawls’ part to justify his employment of the concept of what is “reasonable” if he is unable to provide a more fundamental ground upon which he can justify his methodological determination of what is actually reasonable in the first place. In what I would dare to call a *post facto* (after the fact) fallacy, Habermas’ take on the failure of Rawlsian justification can be summed up in this comment on the distinction between the acceptability and actual acceptance of the theory of justice as fairness.

In my view, Rawls must make a sharper distinction between acceptability and acceptance. A purely instrumental understanding of the theory is already invalidated by the fact that the citizens must first be convinced by the proposed conception of justice before such a consensus can come about. The conception of justice must not be political in the wrong sense and should not merely lead to a modus vivendi. The theory itself must furnish the premises “that we and others recognize as true, or as reasonable for the purpose of reaching a working agreement on the fundamentals of political justice” (Rawls, 1995, p. 122).⁵

By way of a principled disagreement thus, Habermas demonstrates that public reason must be procedural and not restricted to a predetermined set of political values that citizens must imbibe before entering the public sphere. For the scholar Kenneth Baynes, Habermas views “Rawls’ model of public reason, with its reliance on the idea of an overlapping consensus, remains too beholden to the contingencies of a de facto agreement to serve as a suitable basis of political legitimacy” (Baynes, 2010, p. 149). This renders Rawls’ model of public reason as inadequate for the full accounting of political legitimation. Instead, Habermas calls for an accounting of political legitimacy *post facto* when “[basic] political norms” are able to “conform to a demanding ideal of public reason, that is, only if they could be agreed to by all citizens as participants in a practical discourse for the same (publicly available) reasons” (p. 149). For Habermas, the legitimacy of all claims to an open-ended, uncoerced and rigorous communicative structure of actual debate must be settled through a “process of public reasoning” (1995, p. 124), whereby consensus is achieved “by the force of the better argument” (p. 124) and not by recourse to deeply seated private convictions. The aim of Habermas’ discourse ethics was “solely to reconstruct the moral point of view from which questions of right can be fairly and impartially adjudicated” (McCarthy, 1994, p. 46).⁶

⁵ Here, Habermas cites Rawls’ work “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus” (1987, p. 6).

⁶ See also Habermas (1993).

Public Reason in Philosophical Discourse

It is at this intersection of the Rawls-Habermas debate that we can appreciate Zosimo Lee's reformulation of the idea of public reason as applied in the Philippine context and in his advocacy for P4C. He recognized in both thinkers a critical flaw: they both implicitly assume that adult citizens automatically possess the sophisticated communicative competence, emotional regulation, and logical capacity required for public discourse the moment they reach the age of maturity. For Lee, public reason is a highly advanced psychological and social technology that must be systematically taught. It is, as a matter of fact, an active pedagogical practice that must be cultivated from the ground up. Here, he pushes past Rawls (who merely relied on the veil of ignorance to keep things stable) and Habermas (who believed that the force of the better argument will naturally come out) by insisting that we have to train citizens on how to participate in the public sphere and not just demand the filtering of their respective personal biases and conditions.

However, it is better that this process of education start from childhood. This clarifies why the idea of a community of inquiry (from Lee's pioneering work on P4C in the Philippines) complemented his advocacy for the construction of public reason (Lee, 2017, p. 56). In Lee's framework, public reason is the lived experience of a group of people who collectively establish rules of evidence, formulate hypotheses, test logical consistencies, and remain permanently open to self-correction based on shared criteria. Thus, Lee democratized and localized public reason, transforming it from a sterile, Western legal abstraction into a communal tool for collective survival and democratic flourishing in a developing post-colonial Philippine state. Following Matthew Lipman, Lee demonstrates that public reason becomes transformed from a legal and political rule into an active educational practice (p. 63).

What is significant in this Socratic/Platonic injunction is about the establishment of a criteria for discoursing with the other (especially with one's interlocutors). In the *Apology*, Socrates avoided the highly charged, dramatic language of the sophists and insisted on a direct line of questioning (*elenchus*) characterized by logic, directness, humility and with irony. Whereas his opponents (e.g., Meletus, Anytus and Lycon) were using emotionally charged vocabularies on account of their empty logic (*Apology*, 17a-18a, pp. 17-18), Socrates commanded respect by setting up an example on how to use reasoning in public and by so doing, forever set up a standard on how philosophers ought to reason and conduct themselves in public (Nehamas, 1999, pp. xxxiii; 283; 317; 319-320).⁷ It is in this manner that philosophy, as an academic discipline dedicated to logic and truth—must inherently engage

⁷ Alexander Nehamas observes: "Plato realizes that the nature of the good human life cannot be determined independently of the place of human beings within society; that the nature of society depends on the education of its citizens; that proper education requires a view of knowledge and of the nature of the world that can be known; that theories of knowledge presuppose psychological accounts of the individuals that are to be educated; that psychology dictates particular attitudes toward the arts" (1999, 317).

itself with the eradication of the “communicative pathologies”⁸ of modern life (Habermas, 2001, pp. 129-170). The philosopher cannot bring himself down to the level of the public name-calling or to the vulgarity of the masses. Instead, it is incumbent for him to raise the level of discourse by inviting them to the exercise of argumentation ultimately aimed at truth and the knowledge of the Good (*Apology*, 29d–30b, p. 28). Socrates avoided the use of insulting language and insisted, even on the face of death, on a genuine desire to achieve the common social good. He did not look at his accusers as enemies but instead looked at them as fellow Athenians and invited them to care for their souls, a model for the exercise of public reason over political tribalism.

Taking the above Socratic injunctions into account, public reason operates as a normative regulator. Public reason reveals that the objective of an intellectual exchange is not the rhetorical annihilation of the questioner and the questioned, but the collaborative discovery of the true statement based on valid arguments. This idea squares closely with the Socratic art of midwifery (*maieutics*), a paradigm which Lee is most likely to invoke (Ibana, 2017, pp. i-v). Socrates did not enter a dialogue to score sophistic victories or humiliate his opponents; rather, he viewed dialogue as a shared experience where both parties discover the epistemic effort necessary to determine whether an idea is able to stand the test of rational questioning. In this way, public reason essentially transforms philosophical discourse by shifting the locus of authority towards the shared, transparent criteria of logical justification away from the self-aggrandizing prospects of the sophists seeking fame and money. When a philosopher operates within the limits of public reason, they acknowledge that their personal insights—no matter how deeply felt or brilliantly constructed—do not demand forced acceptance on the part of other human beings. Every assertion must be logically justified and is thus open to critical scrutiny.

As a consequence, we understand that to reason publicly means to explicitly accept the risk of being proven wrong. This requires a given level of humility which would allow what Lee would describe as the capacity for “self-correction” (Tubera, 2025). This “philosophical vulnerability” on the part of the philosopher is a recognition that truth cannot simply come from one source and must therefore be an intrinsic attitude of all the participants in the public sphere. For Lee, this means that within a functioning community of inquiry, participants do not merely present static positions. Rather, they actively use the feedback of the community to refine, alter, or completely abandon their initial positions when faced with superior evidence or logical contradictions. Without the safeguards of public reason, philosophical discourse rapidly degenerates into ideology, where arguments are weaponized exclusively to defend pre-established dogmas or advance factional political interests.

⁸ We can define communicative pathology as a form of “systematically distorted communication.” See “Translator’s Introduction” (Habermas, 2001, p. xxi).

Rehabilitating Philosophical Discourse: Four Normative Guidelines

In the Philippine context, the prevalence of social media as the primary mouthpiece for information dissemination among the general population has generated a strange form of democratization. Social media apps like Facebook, Tiktok, X (formerly Twitter), IG, Threads and others, have occasioned the unbridled democratization of speech that adulterated the rationality of the public sphere and led to the cannibalism of public reason. The modern technological democratization of the public voice thus gave rise to these social media platforms becoming a mouthpiece for philosophical vulgarity.

In the Philippine digital public sphere, discourse is structurally optimized by algorithms that monetize outrage, tribalism, and sensationalism. It is within this toxic environment where academic exchanges have been “enframed” (Heidegger, 1997, p. 334) into vulgarity and into the mediocrity of public “bashing,” ad hominem attacks, and mutual name-calling across social media timelines. Without naming particular people, it is obvious that rational debates about the social issues such “war on drugs,” “poverty” and “elitist politics,” have been turned into a caricature of “flip top” exchanges where the pursuit of the common social good has been eclipsed by a market logic that values one’s academic fame and public following over the truth. Rather than modeling intellectual humility and openness to self-critique, academics often mirror the worst behavioral traits of digital “trolls,” weaponizing their philosophical training to construct sophisticated insults rather than public justifications. Given this context, to structurally rehabilitate philosophical and public discourse in the Philippines, we can trace a clear line back to Zosimo Lee’s architecture of public reason. By operationalizing his “pedagogy for reasonableness” (Lee, 2017, p. 14), we can establish four explicit, non-negotiable normative guidelines for all participants in Philippine philosophical dialogue.

a. Respect for the Other

The first and most fundamental guideline derived from public reason is an absolute, unconditional respect for the other person with whom one wishes to engage in philosophical discourse (Lee, 2009; Rawls, 1996, pp. 212-216). This directly opposes the pervasive cultural practice of respect as being tied strictly to institutional hierarchy, age, or political alignment. Within public reason, respect is not a deference to power but a recognition that the other possesses an inherent capacity to reason, evaluate evidence, and offer counterarguments. In practice, this implies that one must not be dismissive of the other’s questioning based on their ethno- or regional identity, institutional affiliation, or political associations. These *ad hominem* attacks are a severe violation of public reason because they attempt to strip the opponent of their status as a legitimate participant in the discourse. To respect the other means to apply the philosophical “principle of charity,” i.e., to interpret the opponent’s

argument before attempting a critique (Davidson, 1973).⁹ If a philosopher cannot adequately rebut the strongest version of their opponent's argument, intellectual victory is not possible.

b. Disciplined and Deliberate Use of Language

The second guideline governs what may be admitted into a philosophical vocabulary regulating public discourse. What can we count as philosophical during a discourse on social media, let us say, when two parties are debating about the morality of the government's "war on drugs?" A cursory examination of how Philippine social and political issues are addressed—for instance, in Facebook—would clearly reveal that language is frequently deployed as a weapon of trauma and humiliation. Sarcasm, mockery, and emotional hyperbole are used to render rational consensus impossible. When language is laced with name-calling and contempt, it fractures the communicative channel itself, shifting the domain of interaction from rational discourse to psychological warfare.

In contrast to this, we can clearly say that public reason requires a disciplined, precise, and non-inflammatory use of language. This constraint is not an appeal to elitist politeness or bourgeois tone-policing, which can be weaponized to silence genuine subaltern anger. Rather, it is a structural requirement for communication. In Lee's community of inquiry model, participants must actively police their own linguistic output, ensuring that their sentences are structured to transmit clear propositions and verifiable criteria rather than emotional noise (Lee, 2009, p. 218).

c. Epistemic Goodwill

The third principle requires replacing one's desire for self-aggrandizing sophistry with genuine epistemic goodwill. A common pathology in modern Philippine socio-political debate is the demonization of the opponent. Instead of listening to understand; what people often look for are the semantic slippages or a rhetorical weakness that can be exploited for the public humiliation of the other.

In this regard, public reason demands a criterion of goodwill—a shared presupposition that all participants are engaged in a sincere, cooperative effort to discern the truth of a given matter. This requires what Lee identified as a commitment to building "shared criteria for better reasoning" (Tubera, 2025; Lee, 2009, p. 595). Rather than treating the dialogue as a game where one individual must destroy the other, epistemic goodwill reframes the discourse as a collaborative exploration. The crucial enemy is not the person sitting across the table or posting on the opposing timeline; the real enemy is error, logical fallacy, and systemic misinformation.

⁹ We can understand this principle by looking into Donald Davidson's thought experiment on "Radical Interpretation" where an interpreter is trying to understand an alien without any dictionary or shared linguistic background. But this means placing oneself in a dilemma: one must first understand the words of the alien by first understanding their belief but you cannot know their beliefs except when you already understand what their words mean.

d. *A Genuine Desire for the Common Social Good*

Finally, the principle requiring a genuine desire of the common good allows discourse to ground its wider ethical and political responsibilities. Philosophy in a third-world country like the Philippines must move away from the luxury of the detached, solipsistic ivory-tower isolation of armchair philosophizing. Instead, discourse must be explicitly oriented toward the achievement of the common social good. Thus, when philosophers in the Philippines engage in public discourse, their arguments must transcend personal vanity, academic careerism, or the defense of a specific political patron. Public reason dictates that the ultimate justification for any philosophical position must contribute, either directly or indirectly, to the emancipation and flourishing of the broader civic community. When a debate degenerates into public bashing, it directly harms the common good by eroding public trust in academic institutions and poisoning the shared cultural well from which ordinary citizens draw their democratic habits. Orientation toward the common good forces participants to ask a crucial, self-regulating question before publishing a word: *Does this utterance lead towards a better way for the achievement of the common social good, or does it prevent it?*

Conclusion

What Habermas calls communicative pathologies are prevalent in present day Philippine public and philosophical discourse. In this paper, I present Zosimo Lee's advocacy for a dialogic understanding of the public use of reason and for a pedagogy of reasonableness as essential principles if we are to continue the good work of philosophizing for the common good of Philippine society. Lee's invitation is not a sentimental call but a realistic one. In a country where regionalist ethnocentrism and political tribalism define how elections are decided, the reformation of philosophical discourse through public reason is a welcome means to effect change. As the intellectual legacy of Dr. Zosimo Lee demonstrates, we must continue working for civic education and communicative discipline so that we find an antidote to the country's many social pathologies. Cultivating the public use of reason through an expansive, egalitarian community of inquiry, the Philippine epistemic community can begin to heal the wounds that scarred it.

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