

Dialoguing as if we're not that important: Ako and the more-than-human

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The idea that the world is interconnected foreshadows a massive change in how education is conceived and practised. It may even render 'education' non-existent. Māori philosophy centreing on the All – which is another term for interconnection but having a stronger flavour of unity between all things such that they are one – suggests that education, if it is to remain, must honour new ways of perceiving the world. Firstly, it must set about striving for an opposite goal, this being cultivating an uncertainty in students as they think about things in the world. Secondly (and relatedly), it calls for a self-erasure, which involves acknowledging the self's vulnerability in the shadow of the All: this humility is not simply intellectual but bodily. In this article, I consider this self-erasure in the context of various korero (discussions) with an older whanaunga (relative). In these korero, we would be aware that there were phenomena that cannot be accounted for but that impinge on thought. These phenomena have implications for education – at least from a Māori perspective, despite the attempts of rational thought to evade them.

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Indigenous ways of thinking have the immediate potential to challenge several domains of Western thought. In doing so, they pose a problem for the human self's comfortability because, from a theoretical perspective, they can destabilise the anaesthetising calm that colonisation instils and, with that, the everyday security that goes with adhering to well-worn practices. Several people have written about mātauranga Māori, for instance, as both traditional and contemporary knowledge, or a combination of both, and those writers tend to acknowledge that it has features that do not sit well with dominant Western thought (see e.g., Marsden, 2003). Mātauranga Māori is the theoretical frightener, as it were; it does not necessarily back down in the face of science or of rationality more generally.

Of all the things written about mātauranga Māori, there is one apparently simple, straightforward idea that these mātauranga Māori writers reiterate, which is actually the most sophisticated and challenging of all. Put in various ways, we can most briefly recount it as the following: *all things in the world are interconnected*. Despite this simple gloss, though, due to its foundational reach, it confronts any system, sector, or way of thinking that evolves from its opposite: *all things in the world are separate from each other*.

In this article, I consider the implications of interconnection through a sustained educational experience I had during my mid- to late teen years, and rethink Ako (teach/learn) through its lens. This article is anecdotal, and it is possibly that very subjectivity¹ which is the first sign of a key aspect of Ako (this being that one is never

¹ A note about style: I frequently use 'we' in this article, and normally this refers to other Māori, but non-Māori may also be able to see themselves within the scenarios I describe. It is a

separate from one's apparently detached statements about the world – the world being discussed is in fact a part of the self). Thus, the first and enduring task in Ako might be that one is forever constituted by the All that one sets out to discuss. I discuss the implications of recentring the All for Ako so that it sits with the more-than-human, and I consider in that discussion that language and thought themselves are more-than-human entities. Thinking about the deep whanaungatanga (relationship) of thought and language with the self, in turn, opens up a sphere or discipline that could be generally useful for Ako, aside from its usual teach/learn meaning that privileges *knowledge* and certainty.

The vulnerability of thinking: An educational twist

For many Māori, thinking has its limits, and contemplating them is itself a sign of respect for the world, because it signals that the intellect cannot know everything. One form of this acknowledgement occurs when we decide to think about those realms of an idea that we cannot easily approach. The difficult, off-limit parameters of an idea can give rise to a discomfort or annoyance, where we have to (for instance) strike a term out that we do not want to use: one example of this is *genealogy* when we intend for 'whakapapa' to take up much more room in the subject of a conversation. This practice derives from Heidegger and Derrida, who were keen to deal with the fixity of dominant Western thought through a term. However, I suggest that Māori have a much more onerous task: we have to somehow think about the fact that there is a *self-erasure* taking place when we cannot successfully arrive at a firm conclusion about something. We are therefore much more emotionally and spiritually implicated in the colonising language we have to use than Heidegger and Derrida suggest.

Self-erasure is a natural outcome of not being able to achieve something that is either of our own making or due to colonisation. More specifically: an idea from a Māori perspective is never fully attainable because it relates to all things in the world, which creates an excess we cannot know; and, even if that were not true, the colonisation of our thinking places philosophical limits on our ability to access the All that traditionally imbued everything. In any case, the self is thrown into a state of uncertainty, in which his/her/their ability to know is cancelled, with this event best being described as 'whakakore,' or 'to become nothing.' The self is erased in all its modes (outlined, for instance, by Mason Durie's (1994) *Te Whare Tapa Whā*, in which the human self is given less priority than other aspects of the world), not just intellectually.

Nepia (2012) argues about kore, the phenomenon of nothingness mentioned in several Māori whakapapa, that:

As eternity, Te Kore articulates space into which we may speak and move or be denied opportunities to express ourselves. Moments of calamity, or uncertainty when all seems disconnected, and unsuitable must be overcome if a creative journey is to fulfill its purpose. The creative process, like a journey, may also have abrupt halts. (p. 70)

generalisation that raises an interesting issue for Māori. Being forced to adhere to rationalistic modes of writing is a form of colonisation-through-universalising because it excludes other forms of argument and response. In that sense, rationality insists on using 'we' without making that explicit.

The journey Nepia speaks of here is ongoing, given the eternal nature of kore. Thus, we always stall in the face of the idea – we never really overcome the vulnerability that perpetual nothingness teaches us. As difficult as this journey of knowing/not-knowing is, however, there is a process of learning involved, whereby the self is continually confronted with the mystery of all things and can speculate on those things as well as one's limits. The All, irreducible to human existence, does generate a sort of existential angst that, from a Māori perspective, may be about the dark humour of vulnerability. Any foray into the more-than-human All, in fact, largely engages with an exploration of one's own fallibility.

Mainstream Western education, on the other hand, relies on *self-confidence*, originating chiefly from the belief that there is an intellectual process or method that brings about a finely tuned idea. This takes place in various guises at all stages, even where rationality is not so obviously at work: Regardless of how much time is spent on play or creative thought at primary level, nevertheless the student is being trained to eventually engage more overtly with that first premise of certainty and clarity. This project of arriving at clarity about a state of affairs or an entity has deep roots in the ancient Greeks, and it relies heavily on the belief that the human self is the origin of thought and, subsequently, language. The human self is hence supported in an overall belief of superiority – that is, as the maker of divisions between self and other, between things generally, and between what is taken to be real and artificial.

Ceding this form of education involves relinquishing self-confidence and, for Māori, returning to the self-erasure that kore (and other concepts) insists on. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, there has never been a sustained attempt in mainstream education to return all entities to their dark backdrop and then establish a means of teaching and learning based solely on the chaos and confusion that such darkness creates. Instead, educators tend to leave the drive for clarity unquestioned and devise new methods based on that founding (and, for Māori, problematic) principle. There may well be a sense – depending on how someone witnessing that avoidance of the issue thinks – that the current education system, especially at the policy level, is *instinctively* averse to dealing with the first principles of existence that Māori might privilege. Any dive into the vulnerability that the All offers, though, means that one has to consider the deep implicity of all things with the human self and to also move away from the idea that the human self is sovereign in the world. The potential for thinking transformatively but with uncertainty at the forefront becomes more the aim of Ako in that light, rather than simply aiming for certainty about things in the world that Ako – when translated simply as teach/learn - advocates.

This brief theoretical backdrop sets the scene for engaging with the All through dialogue, which I shall propose is an aspect of Ako. The interaction between human and non-human is not necessarily educational in a self-conscious sense, but it may be so if any human element does not attempt to reassert itself as sovereign.

Dialogue with a whanaunga

My first *formal* introduction to thinking about the All – at least, the first stage at which I talked about it with someone else in a context meant for such a conversation – was in my mid to late teens. I was fortunate to be taught how to think about the All and language associated with it. These sessions with a particular whanaunga (who has since passed away) were not especially ceremonial; they took place at the kitchen table. I don't recall us saying karakia once. Our talks took place with a whakapapa book that belongs to my family, but our discussions transcended (yet included) the significance of the names in

that book. Silence figured in the discussions, sometimes frustratingly. Our discussions were nearly always in English, not Māori. There was also laughter and a great deal of satire: Not for my whanaunga any immediate deference, despite her status as kuia!

Those observations of mine became more philosophically important to me as the years went by, and I often would have cause to revisit them. But for our current discussion, they are important for various reasons. First, this relation who I talked with most certainly believed there were other forces at work in discussions – but not just about whakapapa. It seems intuitively correct to say that, of course, there would be other forces at work when discussing something as sacred as whakapapa. However, I always had the impression that how we *perceive* anything, as the most fundamental inclination towards the world, had to be carried out in a way that was respectful of those forces. In other words, we had to represent other things with the same degree of care that talking about the sacred names in the whakapapa called for. All our conversations culminated in one major theme, in which rekindling a relationship with a more ancient view of the world than the one brought by rationality asked for us to think outside the boundaries of common sense, bringing together our ability to speculate with those things that cannot be known.

In discussing the more-than-human with my whanaunga, I came to understand various facets. First, the more-than-human are those things that, in sum, comprise the All. My whanaunga was clear that any apparently single theme of discussion was really an agent of the All. It follows any discussion about any one thing was always deferred back to thinking about how it resonated within the world as a whole. For example, the of whakapapa would be considered within the problem of colonisation (which is the world as a whole for Māori). I specifically remember a conversation about how Pakeha consider things such as maunga (mountains) to lack life force: We couldn't have thought about whakapapa in its fullest sense without philosophising about it in its reductionist version. Often, the thetic ('our maunga have wairua') has to be set against the antithetic ('mountains are inanimate') for the All to be acknowledged in learning.

Furthermore, thinking is much more about the gut than the brain, reflecting what Smith (2000) identifies when he says that whakaaro is an "activity of the stomach and the entrails" (p. 58). Much of our time was spent thinking about our responses to events, people or the non-human world through intuition. It was the initial, primal response that was important, not so much the subsequent logical formulation (although that was not without its place). This gut reaction was indebted to the more-than-human, as was the logic. Moreover, this emotional receptivity never really goes away, and in fact underneath any apparently coolly rational statement lies the feeling that stoked it to begin with. It was that emotion that mattered as a point of philosophy or origin, not any detached representation. With that, the emotionless (logical) statement simply accentuates its own susceptibility: Any position we take on a matter is fueled, and it is this fuel that may be the focus for Ako if its concern is the All.

From that entire experience it has since become apparent to me that if we are to use the phrase 'more-than-human,' the self needs to imagine themselves as not entirely human. If we are constituted by all things in the process of Ako-with-the-All, then we need to understand ourselves as fundamentally *other-than-human*, alongside being human. There are various Māori terms through which we can grapple with this idea, one of them being 'wā.' Wā is ~~time~~ and ~~space~~. If we have to use time and space vernacular, then perhaps the following is closer to a Māori philosophy: Any apparent distance between myself and another entity is an illusion, and instead we occupy the present and the same

space. Thinking then has to imagine the possibility that anything is entirely *here*, indivisible from us and from all other things.

Conclusion

Finally, and as I noted earlier, my whanaunga and I also reflected on our inability to truly arrive at a final conclusion about much. Generally, when we are talking about the sovereignty of the All, we are talking about none other than the fact that the human self is of lesser importance than the All, which governs any one thing. Indeed, our wellbeing lies in rethinking the mysterious nature of thought, and identity, but not as a separate exercise where we become the thinkers and the rest of the world, including the abstract notion of the All, becomes 'the thought.' The complexity of theorising the reality of the self as part of the All gives rise to a continual learning process where the learning self is re-implicated back into its original parent, regaining its darker texture. Any notion of critique (for instance) then relies on obscuring an idea rather than pursuing its clarity, and the learning process becomes much more about displaying the fallibility of the self rather than simply distancing the self from any proposition or emotion.

There is a challenge here for the reader and, in particular, for the educator, namely to decolonise certainty. In education, Ako as the more-than-human would establish a completely different curriculum – if, indeed, there could ever be a 'curriculum' as such. There is also an issue of wellbeing tied up with the interpretation of Ako: Will it harm students and the non-human world through its current tendency to constrain both, or can it open up much more to an existential uncertainty, where there is minimal distance between the human and the All? The leap of faith called for here might be disconcerting, but it certainly sits more closely with Māori metaphysics.

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