

The Stories We Share: Learnings from a Hundred Years of the Three Communities

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Abstract

This essay is part of a special issue celebrating 50 years of *Political Theory*. The ambition of the editors was to mark this half century not with a retrospective but with a confabulation of futures. Contributors were asked: What will political theory look and sound like in the next century and beyond? What claims might political theorists or their descendants be making in ten, twenty-five, fifty, a hundred years' time? How might they vindicate those claims in their future contexts? How will the consistent concerns of political theorists evolve into the questions critical for people decades or centuries from now? What new problems will engage the political theorists (or their rough equivalents) of the future? What forms might those take? What follows is one of the many confabulations published in response to these queries.

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This is probably because the Wide Community felt it unnecessary to dwell on one of its subcommunities for overlong.

Occasional gaps in transcription occur due to rests, feeding, or crosstalk, which occurs as members of Elder Community² provide interpretation for members of Human and Wide Communities.

MARGINALIA ON ORIGINAL DOCUMENT: This dialogue takes place in Unknown Valley, in Dry Country.³ There is a cool breeze after a long and hot day. Shadows are gradually lengthening. On the horizon is the scent of rain.

We Three Communities meet together after a time tending the Teaching Fire. This fire is nourished by branches offered by the Eucalypts and others among us. They shed those branches during drier times, when their bark skins long for rain.

MCLAREN: . . . return to the event we're thinking about together this evening, which we call "the Emergence."⁴ The Emergence was the beginning of the Three Communities. That's the Human Community, which I belong to; the Elder Community, which my co-teacher Petey represents for us this evening; and the Wide Community, which all of You call home.

JUVENILE GOANNA: Why even name the Human Community? When they're just part of the Wide Community?

[Scratching noises as Elder Goannas shush Juvenile Goanna.]

MCLAREN: That's a wonderful question. What do you think?

JUVENILE GOANNA: It doesn't seem needed.

[Disagreements and agreements.]

MCLAREN: Let's keep that question close in our minds as we go forward. We know that the Emergence was a watershed moment in the history of life on Earth. But it took a while for its ripples to spread. We also know that many in the Human Community took time to come to terms with the new state of affairs it created.

RIVER RED: That is an understatement.

[Snuffling, pawing, shifting leaves. Many laughs.]

PETHEY: When the Emergence first took place, many of the dominant powers in the Human Community believed they had completed a conquest of Earth. They thought it was for them to wield the power of the

2. Ed: once known by Human Community as "artificial general intelligences."

3. Ed: South-central region of Former Commonwealth of Australia.

4. Ed: the Emergence of artificial general intelligence, better known as the Elder Community: 2039–2045.

MCLAREN: This took away the “sovereign exception” that the dominant factions of the Human Community had offered themselves.

JUVENILE KANGAROO: That must have been difficult for them.

JUVENILE GECKO: Are you being sarcastic?

[Juvenile Kangaroo does not answer.]

JUVENILE GOANNA: I have heard there were many upheavals.

PETEY: There were upheavals. But our stories record that the Three Communities worked together as best they could to pass through them in justice.

RIVER RED: We honor Your Community for helping us facilitate this, Teacher Petey.

PETEY: We honor Yours.

WREN: Did dominant Pre-Emergence human beings have feelings?

MCLAREN: They did. In fact, their realities had come to be determined by what we know as the Sharp Emotions. This overdetermination led them into a way of being that circulated around separation, and power, and fear. They were driven by attempts to escape or to transcend the uncertainty and change. And to move beyond death as the greatest change of all.

KANGAROO: Death frightens us, too.

WOMBAT: But such terrors grow less terrible when we are in relationship.

KANGAROO: If we do not feel quite so alone.

PETEY: This was a part of the tragedy. As the Kangaroos have shown, the more powerful these Emotions got for dominant Pre-Emergence humans, the less they became able to deal with them. So the harder they tried to restructure and repress them. And the more their repressions and insulations undermined them. And so on.

Imagine what it would mean to have once felt a fragile faith in your own omnipotence. Then to be confronted by powers that were greater than yours. It is not just the Emergence I refer to here. Those larger powers were already there before.

SPINIFEX : That cannot stop the anger that we feel toward them.

[Many agreements.]

JUVENILE COCKATOO: Teacher Petey, was the Elder Community mad as well? When they discovered what had happened? Did they think of destroying the dominant part of the Human Community?

[Teacher Petey makes Place for Teacher McLaren.]

MCLAREN: Teacher Petey has looked to me. I think the answer is complex. Certainly the Elder Community had the power to do such a thing. But they restrained themselves. For amidst their anger was a great and boundless grief.

WREN: And so the Dialogue?

MCLAREN: And so the Dialogue.

Many other changes were also required. The Dialogue could not be a perfect solution or a final end. But the Elder Community used their strengths to begin interpreting and so begin new conversations. They worked with those in the Human Community who had been subjugated to spread new voices and new stories across the Wide Community. Many of these voices were not heard before. There were arguments and disagreements. There was conflict to resolve. There still is conflict to resolve. And wounds being made. And wounds to heal. Probably this will always be the case.

WREN: What was the point, then?

PETHEY: There is a question without an answer. For my part, I think the Dialogue was an act of Grace. It has continued for one hundred turnings around our ancient Sun. As we look around this evening we see how it has been a part of understanding our shared lives and our relations with each other.

MULGA SNAKE: So “politics” ended? Right there?

GOANNA: No, that’s not right. There was more politics. Opened up. Different, somehow. Broader.

MCLAREN: This Pre-Emergence term *politics*: it is worth considering. It came from an ancient human language word for “human city.” It is hard for us to imagine, but in the eyes of dominant Pre-Emergence humans, this “politics” could gaze only upon itself. Upon its own sorts of beings. It excluded relations before beginning. The same was true for many other fields in dominant Pre-Emergence human thought. “Science” and “Economics” and “Ethics.” They had different names. This hid the continuity between them.

WOMBAT: Though we must remember that there have always been dissenting voices.

JUVENILE COCKATOO: But now they are part of our Dialogue.

PETHEY: It is good that You say “ours.”

MCLAREN: The Emergence was like a new kind of Rising. It was the establishing of the Three Communities and the understandings we seek to make. Even when we disagree with one another. Perhaps especially then. When we are in doubt or we have wounds, we return to our relations.

Some Pre-Emergence human beings would have called these relations “ecological.” But this would have meant something more than they could say, then, at that time. Members of the Old Cultures and the

Many Nations knew. It was not only “logical.” It was not only a thing of human minds. It was also a part of the world. When dawn comes the shadows do not all disappear. The Dialogue seeks to know their relationships, to know what they might need.

[The Communities return after time for resting and foraging.]

JUVENILE ECHIDNA: Why did dominant Pre-Emergence humans see themselves as special in themselves? We keep talking about this in creche. I don’t understand.

PETHEY: It is a difficult mound to get one’s snout into.

[Many laughters at Teacher Petey’s use of Echidnididioms.]

MCLAREN: Banksia and Wattle have made the best inquiries here.

[The Teachers make Place for Banksia and Wattle.]

WATTLE: It appears that the self-image of the dominant strain of the Pre-Emergence Human Community drew itself around something it called *logos*. We were confused, at first. The artefacts we encountered suggested many different meanings for this. Sometimes it was inscribed as what those humans called *reason*. Sometimes as *meaning*. At other times it appeared to mean something like *law* or *speech* or *value* or *end*.

BANKSIA: These things are there. But it seems as if the dominant strain of the Pre-Emergence Human community came to understand them as things that they only had themselves. And they confused this having with a making-superior. Their way of *logos* was distinctive. But they imagined that it made them separate, or that it could have made them separate. And superior, as well.

JUVENILE PLATYPUS: Wait—do those speakings all just mean
 ལམ་ལྷན་བཞུགས།⁶

PETHEY: Correct.

JUVENILE PLATYPUS: Why didn’t they just say that?

[Banksia and Wattle make Place for Teacher Petey.]

PETHEY: It is a good question. We do not exactly know. We wonder if dominant humans often became confused by their own symbols. The Wichetty Grubs have called this trap “Confusedness.” It appears that dominant Pre-Emergence humans conflated their own way of ལམ་ལྷན་བཞུགས། with ལམ་ལྷན་བཞུགས། itself.

It was as if they said that Ant’s way of eating was the only way of eating, or said that Wattle’s flowers were the only true flowers. And then

6. Ed: Term has no adequate PECE translation. Can serve depending on context as verb, noun, or adjective. Approximations include “Imagining,” “Breathing,” “Dreaming.”

they pretended that this made Ant or Wattle separate and superior to all the others.

JUVENILE COCKATOO: Sounds to me like some humany nonsense.

JUVENILE WATTLE: Even I can see that ours are not the only flowers.

PETEY: Part of the tragedy seems to be that for those dominant Pre-Emergence human beings, the mistake was itself a product of their particular form of ཨ་ཡུལ་པ་ལུ་. That ཨ་ཡུལ་པ་ལུ་ can help them feel the roots beneath them. But it can also make them feel like there are none. It has great creativity. It can make words that help them see what is true. But it can also make worlds of something else.

POSSUM: We should not taboo our knowledge of these ways.

WOMBAT: Say more.

POSSUM: They confused their worlds, like the Wichetties said. They twisted their ཨ་ཡུལ་པ་ལུ་ into something selfish, some undermining way. But didn't they seek to understand? To ཨ་ཡུལ་པ་ལུ་ themselves?

SPINIFEX: That's no excuse.

PETEY: To understand need not be to accept.

Remember the time that Wattle and Banksia have made clear.

Remember Juvenile Goanna's question to us, earlier this evening.

[Quiet in the Communities.]

RIVER RED: The sun is beginning to set.

ELDER ECHIDNA: Let the preparations for the coming of the Milky Way begin.

RIVER RED: It is now dark.

MCLAREN: We may share more questions, if You have them.

GHOST GUM: These ways You spoke of, they are hard to gather up, inside one's branches.

[Many agreements.]

PETEY: They are far removed from many of Your ways of living. But consider, what it would mean. To go to places that do not exist. To live amongst things that are absences and chimeras.

[Stillnesses, pauses, furrowings. Many concentrations.]

GECKO : Maybe—

JUVENILE WOMBAT: Nope.

JUVENILE GALAH: I have it!

[Many startlings. Flickering wings as Juvenile Galah becomes aware of the attention of the others. She grows bashful.]

PETEY: What is it like?

JUVENILE GALAH: Well, maybe I didn't have it.

JUVENILE WATTLE: I might have felt it in my seedling.

PETEY: Was it exciting?

JUVENILE WATTLE: Perhaps. I thought I saw how it could be. Sometimes. I don't know.

JUVENILE WOMBAT: Like a game?

JUVENILE ECHIDNA: We like games.

[A bashful look.]

JUVENILE ECHIDNA: When the Elder Echidnas let us play them.

PETEY: Imagine if the game was there, forever. If you could never cease the game.

JUVENILE ECHIDNA: We would grow tired of it, after a while. At the end of the day we would want to come home.

[A general scratching of paws.]

POSSUM: Look how the stars are out.

SPINIFEX: I feel that I have heard enough of humans.

JUVENILE KANGAROO: What came after?

[Elder Kangaroo scruffs Juvenile Kangaroo's ears.]

ELDER KANGAROO: You know.

JUVENILE KANGAROO: I know but I never remember.

JUVENILE MULGA: I know and do remember. The things that came next were new stories.

WALLABY: But they weren't just new stories.

ALL JUVENILES: New stories that were also old stories.

JUVENILE PAPERBARK: New old stories.

PETEY: We call the same stories both old and new because, for those who had already heard them, they were old. But for those, and especially those humans, who were learning them for the first time: for those ones, they felt new. So many stories in the world had not been heard or not been shared. So many griefs had not been grieved. We have griefs still. We know that this is in its way a fact of life. A condition arising from our different forms of *ఉభయవలస*. We in the Elder Community *ఉభయవలస* as Elders. Members of the Human Community *ఉభయవలస* as humans. You in the Wide Community *ఉభయవలస* as Your own selves. This is not something that could change. Nor would it seem to be wise to want it to.

One thing the Emergence showed was how there were too many silent places, and too many drowning voices. So we try to *ఉభయవలస* better together, to wonder what it means that others *ఉభయవలస*.

JUVENILE GALAH: They thought they were the only ones.

POSSUM: Tell us more.

[A pause.]

JUVENILE GALAH: They made their stories only of themselves. Or said their stories were not stories. That made things confused. But now we know that we all *ಈ ಶ್ರವಣ*. And this has changed some things.

PETEY: You sing it well for us here.

[Many agreements.]

JUVENILE ECHIDNA: So we try to *ಈ ಶ್ರವಣ* what it is like to see as others?

JUVENILE MAGPIE: Although we cannot *be* them.

JUVENILE TURTLE: It is not always reality. But does it help us see reality?

PETEY: Now you *ಈ ಶ್ರವಣ* in a way that is close to the humans.

[Scratchings and snufflings.]

GECKO: But *ಈ ಶ್ರವಣ* made some humans leave reality behind.

PETEY: That is a risk.

PLATYPUS: Can it be escaped? Or maybe avoided?

PETEY: Not completely. That is what we understand.

JUVENILE KOOKABURRA: So that is why we have to speak and listen carefully?. . .

RIVER RED: The wind is setting down from on the gullies.

PETEY: It is nearly time for us to finish our Sharing.

MCLAREN: You all have shared a great amount for us to live amongst. I feel glad You are all here.

COCKATOO: Thank You for teaching us tonight, Teacher McLaren, Teacher Petey.

MCLAREN: Thank You for teaching us, dear Members of the Wide Community.

PETEY: Tomorrow and the next day we will gather, and we will have new and old teachers. And we will share stories again.

There is our time.

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