### ASEAN Philosophical Traditions From A Developmental Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRAK :** Sebagai negara dengan jumlah penduduk Islam terbesar, Indonesia merupakan rumah tradisi intelektual yang menerima, memelihara, dan mengembangkan tradisi filsafat Barat yakni, filsafat Plato dan Aristoteles. Kita juga tidak melupakan pedagang Cina yang bekerja keras mempengaruhi perdagangan di Indonesia dan ASE-AN memperoleh inspirasinya dari etika Konfusius. Paper ini bertujuan merangkum tradisi-tradisi filsafat besar yang mempengaruhi tradisi filsafat Asia dan bagaimana hal itu terbentuk dalam bahasa Melayu-Polinesia untuk menunjukkan bahwa betapa pun berbeda ada kesamaan terutama karena semuanya menyumbang bagi perbendaharan kebijaksanaan kemanusiaan dan cara berpikir manusia yang menggunakan bahasanya masing-masing.

KATA KUNCI: tradisi intelektual, etika Konfusius, humanitas, struktur berpikir manusia, bahasa

**ABSTRACT** : As the largest nation with an Islamic population, Indonesia is also home to an intellectual tradition that has received, preserved and cultivated the Platonic-Aristotelean philosophy, the seedbed of Western Philosophical tradition. Along with Hinduism, Buddhism and other religious traditions, we must not forget the enormous influence of the hard working Chinese traders in Indonesia and in the ASEAN who are inspired by Confucian ethics. The main features of these great Asiatic philosophical traditions blend within the context of our malay-polynesian linguistic sensibilities and our colonial encounter with the West. It shows that despite our differences, there are many commonalities that confirm the parallel structure of humanity's great depositories of wisdom and the basic neurological structure of all human beings.

**Key WORDS**: intellectual tradition, Confucian ethics, humanity, neurological structure of human beings, language.

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION

I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of this conference for this opportunity to share my ideas on Southeast Asian Philosophy. As first speaker of your conference, I am deeply honored to address the first purpose of your gathering today: the development of ethical thinking in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

As a nation that gave birth to the ancient Sriwijayan and Majapahit empires, Indonesia can take pride in being located at the convergence of the great Hindu-Buddhist worldviews. When we speak of Southeast Asia, our reference point in the South is India, the first two syllables of the word Indoneasia and the second word, East-Asia, refers to Buddhism in its various forms. It is within this context that prior to coming to Jakarta, I decided to first go and see Burubudur in order to pay homage and learn from the great traditions that has shaped Indonesia and southeast-asia. The whole human community, therefore, has a lot to learn from Indonesia.

As the largest nation with an Islamic population, Indonesia is also home to an intellectual tradition that has received, preserved and cultivated the seedbed of Western Philosophical tradition, the Platonic-Aristotelean Philosophy. We must not forget, of course, the enormous influence of the hard working Chinese traders in Indonesia and in Southeast Asia who are mostly inspired by the Confucian ethics.

We shall attempt to put together the main features of this Hindu-Buddhist axis of the Asiatic philosophical traditions, along with other traditions, such as Islam and Confucianism, as they converge and blend with our Malayo-polynesian languages in order to show that despite the differences,

there are many similarities that we must pay attention to as we attempt to draw a parallelism between the basic structure of humanity's great depositories of wisdom and the basic neurological structure of human beings.

These traditions inspire the development of local philosophical traditions of countries like the Philippines who are actually at the peripheries of these great philosophical movements. I would like to suggest, as I have suggested in previous works, that philosophy is actually grounded in local traditions as it assimilates other traditions to produce hybrid philosophies that resulted in the production of even the western philosophical traditions of Platonism, Thomism, Cartesianism, Kantianism, and Hegelian philosophy, among others.<sup>2</sup>

The similarities among philosophies are not surprising since we human beings do share the same neurological constitution. Understanding the structure and development of this constitution will allow us to evaluate the history and trajectory of the philosophical traditions in our part of the world in relation to other traditions. This insight is suggested by the triadic structure of the human brain and its parallel structure with other philosophical traditions.

#### 2. PAUL MCLEAN'S TRIADIC BRAIN

The neurosciences tell us that the human brain is composed of three main parts: the reptilian cortex that controls our drive for self-preservation, physiology and reflexes. It is mainly characterized by territoriality and acts to protect the surrounding environment that supports its survival. The second part is the mammalian brain, the seat of emotional reactions, and is responsible for caring for those who are similarly situated such as kinsmen, neighbors and countrymen. The third is the neo-cortex which is responsible for more global and futuristic concerns that involve broader issues such as technological and ecological sustainability and social justice. This last center, like the evolutionary development of the brain itself, is open-ended, it is not yet finished and continues to evolve, like a living organism.<sup>3</sup>

In a previous work,<sup>4</sup> I have plotted the correspondences of these neural centers with major western ethical traditions:

The Brain	Reptilian	Mammalian	Human neo-cortex
Plato	appetites	Emotions	Reason
Aquina s	Existential	Providential	Intellectual
Kant	Technical	Prudential	Moral
Scheler	Pleasure and Utility	Life and community	Justice, Beauty and Truth
Haber mas	Instrumental	Communicative	Emancipatory
Kohlber g	Pre-conventional	conventional	Post-conventional

Ethical norms and the triadic brain

#### 3. SOUTHEAST ASIAN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS

At the expense of oversimplification, let me plot a similar correspondence with the major Asian Philosophical tradition beginning with Hinduism:

Hinduism takes pride in a cosmological conception of the world constituted by Purusha, the absolute being who sacrificed itself to itself because there was nothing else at the beginning of the world. The universe therefore was composed of its various parts: the sun came from its eyes; the wind from

its breath; the earth from its feet. This cosmological stratification symbolized a triadic structure that is most evident in the social structure of Indian society: the Brahmins were its mouth, the kings and warriors were its limbs, and the workers were born from its feet. Despite this caste system, it is important to emphasize the Hindu belief in the shared divinity of all beings, especially human beings.

The triadic structure of the brain is most evident in the stratification of Indian social life where the priestly and intellectual castes govern the lower classes by means of religious and ideological beliefs that legitimize their dominance of the social system. The kings and the warrior classes, not unlike Plato's guardians of the Republic, serve to protect and maintain social stability while the workers and even the untouchables work on the land and are located at the lowest fringes of society. The Rig Veda celebrates this social harmony in the following hymn: "*The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rājanya made*. *His thighs became the Vaiśya, from his feet the Śūdra was produced.*"<sup>5</sup>

In reaction to Hinduism, Buddhism is known to have turned away from the caste system. This is exemplified by the Buddha's abdication of his princely inheritance in order to become a truth-seeker. It democratized spirituality as it attempts to discover a path to salvation through the inner world (the way of the Hinayana) and as it helps others to obtain the same through the Boddhisatvas's acts of compassion (the way of the Mahayana). In both Hinayana and Mahayana traditions, however, Buddhist meditation practitioners pay attention to the triadic desires of the mind, the emotions, and the passions in order to realize salvation or the "deathless" or Nirvana.<sup>6</sup> The Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh refers to the stark reality of prostitution in Manila to illustrate the Buddhist notions of "mindfulness" and "inter-being". According to him,

In the city of Manila there are many young prostitutes; some are only fourteen or fifteen years old. They are very unhappy. They did not want to be prostitutes, but their families are poor and these young girls went to the city to look for some kind of job, like street vendor, to make money to send back to their families. Of course this is true not only in Manila, but in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, in New York City, and in Paris also. After only a few weeks in the city, a vulnerable girl can be persuaded by a clever person to work for him and earn perhaps one hundred times more money than she could as a street vendor. Because she is so young and does not know much about life, she accepts and becomes a prostitute. Since that time, she has carried the feeling of being impure, defiled, and this causes her great suffering. When she looks at other young girls, dressed beautifully, belonging to good families, a wretched feeling wells up in her, a feeling of defilement that becomes her hell.... Only by seeing with the eyes of inter-being can that young girl be freed from her suffering. Only then will she understand that she is bearing the burden of the whole world. What else can we offer her? Looking deeply into ourselves, we see her, and we will share her pain and the pain of the whole world. Then we can begin to be of real help.

The dual notions of "mindfulness," cultivated by the Hinayana tradition and "inter-being" of the Mahayana, show the complementary inner depth and

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outer relational dimensions of reality that must be taken into account in any comprehensive understanding of experience. Nhan's example shows the triadic perspectives of survival, concern for the family, and a more holistic perspective towards salvation.

Nhan's Mahayana tradition finds a counterpart in the Theravada (Hinayana) tradition represented by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the revered Thai Buddhist monk who spent the first ten years of his monastic life in a forest monastery, wrote in his Autobiography how he initially felt content in living with a few possessions – an alms bowl, a pail, his robes and a coconut oil lamp made from a drinking glass – to find happiness without having to deal with anybody, like the yogis of the Himalayas.<sup>7</sup> But he realized his inherent debt from others – in Filipino we call this *utang na loob* or *utang na Budhi* in Bahasa – especially from his ancestors, for what he has become. He then discovered that possessions are not evil in themselves; but the attitude of being attached to them brings suffering. Salvation then lies in making use of things and objects to serve others. His insight again exhibits a threefold configuration: the human person's covetous relationship to things, indebtedness to others, and our duty to serve the rest of humanity.

The Islamic Sufis that came to Southeast Asia narrated stories about the supernatural powers of their religion which was understandably influenced by the mystical traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism because the kind of Islam that was initially introduced to the region came from the Indian continent.<sup>8</sup> The plots of these stories also have a discernible triadic structure that addresses the virtues of compassion for those who are in need, social acceptability, and the primacy of an authentic relationship with the divinity. Rumi, for example,

tells the story of a Sufi who visited an impoverished monastery and left his donkey to be tended by his servant. The resident Sufis, however, sold the donkey to buy food and candles for their feast. The celebration was highlighted with the chanting of a Poet: "Your Donkey is gone, my son, your donkey is gone." Everyone joined in this ecstatic singing, clapping, and dancing, including the guest who owned the donkey. At the end of the banquet, the guests have left, the visitor called his servant to fetch his donkey. The servant replied that the donkey was sold to finance the celebration. The Sufi was surprised why he was not informed about it. But the servant said that every time he informed his master, the latter sang "The Donkey is gone, my son, the donkey is gone." Rumi then concluded that "If you are rich and full fed, don't laugh at the impulsiveness of the poor; they were acting out of some necessity."9 What is more important is the celebration of community and the "meeting with the Friend". This remark can be related to the triadic structure of the brain: the reptilian for those who sold the donkey to pay for the feast, the mammalian for the enjoyment of the feast, and neo-cortex for the religious experience itself. Brain scans show that the frontal cortex of the human brain is activated during religious activities such as prayer and meditation<sup>10</sup> while the mammalian and reptilian brains respectively represent the community experience of celebration and basic necessities of the poor Sufis. A second story that has a triadic structure tells of a woman who complained to her lover for reading poems in front of her instead of being with her. She responded to his poems by saying: ""Here you are, with me and able to perceive my qualities directly; but you insist upon expressing emotions which represent yourself, not me. I am not your object: it is you who are the object of your own affections. It is you who stand between

yourself and me."<sup>11</sup> The woman's refusal to be treated as a mere object represents the reptilian brain while the lover's affections is the emotional mammalian cortex while the desire to live life with the lover represents the rational brain.

If Indic Islam is more mystical, mainstream Islam from the Arab world, on the other hand, is characterized by legalism and a rule-based standard of living. The Arabic word for rule ("Queda), however has a triadic application to at least three levels of life: the level of objects, plants and animals, the rules for cities and the home, and ultimately, God's rule of the Universe.<sup>12</sup> Dietary prescriptions are also organized according to a triadic hierarchy: (1) green herbs, (2) fruits of trees that are fully ripe whose seeds can reproduce, and (3) living creatures such as fish and flesh. Consumption is governed by the principle that "in the partaking of which, there would be the least opposition to the work of the Creator: such as the pulp of those fruits which were fully ripe, and had seeds in them fit to produce others of the like kind, always taking care to preserve the seeds, and neither cut them, nor spoil them, nor throw them in such places as were not fit for plants to grow in."<sup>13</sup>

In terms of the Confucian ethics, "The Great Learning," the required text for all civil servants in Ancient China, recommends that if one desires to govern the state, the family must first be governed properly, If one desires to govern the family, one must properly govern oneself, and if the self is to be governed properly, one must cultivate learning by contemplating the nature of things.<sup>14</sup> This prescription can again be organized in a triadic way: governing the state, the family and oneself which corresponds to the triadic structure of the brain: the reptile for the state, the mammal for the family, and the neo-cortex for the cultivation of oneself. Self-cultivation or education, as we can observe even today, is one of the core values of Confucian cultures. Confucianism believes that education in the key to success. Education, in the Ancient world of Confucius, however, was initially mediated through the family, in accordance with the ideals of the Junzi, elders who exemplify the moral values of the community. It is through emulating the virtues of the elders of the family that one eventually becomes a leader of the community and the world at large.<sup>15</sup>

### 4. INTERMEDIATE REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE TASK OF DO-ING PHILOSOPHY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The first point that can be drawn from these narratives of Southeast Asian Philosophies is the evolutionary thrust towards complex forms of rationality in the development of the human brain and the various philosophical traditions. As one ascends to higher levels of development, the lower levels are subsumed by higher forms of complexity. The three centers of the brain, therefore, are not separate entities but are integrated by a nervous system that has three vortices that act as decision centers.

It is unfortunate, however, that not everyone is able to participate in this movement of humanization. Lawrence Kohlberg admits that only five percent of human beings can reach the post-conventional form of morality wherein value judgments are made on the basis of their universal validity claims and not based on social pressure and baser needs.<sup>16</sup> This percentage, however, is not predetermined as human beings continue to learn and evaluate their contingent conditions.

The traces of these intellectual traditions spill over to our speech acts and the practices of everyday life. In a predominantly Catholic country like the

Philippines, Filipino words, such as "alam" (to know) can be traced to the Islamic term Ilm while Budhi, or Buddhi is a Hindu-Buddhist principle. Experiences that lie beyond our control but necessitate resolution, to cite another example, are relegated to "Karma," another Hindu-Buddhist belief about how evil deeds are eventually punished and good acts are rewarded. *Paki*, Folk Islam's word for "(ritual specialists and religious functionaries) who preside over the ceremonies marking rites of passage" is reproduced in the language of everyday life of the Tagalogs as they use the prefix "paki-" to plead for assistance from others.<sup>17</sup> These Southeast Asian concepts tell us that it will be a more enriching philosophical experience to use them as the root metaphors and categories to understand and explain ourselves than the concepts that we have borrowed from the West.

Organizing these insights in a coherent and architectonic way is the task of philosophers in Southeast Asia today. This mixture of ideas will have a distinctive taste, the way each brand of Indonesian goreng and Filipino halohalo and the various brands of instant coffee have different tastes depending on how the various ingredients are put together. Some world views will be dominated by Christianity, others by Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and even Animism. These religions, nevertheless will become hybridized as their conjectures overlap in various ways in the practices of everyday life. It would be helpful to plot our speculations, however, against the background of scientific data such as the structure of the human brain in order to maintain the philosophical quest for universality and the shared and common destiny of humankind.

#### 5. THE PLASTICITY OF THE HUMAN BRAIN

The combination of ideas that will constitute these philosophies are as varied as the billions of neurons and connections of the human brain. The plasticity of the brain is subject to the experiences encountered by human beings. The more experiences are encountered, the more complex the connections and ideas are formed by the brain. When these connections are habituated and exercised in relation to others, it forms a cultural infrastructure that will eventually organize a civilization or a way of being in the world with others.

The social consequences of the structure of the brain can be illustrated by the relationship of dominant ideas that integrate the other concepts that circulte in a socio-cultural environment. Emilio Jacinto, the so called "Brain" of the Philippine Revolution against Spanish colonial regime in 1896, for example, focussed on the central idea of "authentic faith" as the unifying principle of their revolutionary organization. This is evident in the following schema:<sup>18</sup>





Each of these ideas can be compared to the neurons in our brain and the connections are like our axons that connect the neurons. We can probably do a similar illustration for the Indonesian Pancasila ideology where the five main principles are plotted in relation to other Indonesian principles, values and virtues. (I hope one of our Indonesian philosophy researchers can take up this challenge.) A similar schema can be eventually done for Southeast sian principles. The more important insight to bear in mind at the moment is that the structures of our brains are no different from the rest of humanity and that we are bound by our shared aspirations as human beings with a similar neurological structure. How these structure will evolve is still up to us to decide and determine.

#### 6. THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN COLONIAL EXPERIENCE

This excursion into the Philippine revolutionary ideas of 1896 and the mentionof Indonesian Pancasila ideology open up another dimension of Southeast Asian History and Philosophy that must be taken into account: the colonial encounter of our indigenous ways of living prior to our encounter with Western Civilization. It is sad to say that history textbooks, at least in the Philippines is too short-sighted to begin with the landing of Magellan to the Philippines in 1521, as if we were merely discovered by the West without realizing that we already belong to an ancient and glorious civilization even before that encounter. Such an encounter has produced a hybridized culture today that integrates our initial Southeast Asian philosophies with the Western intellectual and social systems of religion, politics and economics. These socalled western ways of living, especially the capitalist system, has encroached

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into our traditional ways of dealing with the world and has colonized our sensibilities and intellectual categories in term of the language of power and money instead of our traditional ways of being with one another. Our current reactions to the experience of colonization may be characterized in terms of fight, flight or submission, in the same manner that reptiles fight, evade or submit to their predators. But our brain structures tell us that there other more evolutionarily advanced way of dealing with our encounters with aliens that assimilate or accommodate them to our dominant cultures in order to produce a more rationalized way of life. Such a development again testifies to the shared neurological structures of the human brain and a possible trajectory of our human development.

The underlying western principles and ways of thinking can be also subjected to our freedom to choose the kind of human beings and cultural circles that we hope to develop and achieve in the future. In this sense, our destiny still lies in our hands and what we do with ourselves still depends on us. The protest movements and uprisings against westernization is a testament to our indigenous impulse towards emancipation from foreign domination. We shall eventually produce ingenious ways of living as we surmount this difficult stage in our historical development.

#### 7. FREEDOM AND THE HUMAN BRAIN

An experiment performed by Benjamin Libet showed that humans only have one tenth of a second to reject a possible choice before actually performing an action. This means that human freedom is not a freedom towards something because following the initial trajectory of our "action potentials" are already predetermined by past habits and dispositions. But the freedom *from* doing something, to be able to resist and say "No" to an action potential provides a small window of opportunity that can lead to the infinite possibilities of our freedom to deliberate and determine other choices for the future. His experiment is illustrated as follows:<sup>19</sup>



According to Libet's schema, a possible action is already detected by the brain at 550 milliseconds before we actually do it. This means that our brain, with all its predeterminations, can already become aware of what humans are going to do prior to actually doing something. We only have 200 milliseconds to reject or accept a potential activity. Rejection, however, is the key to exercising oue freedom and self-determination because the choice to say "No" opens up a space for deliberation and consultation with others. Such a suspension of judgment can take forever and perhaps even end up with not making a decision, which is also a decision by itself. Action-oriented men view this tentativeness as a form of "paralysis by analysis," that is, indecisiveness, a scrupulous conscience that is unable to immediately contend with the exigencies of reality.

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Such indeterminacy, however, is the crowning glory of human freedom and rationality because despite of all the contingent biological and social determinations, humans are able to overcome the limitations imposed by their environments, society and technological systems towards a future that humans themselves can shape, decide, accept or reject.

#### 8. CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to sketch some of the axiological boundaries that define Southeast Asian philosophy which are certainly not exhaustive and must continue to open itself to the fluidity that characterize our boundaries. The impending regional integration of our part of the world, however, compels us to think about our identities, if there can ever be such, beyond the motherhood statements about our "diversity in unity." Our shared neurological structure tells us that although we were intially bound by the Hindu-Buddhist-Islamic-Confucian traditions, there are many ways of combining these ideas and ideologies in our encounters with other cultural circles such as the so-called Western traditions. We therefore have profound reasons to believe that we can actively continue to participate in the world of the common rationality that we share with other human beings.

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#### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Paper ini adalah makalah yang dipresentasikan pada Hari Ulang Tahun ke XXV HIDESI, 2015 di Unika Atma Jaya, Jakarta.

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<sup>4</sup> Rainier Ibana, "The Implications of the Structure of the Human Brain on War and Peace," *Asian-Arab Philosophical Dialogues on War and Peace* (Bangkok, Unesco, 2010) pp. 56-59. http://www.eubios.info/aapdwarpeace accessed on May 17, 2016)

<sup>5</sup> Hymn XC: Purusha http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv10090.htm (accessed on May 17, 2016)

<sup>6</sup> Ariyapariyesana Sutta: The Noble Search http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ tipitaka/mn/mn.026.than.html (Accessed on June 7, 2016)

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<sup>8</sup> Madi Blumethal, "Sufi Mystics and the Nature of Islam in Southeast Asia", (Internet post https://prezi.com/hambo-zahbc\_/sufi-mystics-and-the-nature-of-southeast-asian-islam/ accessed on June 17, 2016)

<sup>9</sup> The Essential Rumi, Trans. Coleman Barks (New York: Harper One, 2004), pp. 250-251.

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<sup>10</sup> https://www.google.com.ph/search?q=time+magazine+religion+and+th e+brain&hl=en&biw=1350&bih=541&tbm=isch&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=0ah UKEwjA27eCnoTNAhUiL6YKHTm0BQYQ\_AUIBigB&dpr=1#tbm=isch&tbs= rimg%3ACT7gl44mSAZuIjjfDMHbvd7WjzrGXfPuraWsHRNVSL2CdFZkqSG 3ALzSnm9k333k\_11yjkomMq9PMk2jdH8g1-eFokSoSCd8Mwdu93taPEaBlWFzxPCFDKhIJOsZd8-6tpawR2iclvD2gIKoqEgkdE1VIvYJ0VhHVOrYYR3hs7ioSC WSpIbcAvNKeEV6-zbJxTec5KhIJb2TffeT\_1XKMRLl9CyQTO9ksqEgmSiYyr08yT aBFRqxxGpQqJnSoSCd0fyDX54WiREd\_11KEp-ntEy&q=time%20magazine%20 religion%20and%20the%20brain&hl=en&imgrc=wxPPf22wCU5pkM%3A

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<sup>12</sup> Ibn Bajja, "The Rule of the Solitary," *Philosophy Manual: A South-south Perspective* (Paris, UNESCO, 2015), p. 116.

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<sup>14</sup> Confucius, *The Great Learning*, Trans. by A. Charles Muller http://www. acmuller.net/con-dao/greatlearning.html (Accessed on June 17, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Jinli He, "Confucian Ren Ethics: The Relational Person and Family Feeling", Philosophy Manual: South-south Philosophical Dialogues (Paris: Unesco, 2015), pp. 149-151.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg

<sup>17</sup> Eric Casino, *The Jama Mapun*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1976), p. 94.

<sup>18</sup> "The Epistemological Foundations of Emilio Jacinto's 'Liwanag at Dilim'" (Unpublished manuscript, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> http://www.google.com.ph/search?q=LIbet's+experiment&rlz=1C1en US578 PH579& source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj13sLdy5PNAhXH sJQKHZEmByoQ\_AUICCgC&biw=1350&bih=597#imgrc=0dSNhoaM7UY2mM %3A (Accessed on June 5, 2016)