Bio-ethics and the Samoan Indigenous Reference

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Introduction

English physicist Stephen Hawking wanted to “know the mind of God”. As a scientist he wanted to provide a grand unified theory of creation. And, he wanted to offer this to the world in order to prove that the world – homo sapiens/humans – did not need God.

Towards the end of Stephen’s career he came to refute this position. He stated that: “Even if there is only one possible unified theory, it is just a set of rules and equations”. He became more interested in asking: “What is there that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?” In so doing he concluded that:

The usual approach of science of constructing a mathematical model cannot answer the question why there should be a universe for the model to describe....[That] if there are mathematical results which cannot be proved, [then] there are physical problems which cannot be predicted....

And so he conceded that:

We are not angels, who view the universe from outside. Instead, we and our models are both part of the universe we are describing.

Understanding the Pacific research and ethics context presents similar dilemmas. Pacific peoples, whether researchers, ethicists or the ordinary person, are each searching for and constructing models or theories of their own that can help them, as individuals and groups, understand their world(s). While some of these models or theories might hold more water than others there is a common drive, whether by rational thought or intuitive learning, to know the Creator/s (or at least His/Her/Their creations), to feel Him/Her, to feel the magic and wonder of His/Her/Their power and love and to do so without arrogance or undue prejudice.

Through the work of Hans Kung I have come to reflect on the relationship between religion and science. Kung argues that although this relationship is fraught with difficulties it is possible to find a “reasonable middle ground”. This, I believe, is the same for the relationship between Pacific indigenous knowledges and Western science and religions. Bio-ethical questions are questions of primary concern to science, religion and traditional or indigenous knowledges.
To the Western mind bio-ethical concerns are the concerns of science and scientists. To the indigenous Pacific mind bio-ethics is the concern of all. Western science and scientists have never really been in total agreement about the beginnings or origins of time-space, both essential to the question of biology.

For the indigenous Samoan, time-space, the *va-tapuia* and its origins are unequivocally linked to God Tagaloaalelagi, the Absolute, the Creator Progenitor, the source of all biological life.

Scientists and science have contributed to the kinds of technological advancements that have made life-saving medical interventions possible. But these same advancements have also enabled the exploitative aspects of capitalist greed.

The destruction of our physical environment has not been by accident. The toxic waste generated by the mass production and consumption of processed goods and modern conveniences must go somewhere. The wealth created by having control and ownership over the means of production goes to a privileged few. Together these two factors have provided a formula for destruction – destruction not only of the physical (or biological) environment, but also of the social, cultural and, especially, spiritual dimensions of life. If we are honest with ourselves we would admit that with our modern tastes we all – Westerners and Pacific islanders alike – are implicated in the causes of destruction. By taking time to understand the complexities of these cause-effect scenarios, we, however, need not be caught up in the malaise of what to do about it. Engaging in meaningful debates about bio-ethics and Pacific research is a constructive contribution to what is an extremely complex problem.

In this paper I want to explore what might be ‘the ethical’ in the Samoan indigenous reference. I draw from the teachings of my mentors who practiced and lived their beliefs or models of an ethical life. I also draw from the insights of contemporary Samoan practitioners who continue to practice Samoan traditional healing or *fofo*.

In this exploration I touch on two main indigenous Samoan concepts: *tapu* and *tofa sa’ili* and attempt to situate these within contemporary Samoan experiences and understandings of ‘the ethical’. It is my hope that these musings provide a useful discussion point for your deliberations over what might be ethical in the Pacific research context. And, that this can contribute in some small way to your broader discussions on universal codes for bio-ethical research.

If ethics is about moral principles or values, then the two Samoan indigenous concepts of *tapu* (the sacred) and *tofa sa’ili* (the search for wisdom) provide the basis for ethical research in a Samoan indigenous context. Let me start with the concept *tapu*.

**Exploring Tapu**

*Tapu* is a Polynesian term that is generally translated to mean both ‘sacred’ and ‘taboo’. *Tapu* is taboo because it is sacred; it has a sacred essence. *Tapu* is the sacred essence which underpins man’s relations with all things; with the gods, the cosmos, environment, other men and self. The term *tapu* is commonly found throughout the Samoan language. Some common words include:
tapuala – sacred road/passage;
tapumalama – sacred light;
tapu’ele’ele – sacred earth;
tapuafanua – sacredness which pertains to the land;
tapunuu – sacredness which pertains to the status of the founder of the village;
tapualii – sacred chief;
tapumanaia – the sacredness which pertains to the manaia i.e. traditionally the head of the aumaga i.e. the untitled men’s guild.

The common occurrence of tapu in these various words suggest that tapu permeates throughout the different dimensions of Samoan life – from pathways, to land and light, to village and chiefly entities.

The Samoan word, va tapuia, includes the term tapu within. The term literally refers to the sacred (tapu-ia) relationship (va) between man and all things, animate and inanimate. It implies that in our relations with all things, living and dead, there exists a sacred essence, a life force beyond human reckoning. The distinction here between what is living and what is dead is premised not so much on whether a ‘life force’, i.e. a mauli or fatu manava exists in the thing (that is, whether a ‘life-breath’ or ‘heart-beat’ exudes from it), but whether that thing, living or dead, has a genealogy (in an evolutionary rather than human procreation sense) that connects to a life-force. The va tapuia, the sacred relations between all things extends in the Samoan indigenous reference to all things living or dead, where a genealogical relationship can be traced.

In the Samoan indigenous religion, all matter, human, water, animal, plant and biosphere are issues of Tagaloaalelagi. They are divine creations connected by genealogy. They share the same biological beginnings. In similar order to Biblical Creation and the Big Bang thesis, the Samoan indigenous reference asserts that while man might be the most evolved and intelligent of all Tagaloa’s creations, he is, nevertheless, the ‘younger brother’ in Samoan genealogical terms. As such his relationship to all earlier creations must be one of respect.

The respect or faaaloalo that must be shown by man to all things is a respect for the sacred essence, the sacred origins of their beginnings. This is the cornerstone of Samoan indigenous religious thought.

**Tapu in rituals to the gods**

Tapu as sacred essence in Samoan religion and culture is recognised in the naming of many rituals involving the environment, animal life, people and their gods, and underlines their performance. For example: tapu is found in the annual ritual offering to the fee or octopus respected by the people of Aana, Upolu, as their district god.

This ritual offering is known as le tapu a Aana i le fee (literally, the sacred offering of Aana to their god, Le Fee). The god of Atua, on the other hand, is Tupualemase (literally, Tupua who does not die or Tupua the eternal). According to the missionary Rev. Stair, Tupualemase is the planet Jupiter. This suggests that both animal and cosmos (stars and planets) were revered and given sacred status by my ancient
forefathers. The reverence given to these gods was not necessarily idolatry; it was given in recognition of kin status and gratitude for service to the village and/or district. This point is underlined by oral history which records that in ancient Samoa, Atua and Aana held annual festivals where they made annual offerings to Le fee and Tupua legase. Le Fee and Tupua legase are not gods but manifestations of gods. The ritual offerings by Aana to Le Fee emphasises affinity and equation between man and animal. The ritual offerings by Atua to Tupua legase emphasises affinity and equation with the cosmos.

Interestingly, the offering by Aana to Le fee was known as tapu. The offering by Atua to Tupua legase was however, known as amo. While tapu means sacred, amo means burden. One interpretation of this is that an offering can be in recognition of the sacred essence of the god and of the sacred relation between the people and their god/s. But as well it is a sacred relation or essence that presents a burden. The burden suggested here is not necessarily a yoke, in the sense understood of the burden imposed by the God of the Hebrews before Christ. Rather, it is more in terms of the burden of ‘God-chasing’, in the sense implied by the message of Christianity or the Christian God.

**Tapu in man’s relations with animals**

The sacred relationship between man and animals also extend beyond those animals considered manifestations of village or family gods to include animals considered to have psychic or spiritual qualities. For example, in the village of Solosolo there is an affinity between man and dog. Here the sacred essence of the dog is noted in the honorific naming of their funeral ritual, le maile. Honorifics denote special and sacred reverence in Samoan society.

The focus of the le maile funeral ritual in Solosolo is the transformation of the performers in the ritual – through action, articulation and psyche – from human to dog. The value or principle promoted is that when man cries and behaves like a dog, he is celebrating affinity and equation with animal life. In behaving like a dog he raises and connects ‘dogspeak’ with ‘humanspeak’. In symphony they speak to the cosmos, i.e. the unison of man and dog baying to the moon provides mystic connection with the cosmos. Furthermore, a dog snarling is considered ‘dog talk’ or ‘dog communication’ and is something not to be ignored or frowned upon, but to be respected.

What lessons might we draw from the maile ritual of Solosolo? The life of the dog and the life of man originate from a common source. In the ultimate, life is life. In acknowledging affinity and equation man acknowledges the tapu relationship between man and animal.

**Tapu in man’s relations with the plant kingdom**

When man breaks or kills the life of a plant they seek pardon. In Polynesian cultures this is done in recognition of the existence of a tapu within the plant and between the plant and man. When I and my travelling party was in Whakatane during a visit to Te Whare Wananga o Awanuiarangi in 2004, my guide, Pouroto chanted a pardon to ask
the gods to forgive us for ending the life of the leaves to be picked from the kawakawa tree. Pouroto chanted:

Mai ea te Tupua
(Clear the pathway to the godly beings, which is symbolised in the male elements)
Mai ea te tawhito
(Clear the pathway to the ancient ones)
Mai ea te kahui o nga ariki
(Clear the pathway to the exalted ones)
Mai ea ta whiwhi atu ki nga Atua
O i ka ta kinga te mauri ko te mauri i ahua noa mai
(Let the sacred rituals of the life force commence, the life force that has come from the spiritual realm)
Ki runga ki enei taura, ki runga ki enei tauira,
(Place the life force upon these pupils, place the life force upon these scholars)
Kia tau te mauri ki runga ki enei tama
(Let the life force be placed upon the female and the male elements)
He tukunga no te whiorooro o a tane te waiora
(The life force that came from the forest of Tane, from the spring of creation)
Tenei te matatau kia eke whakatu tawera ki te rangi
(This is the knowledge of the ancestors from the forest that is uplifted)
Uhi wero tau mai te mauri hau mai e
(Let it be placed upon, let it be debated, so that through this the life essence may come through strongly)
Ui e, taiki e.

Karakia mo te tango i nga rakau kawakawa
(Traditional incantation used when picking leaves from the kawakawa tree)

Like the dog, the ritual of seeking pardon for picking leaves from a tree is recognition that the tree has a soul, is capable of pain and suffering. There is a presumption of equation and affiliation between man and plant life in the performance of these rituals. This principle of equation and affiliation extends also to what some Western philosophers consider inanimate or non-living things, such as rocks, stones and mountains.

**Tapu in man’s relations with the inanimate world**

When man wants to pay tribute to the different genealogies pertinent to mankind, in Samoan traditional culture and religion, he does so by recognising man’s connections with the different elements of creation. And, again, this is recorded in our funeral rituals where nine salutations are offered to the gods. The last four salutations record the genealogical link between man, the earth, the standing rock, the stones and the mountain. We say:

Tulouna le lagi tuaono! Tulouna le ‘ele’ele!
Salutations to the sixth heaven! Salutations to the earth!
Tulouna le lagi tuafitu! Tulouna le papatū!
Salutations to the seventh heaven! Salutations to the standing rock!

Tulouna le lagi tuavalu! Tulouna le maataanoa!
Salutations to the eigth heaven! Salutations to the stones!

Tulouna le lagi tuaiva! Tulouna le mauga!
Salutations to the ninth heaven! Salutations to the mountain!

By Western philosophical and theological reference, earth, stones, rocks and mountain are inanimate. In the Samoan indigenous reference, the salutations in the funeral rituals accord to earth (dirt), rocks, stones, and mountains, a life and a soul. Each of these originates from volcanic action. Volcanic action is a very important part of the story of Samoan creation. So even though they do not grow they exist as a consequence of a life force that remains connected. For some objects, such as rocks or stones, this life force remains within them. Proof of this is in the fire that emerges when rubbing certain stone against stone.

A connection between volcano, fire, rocks and stone seems obvious on its face. However, understanding this connection is complicated and depends on what model or theory is used to describe the connection. If employing a secular mathematical equation, the argument of life in stone as a consequence of its volcanic origins seems farfetched. But if employing an indigenous Samoan equation and affiliation model of va tapuia, the argument has logic.

In Hawaii, the ritual to Pele, the Goddess of the Volcano, acknowledges, like the Samoan funeral ritual, life and mana in the Volcano. A ritual is performed when treading the ground of Pele in recognition of Pele’s sacred role as the giver of life to earth, rocks, stones, and mountains – elements of which are the basis of tools such as the adze, helpful in agriculture, fishing and hunting. When walking on Pele, connecting human skin by way of treading barefoot makes a point about connecting with the elements and their origins. It says that I feel our connection; that the connection is natural, unencumbered by artificial barriers (such as shoes).

The life and power of the fire of the Volcano is awe-inspiring. When fire emanates from rubbing two stones together the power and life of the Volcano as the original source of rocks and stones is reminded of. The heat that comes off from rubbing two stones together and from the flames of the fire that emerges to warm our bodies and cook our food links the inanimate with man in a fundamental way. The fundamental link is that one would not exist without the other. Recognising this means recognising interdependence; one that is divinely bestowed and equated, the balance of which is sacred.

The sacred interactions and inter-connections between the animate and inanimate resonate also within observations made of interactions between the cosmos and animal life.

*Tapu in man’s relations with the cosmos*
When man wants to know how the seasons affect nature, he need only look at the interactions between animal life and the cosmos. In the Samoan context the *palolo* (coral worm) rises in October and November. This is determined by the last quarter of the moon. The months of the year are determined by the appearances of the moon. The Samoan word *taumasina* literally means “time according to the appearances of the moon”. According to Samoan cosmology, the connection between man and the cosmos is noted in the saying: *e le taumasina*, meaning “the movements of the moon are beyond the control of man”.

The hours of the day are determined by *itula* (literally, the side of the sun, i.e. referring to the side of the sun as opposed to the side of the shadow). The sun is a powerful ancestor in most Pacific stories of origin. He is recognised as one of the ancestors of man. In Samoan mythology the stories of *Tolola* and *‘Alo’aloolela* record Samoan understandings of man’s relationship with the sun. *Tolola*, literally means, “the delayer of the sun”. *‘Alo’aloolela*, literally refers to the avoider of the sun. In Samoan mythology the delaying of the sun was to allow for the impregnation of a woman.

The importance of stars to ancient Samoan creation mythology and to Samoan fishing or navigation techniques is recorded by missionary records to play a significant role. The diligent scrutiny by Samoans of the heavens every night for guidance about planting, sailing and fishing was performed for practical survival. Reading stars was also performed in such a way that showed respect both for their service to man and for their genealogical links with man. The use and reverence given to Tapuitea, the morning and evening star is an example in point. The *soa* or companion of Tapuitea was, as recorded by Rev. Stair, believed by ancient Samoans to be an augury that a chief is about to die. When Samoans point out: *Ua pa’ū le la* (literally, ‘the sun has fallen’) or *ua gasetoto le masina* (literally, ‘the moon has died from haemorrhaging’), both speak honorifically to the death of a chief.

In each of these cosmic occurances the indigenous Samoan culture finds that despite man’s superior intelligence as earthly specie, the mysteries of the cosmic and physical world are beyond them. This reminds man of, among other things, the need to respect the environment.

My final example of *tapu* in the Samoan indigenous reference is in relation to the prenatal practices of Samoan traditional mid-wives, the *faatosaga*.

**Tapu in practices of faatosaga**

The Samoan term *faatosaga* literally means ‘planting and growing the seed’. *Faato* is short for *faatoto*, meaning to plant and grow; *saga* refers to ‘the seed’. The word *faatosaga* speaks to and emphasises the facilitation of the process of fertilisation. It advocates a particular model for encouraging successful fertilisation where the techniques of *fofo* (massage) and a strict regimen of physical health and diet are prescribed. The validity of these traditional practices are evidenced by conception when the male sperm is able to successfully fertilise the female egg. The practices of the *faatosaga* apply only to humans.
According to faatosaga the main objective of the fofo (massage) is to place the fallopian tubes in the best possible position to the ovaries. This is to help ensure ease of passage for the male sperm. The main objective of healthy eating and exercise is to ensure that the body and mind of the potential mother is in sync. Harmony of the mind and body allows for easier (and more enjoyable) sexual activity, considered a necessary precursor to successful conception – notwithstanding, of course, age or other biological barriers.

Conception in Samoan is known as ma’itaga, which is short for ma’itagata i.e. to be ill with a new tagata (human being). The term suggests a Samoan understanding for when human life begins. The suggestion is that human life begins as soon as there is conception. From the moment the egg is fertilised and the mother experiences the symptoms of conception, a human life is said to exist. Here the foetus is recognised as a person. As a person the foetus gains a sacred essence. It becomes tapu. When the foetus is deliberately terminated a breach of tapu has occurred. Pardon must be sought for this breach.

Promotion and protection of human life is implicit in the respect that faatosaga give to the unborn child. Sex is respected as much for its potential to make life and continue genealogies as for its potential to connect two living souls. In the ideal, conception is the product of two souls coming together. The spiritual dimension of love-making is, according to one faatosaga, utmost at the moment of conception.

After conception and during pregnancy expectant mothers are known to go off sex, food and husbands. Some become anemic and subject to regular bouts of headaches and vomiting. Others develop voracious appetites, which if not regulated can lead to overeating or eating food that is harmful to both mother and child.

Usually in the fourth month of pregnancy a noticeable calm takes over which the faatosaga suggests is the time when the body of the mother and the body of the child have reached a physical, emotional and spiritual accommodation. This prepares both mother and child for the next significant phase of giving life, which is giving birth.

Throughout the process of attempting conception through to giving birth where conception is successful, the main job of the faatosaga is to steer the mother through massage and good advice towards a successful birth. The moods of depression and abnormal appetite can easily put many pregnant women out of balance, mentally, spiritually and physically. The faatosaga’s regimen of fofo and counseling is holistic. It considers paramount the need for balancing the harmonies of mind and body for the mother, ensuring that these are in balance with the growth of the unborn child. The relationship between the mother and the unborn child is sacred. Providing advice and applying massage techniques are, therefore, done with care and respect for this relationship.

In ancient Samoa once conception was established there was a ritual celebration. This was known as afuafua (literally meaning, ‘beginning’). The prayers, chants and rituals of the afuafua are today replaced by Christian prayers and special food. Today this ritual of conception is rarely performed; even the word afuafua and/or its meaning seems lost.
When thinking about the ethical debates over stem cells, I asked one faatosaga: “What about the use of the cells of a dead foetus for research?” She replied: “That is a breach of tapu”. In her opinion the body is sacred and should return to the earth. To tamper with the body of a dead foetus is to show disrespect for the sacred. Here, she suggests, that the body retains its sacred essence, its tapu quality, even upon death. The dead body returns to its Creator untampered by outside interference. It is to return to its Creator by the very route of its birth – back to the earth. This principle of respecting the origins of man’s genealogical link with the earth is implicit in ancient Samoan practices of ritually burying the placenta and umbilical cords in the earth.

When I asked the same faatosaga about whether there are any tapu on burying the placenta and umbilical cords, she replied: “[Our] cultural claim to any land or earthly inheritance is premised on a genealogical connection with the earth – this is tapu and is recognised by adherence to the ritual” [O le faavae o le mau nei, o le sootaga ma le ‘ele’ele]. The sayings, o le ‘ele’ele o lea e tanu ai lou pute (literally, ‘the land where my pute is buried’; and tama o le ‘ele’ele (literally, ‘man of the earth’) signal the ancient connection between man and earth.

The sacred aspects of these rituals is commemorated in a belief held among most faatosaga that omitting to bury the placenta and pute back to the earth can materially affect people. When asked: In what way? One faatosaga answered: “We can tell by the te’ite’ivele (meaning, highly strung and overly sensitive) or lili’a (meaning, a sense of vertigo; someone who is very emotionally and physically afraid of heights) qualities of a person”.

Regardless of the validity of these intuitive claims what the insights of the faatosaga provide are insights into our Samoan indigenous reference and the possible contours and content of a Samoan indigenous ethic of care. The faatosaga suggests that the foetus is tapu and so to abort a foetus is to breach tapu. This has significant ramifications for integrating the indigenous reference into modern day ethical debates on human abortions.

The faatosaga also suggests that a dead body, born or unborn, is upon death the entitlement of no other but God, the Creator and so should be returned to Him upon death untampered. This too has significant implications on the possibilities for doing research with dead bodies.

The perceived premise for these beliefs lies in the principles of equivalence and affinity whereby the life of man holds equivalence with the life of the cosmos, animals, plant-life and the environment. Life and death exists in a continuum of sacred relations – along the continuum of the va tapuia. The conception, birthing and funeral rituals and their underlying principles of equation and affinity among all things, animate and inanimate, are not merely theatrics or hocus pocus, they are models of what is ethical in the Samoan indigenous reference.

Where man might be considered the most evolved specie in as much as he has been endowed with a superior intelligence and spirit, he is charged by virtue of this endowment with a special responsibility to look out for the interests of the animal, the plant, the waterways and biospheres. In the Samoan indigenous reference man’s
survival is dependent on a recognition and respect for the principles of equation and affinity promoted here.

To discern how tapu might describe or inform Pacific ethics is to suggest that it carries with it an ethic of care – one framed in relational terms where those relations have a sacred essence. In determining a research methodology for Pacific research that believes in the values of the indigenous reference, it is wise to take heed of Stephen Hawking's disclaimer that: “We are not angels, who view the universe from outside. Instead, we and our models are both part of the universe we are describing”. In this sense, Pacific indigenous researchers seeking to understand the ethical within the indigenous frame, a frame that has undergone many challenges and changes over time, must recognise their own limitations or constraints and that of their reference. To do this one must have the tofa sa’ili.

**Tofa sa’ili**


*Tofa sa’ili* alludes to the idea that one is forever searching and searching for knowledge within the ethical imperatives of humility and love. In our *tofa sa’ili* Samoans are forever seeking to understand the human condition; our strengths and weaknesses and attempting to find balance and harmony in our decisions as protectors of the earth and of life.

*Tofa sa’ili* demands that researchers take cognisance of the need for balance in life; for balance between and across the harmonies of human life, cosmic life, animal life and plant-life. It demands that humans accept with humility their position as the earthly specie of superior intelligence.

The need to have humility and engage in the practices of *tofa sa’ili* is reflective of Karl Barth’s thesis on God sickness and Francis Thompson’s idea of God-chasing. ‘God-sickness’ and ‘God-chasing’ represent the tensions of wanting to know God on the one hand, and searching for the wonder of God, on the other.

I have spoken at more length elsewhere on this, what I want to say here is that in exercising *tofa sa’ili* the researcher will inevitably come across the dilemmas of God sickness and God-chasing. To want to ‘know the mind of God’ is to assert arrogance, this is “God-sickness”. To say that one chases God is to say that they are in constant search of him, of his wonder, beauty, love and compassion. In the latter case there is no presumption of knowing God (for asserting to know God is a short step away from asserting being God). The presumption is merely in wanting to chase understanding of the beauty of God’s creations.

But sometimes the humility that comes from wisdom and understanding which underpins *tofa sa’ili* comes at a price. In the paradoxes and ironies of human life can come the most profound insights about the human condition. Within these insights the place of the sacred or spiritual is undeniable. Within these are also the
foundations of an ethics for humanity. Here the gains of the human spirit are often beyond (human) comprehension. I want to illustrate this with two stories. One is about the brother of a dear friend, who is suffering from a horrid terminal illness, who finds an insight into the fundamentals of life as a consequence of his suffering. The other is a simple story about the consequences of caring. Both tell a similar message about what ought to be the measure of what is ethical— not just for Samoan or Pacific societies, but for all.

I tell the first story using the voice of Pete himself. Pete is Australian and his story has been condensed for our purposes. He tells:

“Often the most beautiful things come in unsightly disguises. Take the rose for example, its bush a tangle of noxious thorns, yielding in spring beautiful fragrant blooms. Or the newly hatched eaglet, bald, wrinkled and utterly dependant, giving no sign of its potential power and majestic grace.

Motor Neurone Disease is a most hideous illness and I wish I didn’t have it. Every night I pray to God to lift this colossal cross from my shoulders and those of my loved ones.

...One of the most sinister of all physical side-effects of this bloody disease is a little bugger called lability. As my MND has progressed, my emotional lability has become crippling. I now have to excuse myself from, or avoid altogether, any situation that could potentially bring on an emotional response. I rarely cry but find that in any moderately amusing situation I laugh uncontrollably and hysterically to the point where I am unable to breathe and have recently vomited at the table during dinner parties. ...During these episodes I am far from euphoric; quite the contrary, I am exceedingly embarrassed and silently screaming for someone to help me stop this ridiculous and inappropriate laughter, and I am petrified that my heart and lungs are going to explode. ...This is one of the most cruel aspects of the disease because it has ostensibly meant that through self preservation I have had to change who I am. No longer can I relax in other peoples company, enjoy a movie, tell a joke, or just be me and enjoy the moment without having to constantly check and re-check my emotional state and get a grip of myself.

The psychological and emotional implications of all this, coupled with the problem of regularly pissing my pants because I can’t get to a toilet in time, increasing dependence on others for the most rudimentary of tasks and the changing nature of the relationship between Lee (my wife), Eliza (my 4 year old daughter) and I, when all the while knowing there exists no treatment or cure is excruciating. It sits like a crushing weight every minute of every day. ...This having been said, I am so proud of the way we as a family are dealing with our lot in life and I am self-satisfied by my own response. In fact, I feel that I am a far healthier, more principled person because of this illness than I ever was before. I now realise that such incredible gifts have been bestowed upon me and I feel blessed. I know it sounds clichéd but having the spectre of my own expiration hover over me and the slow degeneration of my body has stimulated a lively awareness of the goodness in the world around me and how fortunate I am to share in this life. There are so many things that are clearer to me now; about myself, my place in the world, my impact on others and the beauty of creation, that I can pass beyond this world a profoundly happy and fulfilled soul. I guess you can say that I am more in touch with my spiritual side now. Not in a ‘god’ sense but in terms of another, more precious dimension to myself. Before this illness took hold I was considerably more concerned with how others saw me but now I am manifestly more outward looking and I have the luxury of not getting caught up in life’s bullshit. I would love to have another crack at existence unencumbered by all the baggage cast off over the past 3 years but I know life doesn’t work that way. Don’t be under any misapprehension, however, that I don’t still have my bad,
horribly dark days. Of course I do. I despise this disease and pray this curse will be
lifted from me but at least I am better equipped to deal with it and celebrate life
beyond it. It has not consumed me and it does not define the person I am, nor will I
ever allow it to”. (Pete Anderson).

My second story comes from Aotearoa, New Zealand. It was told to me by another
friend who attended a health conference in Aotearoa, where the ethics of caring was
discussed in the context of change and innovation in healthcare. The story goes:

“During a recent food services sector strike in New Zealand hospitals, one hospital
manager witnessed an event that had a profound effect on him. He, like other
hospital workers, was forced, as a result of the strike, to buy his lunch time meal from
the local café. When he went there one lunch-time in the middle of the strike period,
he was in line with a number of junior registrars. When the female registrar just in
front of him went to order her meal, Maureen, the lady serving her, greeted her
warmly: “How are you today, madam”? The female registrar grunted in reply, not
bothering to raise her head as she signed for her meal (student doctors are afforded
the luxury of having all their meals paid for by the hospital during their internships).

When Maureen asked this intern what meal she wanted, the intern, with as
little interaction as possible, stated what she wanted. When Maureen asked her how
her day was, the intern merely grunted in a somewhat annoyed manner, another
inaudible response. When the meal arrived, Maureen wished the intern a good day,
although by the end of her sentence the intern was well gone.

The hospital manager stood in disbelief while this whole scene played out in
front of him. He hoped that the intern was not from his hospital. When the hospital
manager took his turn to order his lunch, he asked Maureen: “Why do you bother”?
Her response taught him a lesson in humility and caring. She responded: “Well, I
bother because if I am ever her patient I would like her to smile at me”.

The capacity of man to presume beyond his place as protector of life arises when man
presumes the role of the Absolute. The vulnerabilities of man lie in the vulnerabilities
of having choice. But choice is a gift from God. Determining how best to make or
exercise that choice can make or ruin man. This is the challenge of tofa sa‘ili.

In the Samoan indigenous context insight into the philosophical principles of tofa
sa‘ili and of how these might operate ‘on the ground’ may be found in an analysis of
the decision-making powers of matai or Samoan chiefs. In the ancient Samoan
indigenous reference chiefs are divided into two main classes, both of whom play
different but complementary and interdependent roles. One is the role of a tulafale
(orator) and the other is the role of alii (high chief).

The division of these roles is sacred and presumes divine designation. The difference
in the sacred essence of these roles is noted in the difference accorded to their duties
and to the naming of their wisdom. The wisdom of a tulafale is called the faautaga
loloto. His wisdom seeks understanding of the ‘deep view’ – understanding the
context of the here and now. The wisdom of the alii is called the tofa mamao. His
wisdom seeks understanding of the ‘long view’. The naming of the sleep of these two
kinds of chiefs, i.e. moe is the sleep of the orator and tofa is the sleep of the high
chief, further symbolises the separateness of these roles. In some ways this
separateness allows for alleviation of the burden of amo discussed earlier. The two
roles must, however, work in tandem. Both roles come together to inform the
decision-making powers of the collective (the fono or saofaiga a matai).
Collective decision-making is privileged in Samoan indigenous culture in recognition of the intricate and sacred ties between man and man, man and his environment, man and the cosmos, man and animal and plant life, and man and their gods. Adherence to tapu principles ensures respect for the spiritual aspects of the physical, social and mental dimensions of life, animate and inanimate, abstract and real. The tapu aspects of these relations between the spiritual, mental and physical are implicit in the privileging of the collective in practices of tofa sa’ili. Understanding the context of Pacific research and ethics requires understanding the principles of tapu and tofa sa’ili.

**Conclusion**

The lesson of Pete’s and Maureen’s stories is not that man is supreme but that man is vulnerable; that he needs his inner, spiritual, subjective strength to sustain him. One can’t measure or grasp the gains of man’s inner strength, of the human spirit, by mathematical equation. The lesson we learn here is that it is often in our pain and suffering that we come across our strengths, across the core of humility and humanity. It is in these paradoxes and ironies that we often find meaning in tofa sa’ili and in our tapu relations. Both frame the ethical in my Samoan indigenous reference.

Understanding the context of Pacific research and ethics and searching for what is ethical in the Samoan indigenous reference requires first recognising that our reference is vulnerable to human weaknesses. Recognising this is not in itself a weakness. Rather, according to Paula Gunn Allen, a native woman writer of the Pueblo tribe, it is a strength and a must. It is a must in the search for truth, or more to the point, in the search for an accommodation of truths. Indeed, in bio-ethics it is what Paula describes as ‘a dance’ – “a dance with and between power and vulnerability”. She writes:

“[In] accepting [our] fragility [as] both a power and a vulnerability…bioethics is then, in this sense, a dance with and between power and vulnerability. The academic pursuit for a sense of objective principles is only part of the truth search…it is also about choices that come from the soul of the individual and the collective…responding to Wisdom”.

Humility, respect, compassion, love and caring are each gifts of the spirit as proclaimed by the Bible. They are what ought to underpin the ethical in any book or culture. Questions of ethics in Pacific research are questions about how to search with respect within ourselves and with our spiritual and physical environments. They are questions about the dilemmas of searching without hang-ups. If bio-ethics is about the value of life and the value on life, then for Samoans and other Pacific nations who privilege the sacred, bio-ethics is about a respect for the sacred, for the va-tapuia. Bio-ethical declarations that refuse to recognise the sacred will ultimately refuse to recognise the indigenous Pacific context.

To recognise the sacred means that we must first learn the lessons of humility, of tofa sa’ili. In the Samoan indigenous reference this is founded on the lessons of understanding equation and affinity between all things, animate and inanimate, living
and dead. These are difficult and complex ideas, fraught with indigenous cultural biases.

Nevertheless, what the indigenous reference can offer the world is a re-appreciation of the rightful place of the spiritual, sacred and tapu (implicit in our cultural rituals) in ethical debates. The indigenous reference also gives weight to what English physicist Stephen Hawking eventually came to understand, i.e. that “our search for understanding [our tofa sa‘ili] will never come to an end” because “we will always have the challenge of new discovery”, 11 For as J.B.S. Haldane says, “the universe may not just be queer to imagine, but queerer than we can imagine”. 12

Both science and religion admits that knowledge of the beginning of all things, bio-ethical or otherwise, is beyond human comprehension. What is within human comprehension is the search for truth and meaning (tofa sa‘ili) and for the truthful embodiment of that in one’s everyday acts of kindness (tapu). This for me is the ethical in our Samoan indigenous reference.

Soifua.

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Notes

2. Ibid. p17.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. p17, p21.
5. Ibid. p21.
6. See Kung, H. at fn. 1.
11. Cited in Kung, see fn. 1, p22.
12. Ibid.