Aristotle, the Good Life and a Good Constitution

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The intention of this paper is to explore the link between ideas about how government is best constituted and ideas about what makes up a good life for citizens. The paper will for most part be a reflection on Aristotle's Politics. At the beginning of Book VII he says, 'Concerning the best constitution, one who is going to undertake the investigation appropriate to it must necessarily discuss first what the most choiceworthy life is'.

His view is that unless one is clear on the particulars of the life that one is seeking, it will be impossible to design a constitution in such a way as to foster this life or even to know what one is doing in forming a constitution. If, for instance, wealth is what is best, one will install some sort of oligarchy. If equality for all is regarded as primary, some form of democracy will be appropriate. In Book VII, Aristotle explores the best possible constitution, and so he must also explore the best possible life.

I will read the Politics with help from work done by Martha Nussbaum during the 1990s. Nussbaum developed what she called 'the Aristotelian conception', according to which the design of good political institutions should ensure that all persons in a society are able to develop those capabilities that will enable them to function well as human beings. Her view is that these capabilities can be listed in such a way that, although the detail remains vague, they have a universal application. They therefore play a role in discussions of distributive justice.

My own immediate concerns are different from those of Nussbaum. Her area of application has been to women in third world countries, who have not even sought goods like education, because they had not imagined that they might. Nussbaum's chief opponent is John Rawls, whose account of the good she finds too thin, though she shares his liberal sympathies. My interest is in application to the island countries of the Pacific, particularly in Melanesia and Polynesia. Here, the chief opponents are history and geography. For most, European contact came less than two hundred ago and as recently as sixty years ago. It has wrought extraordinary change in the lives of these peoples as they have taken on Western aspirations and Western political forms. While many took on the apparatus of the modern European state with independence in the seventies, they are now looking back to customary law and culture as part of a solution to the difficulties that beset them. They do this, however, in a geographical context that severely limits their options, though without necessarily cutting off the possibility of living a good life.

This paper is largely programmatic. When I first proposed it, I had intended to do some fieldwork in the Pacific at mid-year, but that will not eventuate until next year. When it does, I hope to test whether the articulation of philosophic ideas and in particular of Aristotelian political philosophy can be helpful to peoples who are engaged in a process of very significant social, cultural and political change. The point of being philosophical is not to have solutions to the issues that face them but rather to offer ways of thinking that may enable them to work towards their own solutions in the decades before them.

Aristotle's Fundamental Premise

Aristotle’s fundamental premise is made very clearly in Politics VII, 2.

Now that the best constitution must necessarily be that arrangement under which anyone might act in the best manner and live blessedly is evident.

He takes it as evident that any claim to have achieved the best political arrangements will have to be assessed in terms of how those arrangements allow people to live. The people concerned, namely ‘anyone’, are all of those who live under the constitution. Strictly, this means all citizens,

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1 Aristotle, Politics VII, 1 (1323b14), Lord, p. 197. I here replace Lord’s ‘regime’ with ‘constitution’ to translate ‘politeia’ and will do this consistently. It needs to be noted, however, that the sense of constitution is much fuller than we often imply when talk of the constitution of a state. In the Aristotelian view it is the form of the country.

and so the question of who are citizens arises. It leaves open the question of the lives of non-citizens, though, in a particular case some definition could be given to the degree under which they do, indeed, live under the constitution. Nevertheless, we are concerned, in the first instance, with the lives of individual persons. It is not demanded that they all live the best of lives but rather that they might, in other words, that the constitution readily enables people to live well. I take this enabling in the strong sense of not only removing obstructions to living well but also of providing the kind of environment in which people are likely to live well.

This premise raises three important questions. Firstly, why is it so evident that the best constitution must enable the best lives? Secondly, what are these lives that are lived in the best manner and according to which people flourish? Thirdly, what practical arrangements could, in fact, lead to this condition? I will deal with each of these in turn and with the first straight away.

In Book I of the *Politics*, Aristotle traces the development of the *polis* or city out of families, tribes and collections of villages. His recurrent theme is that the city is formed not for the sake of living but for the sake of living well. In other words, in the geographic context that he knew, human beings could have limited their lives to simple subsistence living in small communities that had only casual contact with their neighbours. The move to closer living under more complex structures was a move to enable forms of living and flourishing that were not available to small communities. This is not to say that Aristotle was unaware that amalgamations might take place simply through conquest and the desires of the strong, but were this to lead to despotic or tyrannical rule of the conquered it would clearly be a retrograde step, especially for those conquered but also for life in general.

We might think today that large states are necessary simply for life itself rather than for living well due to the kinds of technologies that we use and for strategic reasons and that they are mandated for historical reasons that would excise any sense of choice. One can, however, think of a country like the Solomon Islands. Its nine provinces are constituted by different island groups with traditional associations between them but with different identities, and there is no strong sense of nationhood among most of the people of the region. In a sense, they have to act as single state because of how they were colonised by the British and because the external world pushes that structure on them, but the question of how this might enable better lives for all Solomon Islanders is, indeed, a real one and an interesting one.

### Good Human Functioning

The beginning of an answer to the second question about the nature of the good life is found in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The argument is dialectical as Aristotle sifts through the views of his contemporaries in search of a first principle. What is the supreme good of human life? People agree that it is happiness, but they disagree on what constitutes a happy life. In Chapter Seven, Aristotle concedes that talk of happiness is often platitudinous and changes tack in order to pursue the notion of good human functioning. He draws an analogy with a flautist. If it is the function of a flautist to play the flute, the goodness of a flautist will lie in playing it well. Excellence will lie in the best performance of function.

In applying this analogy to human life as such, Aristotle makes a number of distinctions. A human life is complex embracing vegetative, sensitive and intellectual functions. What is best will relate to what is properly human or human as such, and this has to do with the exercise of reason. In respect of a life, however, we are looking at action rather than contemplation. And so, the good of a human life will lie in the best performance of all its actions guided by practical reason. The performance of even vegetative actions such as generating new life, will be done not in a vegetative or brutish way but in a distinctively human way, that is, informed by practical reason. The disposition to perform in the best way, Aristotle calls excellence or virtue, and the *Ethics* becomes a detailed examination of the different virtues both moral and intellectual, which together make up the fabric of a good human life.

Aristotle’s own conclusion to this discussion holds an important clue to the *Politics*.

> If all this is so, the conclusion is that the good for man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, of if there are more kinds of virtue than one, in accordance with the best and most perfect kind.

This best and most perfect kind, clearly is some exercise of reason, though Aristotle will question in *Politics* VII, 2 whether it is speculative or active, that is, whether the life of a philosopher or the life

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3 In *Politics* VII, 3 (1325b29-31) Aristotle asserts that ‘the same way of life must necessarily be best both for each human being individually and for cities and human beings in general’.  
4 This argument is made explicit in VII, 8 (1328a35-40)  
5 For this discussion, see *Ethics* I, 7 (1097b22 – 1098a19), Thompson, p. 15 – 16.  
6 *Ethics* I, 7 (1098a19), Thompson, p. 16.
of a politician is to be most praised. That discussion can be interminable, but clearly the direction of the whole of the Politics is that good will be achieved if all of the citizens are able to participate in the exercise of practical reason, that is, in deliberation about their own lives and the actions of the city which affect them. This is the difference between political rule and despotic rule. A primary good for all, therefore, will be intelligent engagement in political life.

From Functioning to Capability
Before we can go further, it is necessary to take up the discussion of potentiality in De anima II, 5 (417a22-b1). There, Aristotle distinguishes two senses of potentiality in relation to knowing. An unschooled child has potential to act grammatically simply through being a human being capable of learning grammar, although it is unlikely to act grammatically except by accident. An educated adult has a more ready potential to act grammatically, whenever she wants, by dint of the fact that she has developed the habit of forming correct sentences. The move to act grammatically is a further actualisation of somebody ready to act. The distinction applies in all areas of human life where behaviour is learnt either by habituation or by instruction.

Nussbaum uses this distinction to define her capabilities approach. The role of government, she suggests, is to ensure that every citizen has the capability to act in those areas of life that are part of good human functioning. This capability is Aristotle’s second level of potentiality. It stands, therefore, between action and mere potential or the material conditions for action. The theory stands at the mean. On the one hand, it contrasts with theories that make good human functioning itself the goal of government, such as you find infamously under totalitarian or communist regimes. Instead, under the capabilities approach the citizen is educated to the point have having the ready capability to act in the best ways, but is left free to deliberate about what to do and to choose according to the outcome of those deliberations. On the other hand, it contrasts with more liberal theories that, while seeking opportunity for all, insist that its outcome have no specificity. The capability approach suggests, for instance, that, if it is good to be religious, all should be schooled in piety so as to be able to choose properly whether to act religiously or not, just as the choice of a musical career is dependent on prior musical education.

Nussbaum calls her conception of the good the thick-vague conception of the good. It is thick in the sense that it involves a comprehensive account of human functioning and so supports programs that work towards such functioning. It contrasts with programs that presume that distribution of money or the application of desire to a free market will ensure just distribution. She keeps it vague so that its level of generality is such that it can be applied in diverse cultural and geographic situations. She claims that it is not ‘metaphysical’ but rather ethico-political in the sense that it is worked out in the light of the experience of a being that, in the Aristotelian phrase, is neither ‘beast nor god’, though it might attempt to overcome the limits of its existence in both directions. She does provide a list of ten capabilities, which for now I will relegate to a footnote, since generating a fresh list in dialogue with peoples is likely to be the more fruitful activity.5

Achieving the Best: A Working Constitution
In moving to our third question about the kinds of constitutional arrangements that might best support the good life, I need first to say something about the nature of Book VII of the Politics and about its relationship to Book IV, Chapter 11. On my reading of her, Nussbaum takes insufficient notice of the difference between the two accounts of constitutions that are called best.

In Book VII, Aristotle gives an account of the best possible regime along the lines of the four causes. The material cause of the city is a people living in a certain territory with its their material conditions. The final cause of the city is a better life than could

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5 *Politics* I, 2 (1253a1-28). This includes a discussion of ‘man is by nature a political animal’. 8 See ASD pp. 62 – 63.

ASD pp. 70 – 71 offers a list of 10 Basic Human Functional Capabilities:

1. Being able to live to the end of a complete human life;
2. Being able to have good health, nourishment, shelter, sexual satisfaction and mobility;
3. Being able to avoid excessive pain and have pleasurable experiences;
4. Being able to use the five senses, imagination, thought and reason;
5. Being able to develop attachments to people and things outside of us;
6. Being able to form a conception of the good and to deliberate about one’s own life;
7. Being able to live in interaction with others;
8. Being able to live with concern for the world of nature;
9. Being able to laugh and to play;
10. Being able to live one’s own life and nobody else’s.
be had without it. The efficient cause of the city is the lawmaker, sometimes a sole and blessed figure as Solon, drafter of the Athenian laws, was thought to be, and at other times several people responding to particular opportunity. The formal cause is the constitution with its institutions, offices, programs and laws. The achievement of the best possible arrangements is dependent on perfect material conditions, on prudent and effective legislators and on their choice of what is best in their work of design. That Aristotle labels this the constitution ‘to pray for’, suggests that some degree of luck is also involved. It is by definition aristocratic, though with perfect stock and good education aristocrats may form a very large proportion of the population.

In Book IV, on the other hand, Aristotle describes the best practicable regime. The timeless and essential parts of any real city are the wealthy and the poor, and the constitution that works best will be one that incorporates both in a way that makes best use of their skills and recognises their interests. This is the polity or mixed regime of oligarchy and democracy that is made more virtuous by encouragement of the development of a middling group, in order to moderate the extremes of poverty and wealth. It is sustained by clever devices, such as restricting some offices to the wealthy so as to have them filled by the most capable, while at the same time choosing auditors from among the poor, who will be assiduous in ensuring that the wealthy do not feather their own nests. Its genesis is less likely to be in the simple design of a founding legislator and more in a long history of subtle amendments that move the city towards a better form of life.

The role of Book VII is to point out what can be achieved when the material and other conditions are just right. This imagined republic, rejected at the beginning of modernity by Machiavelli, is both a guide to law makers and the beginning of a discussion about how human beings, the essential material of the city, should be educated, if the best possible life in the circumstances is to be achieved. The clever parts of a constitution turn out to be the small devices, such as the distribution of offices mentioned above, that balance the parts of the city and the forces working within it.

Although Nussbaum is right to emphasise capabilities, in thinking about the details of constitutional arrangements, Aristotle works at all three levels that we have discussed: the material conditions, human capabilities, and actual human functioning. Brief examples with suffice for the first and third. Materially, the city needs good human stock and the best of breeding. It also needs two water supplies, one for consumption and one, we might say, for hosing paths and washing cars. At the level of actual functioning, common meals paid for by city revenues will ensure that all, both rich and poor, are able to participate in the life of the city. Punishments for infringements of the laws will limit wrongful behaviour.

The development of human capabilities is achieved through education, both by habituation and by instruction. Aristotle sees three major areas of education. He gives most emphasis to education in virtue, particularly courage, moderation, justice and prudence. If one has virtue, desire of other things, such as wealth, goods, power and reputation, will be easily kept in place. He does, however, distinguish between the virtue of the good person pure and simple, such as we find in the Ethics and the virtue proper to life under each particular constitution. At another level, training is needed in those tasks that are necessary to the life of the city. He mentions farming, the crafts, warfare, finance, priesthood and governance. Governance, or the ability to rule and be ruled is primary. Finally, he gives extended treatment to schooling in the liberal arts, so that citizens will use the leisure that a good constitution brings well.

Conclusion
In conclusion, much of this may seem fairly easy to enact. It is not. There are many sharp contrasts to be found between the Aristotelian idea and the assumptions of Western modernity. In its Pacific

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9 Politics VII, 4 (1325b37). See also VII, 5 (1327a5), VII, 10 (1330a26); VII, 13 (1332a30).
10 Politics IV – VI are about this movement.

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application, I am reminded of a Sepik River man, who told me that in his village children were given an excellent education in a mission school. The jobs for which they were prepared, however, never eventuated for most children, and the traditional village education, which would have prepared them for subsistence farming, was neglected. The Aristotelian analysis can provide a framework in which to think about what might be best, both in the short term and in the long term; both in itself and under the prevailing conditions.

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Bibliography


"communism: that lives can be centrally planned and organised."

22 Other Pacific problems can be thought about:

1. In PNG nobody who is living on the land of their clan will go hungry because they have access to the land and food of the clan. Displaced persons such as those in settlements in Port Moresby, however, are in a desperate situation without employment or land on which to grow crops. Welfare is not a solution because most of the country does not work on a cash basis. Recently, military service has been posed as a solution, but might this not lead to a more militaristic country.

2. In most Pacific states a strong distinction has developed between the elites who have good, often university, education and are paid high salaries, often by the government, and village people, who continue to live in close to traditional ways. How will these two groups continue to live together easily? In fact, many elites are quite happy to return to village life, at least for short periods, but how will this extreme difference be managed politically and economically.

3. The material limitations of life on small isolated islands, particularly in Polynesia place dramatic limits on what might be the good life there. An important difference with modern Western life, however, is the amount of leisure that these people have. How might it be best used?


