Principles of Pacific Life

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This paper begins a project that flows from my book, Thinking about Political Things: An Aristotelian Approach to Pacific Life.1 In that book, I laid out an Aristotelian approach to the analysis of political possibilities in a way intended to be accessible to educated Pacific Islanders and friendly to their needs. At the end of the book, I encouraged Pacific Islanders to reflect on the goals that might best drive their politics, namely, the goods that they seek for their communities. Only the various political communities can themselves answer this question, but what I am proposing is a project that would help them do it. I see the project having four parts and these will comprise the sections of this paper: the goods we seek; the qualities of character needed by communities; the values held by persons and communities; and, meanings conveyed by stories. A final note articulates the distinction between an economic good and a political good. It will be assumed in the discussion that there may be significant differences between the principles underlying the lives of Pacific Islanders and those underlying contemporary Western societies.

This paper intends simply to set out a theoretical framework underlying the project. The second stage will aim to develop instruments that would help Pacific Islanders in the exploration and articulation of the principles by which they wish to live. These could be used, for instance, in workshops. Any suggestions about how this might be done will be gratefully received.

The Goods We Seek

The primary question that the exploration of goods brings is, what do we hope to achieve by initiating and sustaining a particular political community or country? This question assumes two things, firstly that the formation of a political community is not necessary for living as such but is done in order to achieve some purpose, and, secondly, that to do so is a human action that implies deliberation and choice.

The first assumption rests on a rather hard distinction between the forms of natural community – the extended family and the tribe or village composed my many families – and the political community or country, which brings into one community people who are different and, in particular who come from different families and tribes.2 It is a distinction that has to some degree been obliterated in the West but which is still in evidence in the Pacific especially on larger Melanesian Islands.

The second assumption rests on an understanding of human action that acknowledges that while some things may be done by natural functioning and some by instinct, others are done thoughtfully through deliberation about ends and means followed by choice about what action will be pursued. These ends are the goods that we seek, and it is an Aristotelian dictum that every action aims at a good.3

What this good is can be simply stated as living with some degree of self-sufficiency and living well. This statement has a point but clearly needs to be unpacked both because the various goods sought are complex and because different kinds of people will emphasise different kinds of goods. Of constitutional interest to Aristotle are the differences between citizens who are democrats and largely prize freedom; those who are oligarchs and prize wealth; and those who are aristocrats and prize virtue.4

Aristotle gives us a useful distinction between kinds of goods that will form the basis of this exercise. He distinguishes between three goods: external goods, goods of the body and goods of the soul.5 External goods are things like tools, food, houses, wealth, and reputation. Goods of the body are typically health, strength and beauty. Goods of the soul are the intellectual virtues, such as science and technical skill, and the moral virtues or qualities of character, such as courage, justice and generosity. Communal goods, such as peace or friendship, also belong here. These distinctions

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2 See Aristotle, Politics I, 1.

3 Aristotle, Ethics I, 1 (1094a1) and Politics I, 1 (1252a3).

4 Aristotle, Politics IV, 8.

5 Aristotle, VII, 1 (1323a25).
may again seem straightforward, but there is complexity and room for difference of acceptance and emphasis. Aristotle himself thought that people tended to believe that they had sufficient virtue but never enough wealth. Our modern democracies tend to assume that most or all goods can be reduced to some kind of monetary value. Whatever we hope for, our achievements will be in some way moderated by the available means to achieve them. Once we enter cross-cultural dialogue interesting things can happen. I was gifted with a wonderful and wide-ranging conversation with a chief in Malaita. He became very excited, when we discussed these things, but in the end, he found it difficult to determine whether his canoe was an external good or a good of his body.

**Qualities of Character Needed by Communities**

I want to take up just one part of the good in this paper, namely, moral virtue or quality of character. The relevant question is, what qualities does one need to live in this community? I have asked this question in various parts of the Pacific. In the Trobriand Islands, a young woman and an elderly man told me that what was important were respect, obedience and sharing. At a welcome ceremony in Tonga, a leading lady told us that the qualities underlying Tongan society were respect, sharing, generosity, loyalty and commitment. The Chamorro people of Guam and the Northern Marianas teach their children to follow the ancient core values of interdependence, reciprocity and respect for rank, age and nature. At the 2018 State of the Pacific Conference at ANU, Dame Meg Taylor told us that responsible development depended on love, respect, help, generosity, honesty, goodwill and righteousness. What comes through in these encounters is the importance of respect, reciprocity and interdependence. Were one to ask the same questions in Sydney, I believe that one would get different answers, perhaps independence, tolerance of difference and initiative. When I first began listening, one rarely heard of respect in Australian public discourse, though it has become more common in the last few years, perhaps because of the rise of a level of disrespect.

There is a tendency to think that moral virtues are roughly the same everywhere, and philosophers debate aspects of this. Perhaps, there is a core of common virtues, such as courage, justice and temperance, but when one compares lists of virtues such as those of the Greek philosophers, Christian medieval writers, the Chinese Confucian tradition and the initiators of Western modernity, there are marked differences. Furthermore, these differences relate to the kind of society these people have developed and the political forms that have supported it. Christian charity and forgiveness were not found in Aristotle’s Greece, nor were Aristotle’s liberality and magnificence found in Thomas Hobbes’s modern world. In the midst of today’s economic contest between the superpowers, China is insisting that it wants to maintain its core values of ‘patriotism, loyalty and collective values over individual rights’. The point of this discussion is that human character is not the same everywhere, nor need it be. The character of persons and communities is part of culture, and culture is the deep learning associated with how a particular community has learnt to live successfully in a particular place over a long period of time. It may be learnt by imitation of one’s elders, by some kinds of instruction or by laws which direct how people will act until such time as that becomes a connatural way for them to act. For my project, this means that the articulation of these principles of Pacific life needs to be done reflectively, carefully and only after a lot of listening.

**Values Held by Persons and Communities**

Although there are sophisticated theories of value available, the notion of values is not a particularly important one in my theoretical framework, and, indeed, some moral theories based on value are inimical to what I am proposing. On the other hand, ‘values’ is a common and broadly used term, and I suggest that it has educational potential to elicit first responses to questions about the good. The question can be as simple as, what things are important to us?

The Oxford English Dictionary offers multiple meanings of ‘value’, many of them financial and not to our purpose. The first is general, ‘the worth,
desirability or utility of a thing, or the qualities on which these depend (the value of exercise). The seventh refers to the plural, ‘values’, ‘one’s principles or standards; one’s judgement of what is important in life’.11 It is in this sense that I want to use the term, values. I believe that such an approach will allow initial exploration of what is important to people without implying any particular moral or political theory. It will also allow contrasting values of different people to emerge.

Examples of inter-culturally controversial values are freedom and equality.12 I come from a country, whose society prizes these values highly and understands them in a somewhat radical way. Freedom is freedom from constraint except where an action might harm others.13 Equality can seem to be absolute, and, indeed, Thomas Hobbes’s argument for equality as the underlying principle of a political theory, was that any person has the capacity to kill any other person.14 We are still working these ideas through, and I suspect that the emerging ‘identity politics’ is an effort to wrestle with issues of sameness and difference as well as an attempt to lever some social advantage.

Are freedom and equality likely to be high-level values for peoples in other cultures? It is clear that there are autocratic countries where they are not, but these may not be places in which many of us would want to live. But what about peoples for whom communal cohesion is more important than individual exception? Freedom may be prized, but it will be qualified: freedom to act in a specific manner or freedom from some form of oppression. Similarly, peoples for whom lineage or hierarchy is important will value equality in certain respects, such as equality before the law, but not equality absolutely speaking. Sorting out these differences is the task of the project I am proposing.

The Meanings Conveyed by Stories

I turn now to stories or more properly speaking oral traditions that can take a number of forms that may include story-telling, song, dance, myth, fable and oratory. For my project, the relevant question is, what do our stories tell us about who we are and how we want to live? At least in the West, this is controversial. I quote a young scholar on Radio National in Australia. ‘Life is not a story, life doesn’t work as a story, and the idea that that’s how we think, that’s how we arrive at meaning, that’s how we respond to complex ideas and to the world that is changing in front of us and in a state of constant upheaval is wrong.’15 About all I agree with in that statement is the implied difficulty presented by a world that is in a state of constant upheaval.

Aristotle places the forms of literature and art listed above under the generic term, poetry, which, he says, is a kind of imitation or representation of actions and life. It is attractive to people, because they enjoy looking at images and ‘as they contemplate them, they apply their understanding and reasoning to each element’.16 A well-constructed poem is also beautiful; it is ‘serious, complete and of a certain magnitude in language, which is garnished in various forms’.17 Not every poem or story that is constructed survives in either a literary or an oral tradition. It is the skilled poet who is able to imagine the topic to the fullest extent and to compose it in vivid language that presents what is appropriate to human action and life.18 It is in this genius that truth is discovered and conveyed. In oral traditions, songs and stories may have many authors, who have recounted and refined them over generations, thereby giving them even greater claim to authenticity within the culture.

These kinds of arts have moral and educative components. Aristotle explores this particularly in relation to tragic drama. The subjects of Greek

12 I am aware that we are hosted by a country, whose motto is ‘Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité’. The history of working out whether these values can be consistent with each other or not is an important story.
13 ‘Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by law’. The Rights of Man and Citizen, n. 4, The National Assembly of France, 1789. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp, accessed 8 June 2019.
14 Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), XIII, 1, p. 82. ‘Nature hath made men so equal, in the faculties of the body, and mind, as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another many not pretend, as well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himself.’
15 Maria Tumarkin, Future Tense, Radio National, Australia, 7 January 2018.
16 Aristotle, Poetics 4.
17 Aristotle, Poetics 6.
18 Aristotle, Poetics 17.
drama are people much like ourselves to whom some kind of tragic flaw brings desolation. The attentive spectator is drawn into the drama both intellectually and emotionally, and a kind of catharsis or purification occurs when either the play resolves itself or the spectator regains composure. The result is both a deeper understanding of human life and preparation to deal with crises that may arise. In the Western tradition, this is surely the role of Shakespearian tragedies. They are not simply for amusement or entertainment but rather for more serious contemplation of human life and its turns.

It is my belief that in the oral traditions of the Pacific will be found not only truth founded on experience about how to live successfully in a particular place and culture but also educative means to communicate what is valued by the people of that community. Grasping these meanings is not necessarily easy for a stranger, and it is the owners of the stories that must unravel them.  

**An Economic Good and a Political Good**

I would like briefly to distinguish an economic good from a political good. Economic goods are those for which we labour – wealth, food, clothing, tools, etc. Political goods are those which constitute excellent communities – justice, peace, harmony, knowledge, the arts etc. This distinction tends to be lost in the contemporary world. One could easily think, for instance, that the sole role of the Australian Government is to maintain the economy. The relative priority of goods also gets confused. From an Aristotelian perspective, the political goods are the higher goods – they make life worthwhile; while the economic goods are necessary for survival. The necessary can be prized above the truly good, particularly in times of economic stress, but also theoretically when it is proposed that given wealth, happiness will necessarily follow. It may be argued that the Brexit mess in the United Kingdom is the outcome of such a confusion of ends. The European Union was formed originally of five countries for a political end – that the countries would grow in unity, common laws and common understanding so as to prevent another European war. Britain joined later for largely economic reasons, after Europe had become economically strong. In leaving, it wants to maintain the economic advantages of membership but to renounce the political ends and the laws and agreements that support them. It is not surprising that the Europeans are somewhat uncooperative. This project will keep this distinction in mind.

**Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the project proposed in my introduction and to suggest how it might unfold. My approach is practical rather than theoretical. Two things are important. First, it is an educational project rather than a research project in that it aims to assist a community to articulate its own senses of the good in order to be able to participate better in political life. Secondly, because of this the program needs to be pedagogical and so to follow an order and process that allows participants to arrive at a deepening awareness of the issues. For this reason, the order of dealing with topics will be the reversed from the theoretical order presented in this paper.

There will be, therefore, notionally four sessions. A first will, after a brief introduction, elicit the telling of sacred, traditional or foundational stories chosen by the participants, followed by time for reflection and then discussion of the meaning of the stories. The second will begin with some input but will be in the main a wide-ranging discussion about the values that are considered important by the participants. These will be listed as they appear, but it is reasonable to assume that some sort of ordering process will be helpful. The third session will merit greater initial input about ways of thinking about human character, and possibly draw comparisons between classic ethical systems. Discussion will focus on the question, ‘what qualities of character does one need to live well in this community?’ Finally, a fourth session will begin with a more detailed theoretical presentation on the good but then attempt to articulate a considered list of goods according to the categories spelt out at the beginning of this paper.

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19 Aristotle, Poetics 6 and Politics VIII, 3.
20 My experience was in attempting to understand Australian Aboriginal stories. With all respect, I found this very difficult. In part, this was probably because they were written down in abbreviated form, but also because I did not have access to the right context in order to appreciate them.