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The thing's revelation: Some thoughts on Māori philosophical research

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Abstract

In indigenous research projects, there is a strong emphasis on interviews and the analysis of the data that results. There is, however, another form of research that still calls to be fully acknowledged. Philosophical research shares some ground with empirical because it responds to a Māori history and experience of oppression. One clear area in which it may differ, though, is in how it attempts to acknowledge the presence of 'things', which we might call our 'whanaunga' (relations), even where these have been deemed by Western science to be inanimate. More importantly, philosophical research is risky because the thing continues to influence the researching self, despite the self's eventual disengagement from the research. Philosophical research—the kind that seeks an unobtainable ground of thought—is at once aware of and tentative towards the thing. It also acts within the influence of the thing: this phenomenon for the author can be best felt when the bizarre is encountered in everyday observations.

Keywords

Whakaaro; research; Māori; philosophy; thinking

Introduction

In an era in which we are strongly encouraged to undertake a self-conscious inquiry in order to ultimately construct knowledge—one might call this 'researching for knowledge' or simply 'research'—it seems strange to see the process through without a determined method. Not to have a method suggests a lack of a rigorous question, an uncertainty about what data one should approach, whom one should talk to and so on. Indeed, whether it would constitute 'research' or not is debatable, given that it threatens to hold the self out against the world in a way that places the self somehow at the mercy of things. Whilst those who are engaged with empirical research might claim that they, too, are in a state of uncertainty, it is my argument that, due to a lack of strong method in what I shall call 'conceptual' or 'philosophical' research, there is an even greater murkiness involved. One is led, as it were, primarily by feeling based on a perception of a thing, or of an association that the thing provides.

For Māori, the dilemma of whether there needs to be a method for philosophical research, quite apart from just 'thinking', is even more fraught because of an ethics involved with things in the world that Western researchers do not tend to identify. For Māori, the thing in its most basic sense is like the self: it is immediately connected to everything else, so discussion about 'things' itself constitutes some sort



of materiality that links to the thing and the self. Thus, there must be an ethical way to even comport oneself towards things so that they are discussed in a way that does not constrain them. Yet, the very nature of academic research asks for a distance between self and thing, both in intention and in practice. In this article, I identify both the advantages and drawbacks of a proposed method for a consciously philosophical mode of inquiry: the revelation of the thing. This deliberate way of inducing thought has existed in various cultures for millennia. My purpose here is to describe the revelation of a thing as an impetus for thought, in a current context, in which colonisation, counter-colonialism, and a Māori metaphysics coalesce around a problem or concern.

It would be disingenuous for me, in a Māori sense, not to declare my strong draw towards philosophical research and thus my vigorous advocacy for it. Indeed, I was probably always wanting to be there but was never aware that it existed. We might note here the German poet and philosopher Novalis' words: "Philosophy is really homesickness—the desire to be everywhere at home" (Wood, 2007, p. 155). He really means that orthodox philosophy exposes the desire to find the absolute ground of all truth or existence but in this present scenario I feel that conceptual or philosophical research, for me, was the desire to be finally comfortable within a particular mode of thinking. Novalis was actually stating this ironically; he was saying that any such ground to truth or knowledge, even the pursuit of such, was a delusion. This delusion, I shall describe later, is necessary for my own conceptual and philosophical *Bildung* or formation. The delusion, the pursuit of articulation whilst not being able to finally articulate, provides further provocation for thinking. It provides a schism between what is held out to be a real image of the thing and the inability to truly assert what that real image is. It thus opens up a chasm in the ground of certainty; it forces the ground out from under one's feet. This clearing, however, is not solely of my own making, although as I mentioned earlier, feeling and intellect do come to play on this generally dark ground of clarity. Thus, conceptual or philosophical research, drawing primarily on the faculty of 'whakaaro' for Māori, is like the withdrawn, quietly disturbing cousin that we see at family functions, brooding but nevertheless *there*. Its silence, I argue, merely underlies its importance for the expression of thought amongst things in the world.

Thinking from the influence of things: Beyond the self

If considered in a Kantian context, 'whakaaro' may be thought of as relating more to that initial uptake of an object, its intuition, rather than its final conceptualisation. According to Smith (2000), whakaaro means "to cast attention to" (p. 58) which he describes as an "activity of the stomach and the entrails". 'Whakaaro' in this case refers to a much more primordial response to something and engages with a process that is not a participant in thoroughgoing reason. Indeed, Smith mentions that it is not rational thought as such, but rather a "basis of action". Royal (2008) moreover, notes the showing of the world to the self, evoking an emotional and spiritual response, allowing the participant to understand something. It is in this understanding, perhaps, that one is moved to act in both subtle and deliberate ways, but it is important that the presentation of the world in all its complexity is preserved in that description. It is here also that we encounter the problem of Kant, whose influence in the Western world—and therefore on us, as colonised indigenous peoples—was every bit as great as Plato's, Aristotle's or Descartes', and whom we must address to move away from a colonial belief that things are a pure moment of representation. Briefly put: Kant argued that there are two stages of cognition. The first, which is what I emphasise here, involved the intuition of a thing, given to us through space and time. This is a construction of the mind though our *a priori* intuition of space and time. We cannot see space and time. Things are presented *in* space and time: space and time are the most basic and abstract intuitions. We use them to come to understand that there is something *there* to begin with. Thus, according to Kant, space and time are thoroughly unavoidable and utterly constitutive through our own faculties (Janiak, 2012).

Whakaaro as both Royal and Smith describe it proposes something quite different for things in the world. To be sure, there is a process of the self in perception, but a huge difference lies in those writers' speculation that there are two other aspects at play: the interaction of all things; and the possibility that things that are imperceptible in that very first instance may still have an effect on the self. Perception for Māori is here the antithesis of pure presence; it is the absence that Derrida notes as constitutive of what is acted on or, indeed, perceived (Biesta, 2010). Whatever we perceive as Māori, therefore, is comprised of what is not immediately there. 'Whakaaro', if thought of abstractly, is a

metaphor for acting on the distant—that which lies outside of perception—as much as on what lies before us in a Kantian sense. Furthermore, the initial representation of the world to us is an important one, not just the supporting actor for the lead role of knowledge, which is Kant's second step of *conception*. In that important primordial act, the thing is orientated towards the self to the extent that the self becomes aware of it.

A huge gulf, though, exists between what Kant thinks of as the intuitions of space and time on the one hand, and Māori constructions of them, which are primarily affective, on the other. Here we reach an impasse with Kant's proposal that whatever we perceive is presented to us within something *a priori*, because a possible Māori theory about space and time is that they have their own ability to present themselves as both substance and relation. Space and time in Māori are both referred to in the same word—'wā'—and cannot be known, but this does not preclude them from 'coming to bear' on the self. Indeed, they possess some sort of self-arranging and impactful resonance. Returning to the term 'whakaaro': a reciprocity between thing and self is established such that the thing, whether abstract or concrete, shows itself in some form to the self, who can then construct an idea about it. Most important in that statement, and marking a distinct divergence from Kant's much more self-constructed representation of an object, is the role that the thing has in bringing the self to its attention. In a Māori worldview, things are not just passive entities awaiting construction by the self (Mika, 2014); they are instead animate and creative, having a much greater impact on the self than would be credited in dominant rational discourse.

Thus Māori may only have conceived of space and time to begin with because of those things' 'showing' of themselves. Space and time in that interpretation are both *a priori* faculties (à la Kant) and, most importantly, in some indigenous beliefⁱ are entities in their own right that even have some ability to construct us through their manifestation. Space and time in this vein can be seen as active, discriminating participants that transcend mere innate human faculties in the term 'whakawā'. 'Whakawā' has taken on the gloss of a judgement (the sort that takes place in a courtroom or by a public body) but there is also an original sense to the term of discernment or discrimination, through its much more connotative 'to become divided in light of space and time'. 'Whaka' here refers to 'to become'; 'wā' can mean a division but always collaterally with space and time unified. We see here the possibility for 'wā' to point towards something beyond its usual static positing through much tighter dictionary definitions. 'Wā' moves here beyond the usual abstract notion of space and/or time and takes on aspects of a phenomenon that one aspires to (becomes). One has a measure of what space and time are in one's mind, and has thus incorporated them as ideas, but they are simultaneously outside the mind; they have become concerning entities that provide those ideas. The self is less making a self-asserting judgement and is more attuned to the possibility that time and space are coalescing around one's cognitive faculty.

Kant's propositions about space and time are partially correct but the Māori notion of space and time is far more paradoxical than Kant allows for. A Kantian argument might therefore be levelled at my assertion above that 'wā' is not really space and time; it is something else that is presented to us within Kant's true intuitions. To be sure, a Māori worldview is that things arise not just from 'whakapapa' as it is constructed, but from whakapapa *itself* as a participant in Papatūānuku or "rock foundation beyond expanse" (Marsden, 2003, p. 22): perhaps in this term or entity, then, lies Kant's true definition of space and time. But again, 'whakapapa' cannot be divorced from 'wā' either. First, if conceived of as 'genealogy', then it draws on space (the gap between one generation and the next) and time quite necessarily. But even if we were to posit that whakapapa is somehow an *a priori* determining faculty, we soon discover to the detriment of that argument that whakapapa is immediately and inextricably enmeshed with the notion of 'earth mother' (Papa). This complicity—which is not really a complicity because whakapapa and papa are necessarily one and the same—draws the concept and all that participate in its primordial reach at once, meaning that space and time are collapsed and are thoroughly active.

Any apparently original and innate intuition that we posit as something merely cognitive, then, becomes simultaneously an active thing that impacts on the self. For the researcher, this contradiction

ⁱ See for instance Maffie (n.d.) who argues that "time-space is concrete, quantitative, and qualitative" (n.p.).

is especially important when we are made to consider the possibilities that a single thing holds for us when we are moving seamlessly forward in finding answers to a question. With a more thorough and mysterious concept of the thing in mind, let us now turn to the potential for Māori philosophical research to reflect an ethical response that things in the world demand.

The provocation of a thing

In line with an albeit modified version of Kant's intuitions, it is the initial effect of the thing, I have just argued, that makes the greatest demands on us as Māori researchers, for it is their disclosure of themselves that brings us to speculate in the first instance. Rather than comprising a passive template from which one may move towards a sense of the world, then, whatever is *a priori* is made something else altogether in the Māori world beyond sheer abstraction. Things are therefore capable of provocation; they can 'call forth'—the sense of 'provocare'—something in us through their own language or expression. They draw on the active nature of what we would call 'wana' or ongoing attunement and are not merely products of the mind. Kant's intuitions in this instance are turned into something affective, in that they are more indebted to a Romantic notion of 'the Absolute'ⁱⁱ and are far less submissive to human agency.

It seems perhaps unusual to imagine that humanity can be provoked into thought by a thing because this suggestion posits the self within the influence of things rather than the converse. Yet this is precisely where Māori thought surpasses what Foucault (1989) insisted was the Western ushering in of man. Māori have long insisted that humanity is dependent on things in the world for the most original actions—even those things that lie beyond the immediate senses. One's tribal saying, for instance, does not just state mountains, rivers and other people as concepts because that replicates a detached view of those entities. Rather, there is a sense in these sayings that the self is only uttering those things' names to begin with *because of* their manifestation. Confusingly, they are not necessarily present, not precisely consumable on the basis of their immediacy. They do, however, reside in the very utterance because of the self's link with them. The self can be thought of as amongst those things whilst being constituted by them in some form beyond being the "present at hand" that Heidegger (1967a) warns against.

Thus, provocation for Māori may be both directly inciting and subtle. I shall turn to the sensory provocation soon and its implications for research, but let us continue with that more mysterious idea that what lies beyond the senses, for a Māori horizon of existence, has a say in how one shapes one's thinking and, thus, research. No less stimulating than, say, a more material object (for instance, a person or a term), things in the distance display their influence through their interdependence with other things. The poet and philosopher Novalis indeed noted that "all bodily operations are an inverse thinking. What is thinking sensing etc. here—is burning, fermenting, thrusting etc. yonder" (Wood, 2007, p. 24). It can be speculated here that one's thinking acts in direct conjunction with the interplay of things, to the extent that whatever is occurring with the mountain that one names in one's saying has an effect on the self. The ontological aspect of the utterance in this form is in a thorough state of flux, even if the words themselves do not appear to have changed. In 'casting attention to', thought is at the same time unmoored from its apparently fixed foundations, with Takirangi Smith (2000) continuing that whakaaro is an "activity of the stomach and the entrails", where "the stomach is associated with the *ira tangata* aspect or earthly component of that which forms the basis of action" (p. 58). Alongside being an obviously emotional process, thought is a response to an essential call that coalesces around the 'flaring up' of a thing, near or distant. An eternal, unchanging property that allows a person to think is less likely in this scenario; instead, something persists that the self is attuned to in some fashion. A thorough knowledge of this synchronicity is utterly elusive, but its continued draw to thinking is engaged with in Māori terminology and everyday practice.

ⁱⁱ For further discussions on the Romantic ideas about the Absolute/Being, see Stone (2011); Frank (1997); Beiser (2003). The Absolute is both substance and absence that gives rise to impressions and ideas as much as to concrete phenomena.

The term and the bizarrely unknowable: My impetus for speculation

This has special repercussions when one is thinking and writing about a philosophical concept. Often I have found it difficult to think about the term in its entirety because I encounter a limit of sorts. I suspect that this wall is actually the enormity of the term's ontological sense. It is then that I realise that I can only talk about a concept partially, because the reason that I am thinking about it then and there is due to its influence on me. In other words, I am *amongst* the term as I struggle to think *about* it, and I only have access to speculation. This 'withinness' is relatable to my earlier discussions about whakapapa, which ensures my active participation amidst the term with all its uncertainty and absence/presence. Perhaps articulating the rift that I mentioned earlier—the mismatch between what appears to be the real thing and our inability to articulate the concept of it to its fullest extent—constitutes a method of speculation. In that case, we could begin, say, a thesis with a method chapter explaining that phenomenon fully, and then outlining how this takes concrete form in an inquiry towards a problem. However, I understand this as only a temporary measure. One could never be absolutely certain when this rift takes place at every point. Identifying the rift, as Novalis puts it, would be like trying to "square the circle" (Kneller, 2003, p. 168). There is nothing mystical in this notion of thinking at all; it is an everyday occurrence. It simply signifies that we are not as completely self-originating in conceptual research (or other types of research, for that matter) as academia and its backbone, rationalism, would have us think we are. It means that not everything is available to us. The thinker is therefore not outside matter; he or she is instead *within* it.

An example is appropriate here. Importantly, one's version of how a thing manifests is highly personal. In my own research, I tend to think in words and language. My most meaningful thinking happens when I am writing; normally if I am thinking when not writing, it is about unconnected things. Like many Māori, I live in the world of the ironic most of the time. In fact, maybe we could argue that we live in the world of the fantastically bizarre when writing or researching philosophically, because paradoxes and ironies are presented to us so intensely in those situations. As I see potential in words (mainly indo-European ones because of my inherent suspicion of them although if I think hard enough I see them in Māori terms as well), my attention is snapped to a word or term. This is a deeply personal response, and others may be moved by something else altogether. I then consider what the word means (starting perhaps with its strict meaning but not at all limited to that); how the word might jar or accord with its 'neighbours' if there are any; what the word draws to it in terms of other words. I then turn to theorise about what it doesn't so readily reveal through its dictionary definition and hence what the term carries with it regardless of its attributed meaning. Here, incidentally, is where I tend to differ in my (developing) view from the likes of Foucault, although remain to a certain extent aligned with the mainly German Romantic philosophers and, I believe, to a Māori ontology.

One term that I've been thinking about recently is the one currently under discussion: 'research'. I suspect that when I move through a term I move through its influence, and the influence of other things, to a certain extent. So I'm never sure what will emerge. In this instance, I have certain suspicions about the term 'research', but I shall keep those in abeyance. If we look at the etymology of the term, we see it comes from the french 're' which just means 'intensely', and 'cercher', which means to search (Onions, 1966). If we look at 'to search' we see that it has roots in the Latin 'circus', which means 'to circle'. This doesn't tell us much on its own, but it is clarified when we think about what it might proclaim within a worldview or worldviews. If I think about the term in light of 'to search intensely' then I would suspect that there is a metaphysics of selfhood at work, in which the self is projected as a certain ground of inquiry. There might be a topic of inquiry, to be sure, and I could say that this constitutes something that isn't the self, but the topic of inquiry is absent from the etymology of the term. This strong selfhood in the term might indeed persist, even in kaupapa Māori research, because of the ontology of the term 'research'.

Admittedly we can only ever theorise about the nature of that ontology, and it is here that we might call this type of thinking 'research' if we wanted to. So if we return even earlier to the Latin we might get a sense of something less self-oriented if we wanted to. We simply see 'an intense circling around' of something. Again, my question would be: does the term allow the influence of other things in the world apart from the self? What I might theorise here is that one is circling because of the signposts of

the external world—material, conceptual or non-cognitive. This construal could be a more palatable accord between the act of research in a Māori sense and the essence of the term itself.

Joining with the jolt from a word, the external world in its strangeness helps this process of thought. What moves one along in this sort of venture is a sense and observation of the bizarre. To this extent, I emphasise Camus' (1964) suggestion that absurdity is the root of thought:

At any streetcorner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face. As it is, in its distressing nudity, in its lightout without effulgence, it is elusive.... It is probably true that a man remains forever unknown to us and that there is in him something irreducible that escapes us. (pp. 10–11)

I advocate drinking coffee and people watching whilst doing conceptual research. This openness to the unknowable galvanises me to write without me knowing how. My lack of knowing can be thought of, in relation to my earlier philosophising of the Māori terms, in the following sense: I am drawn towards the uncertainty that whakapapa asserts in its connection with primordial Being; I am acted on by the self-autonomy of other things and people in the sense of whakaaro; and I move towards those others with a particular concern that is constructed within those others' residence in 'wa'. As I am sitting here writing this paper, in a café on Davie Street, Vancouver, I look across the road. There is a woman dressed in a fabulously outrageous outfit swinging around what look like two pieces of string with jandals attached to each. Meanwhile I am flitting between this paper and watching Victoria Wood's 'Acorn Antiques' on YouTube. Quite what this does to contribute to my thinking I'm not sure, but it does something; I am immediately prompted again into theorising about what lies beneath the world of appearances. However, against the apparently mechanical nature of this process, Camus (1964) warns that "the method defined here acknowledges the feeling that all true knowledge is impossible" (p. 12). Something steps forward for me: the surreal as a broad notion, and, thereafter, the capacity for one to disrupt the concept of the normal. Continuing with my current example: can the term 'research' act to disrupt the concept of 'normal' or is it complicit with it? I might then theorise the word in light of both its etymology and its more poststructural consequences. I might then write it up into an article or just allow it to percolate for a while. Here we have not just the guiding effect of the word: we have the guiding effect of the word alongside, for a moment at least, thorough surrealism.

Is thinking in the wake of things a 'method'?

Who could ever predict and prearrange where the rift occurs and how it is to present itself? One other point to be raised here is that when one is presented with the surreal, there is a falling of sorts into that abyss. Is the uncertainty of one's direction here related to the dark that is spoken of in our (Māori) metaphysics of creation? Quite possibly, especially when we consider that the Enlightenment—which we have certainly been colonised by—expects us to avoid the abyss at all costs. In terms of a method of certainty, Heidegger challenged Descartes on the basis of his assertion that a method is necessary to reveal very "first principles" (Newman, 1997, n.p.). Heidegger interprets this to mean that

this rule does not intend the platitude that a science must also have its method, but it wants to say that the procedure, i.e., how in general we are to pursue things (*methodos*), decides in advance what truth we shall seek out in the things.

Method is not one piece of equipment of science among others but the primary component out of which is first determined what can become object and how it becomes object. (Heidegger, 1993, p. 300)

The 'how in general' we are to pursue things is the clincher here for Heidegger, not whether a method is qualitative, conceptual, empirical or kaupapa Māori. In thinking there has to be a way of determining, we have from the outset determined how those things are to appear. However, the converse may be true: that the ground of the question or inquiry determines how things are to appear. Perhaps in asking the fundamental question to be researched we have already necessarily presupposed a method. That is, one couldn't have a question to be researched without already having anticipated that there will be a method attached. So perhaps it is not what comes first: maybe they co-attend. What we can take from both method and inquiry is not merely a *way* of doing things (although this is what method has come to *mean*): it is the ontological, unconscious but very real expectation that objects

will be determined in advance as ascertainable. Method and inquiry open up a field of performance of both self and thing. Objects here may include ideas or intangible concepts, not just solid things.

There is quite possibly a problem here for Māori. Heidegger (1967b) noted that this predisposition towards things characterized an impoverishment in the West, beginning since Plato (whom we must thank for rationalism). The self was in a state of deprivation because it was denied an inquiry into Being, according to Heidegger. But unlike Māori, he didn't figure on the possible detriment that this predisposition would involve for things in the world. Some of his predecessors, I would add, certainly had. But to return to my earlier speculation: if we are always in amongst the world as Māori, through the myriad of connections that we claim to have through various terms and descriptions, then there might be an effect on other things besides the self (but including the self) of a method. To be sure, I am entering outrageous and dangerous territory because I am suggesting that our orientation towards a thing has effects on that thing. This is particularly outrageous for a participant in academia to suggest because philosophically it means that a number of phenomena occur that cannot be perceived. In the words of Kant and the much later Carnap (Friedman, 2000), one can say nothing of this sort of metaphysics. Nor should one, according to the Academy. To do so is anti-empiricist. However, I am not the first to do this: if we, for instance, put the whare tapa wha model—a relatively empirical Māori framework of health—through some phenomenological paces, then we discover that how we intend a thing to exist has consequences for that thing, given the interconnectedness that the model expressly highlights.

Conclusion

The vast majority of Māori researchers appear to be undertaking interviews, a phenomenon that rests on a presumption of what authentic research is meant to be. There are metaphysically ethical considerations in that specific research method that are pertinent for Māori, including the possibility that the free form of a thing is constrained by our preconfiguring of it; the regard of Māori speech from interviews as 'data', and so on. The darker research that I have called for in this article—the spaces of obscurity where 'whakaaro' is called by things to speculate but not necessarily penetrate into—is the diminished relative. It originates from the ability of the self to philosophise, but from the paradoxical position that one is in the first instance cognisant of a thing through that thing's choice. This draw towards the thing can be expressed through a number of Māori terms, including whakaaro, whakapapa, and wa, even if these terms have been overwhelmingly represented as not related to everyday events.

In this sort of research there is the wonderful potential for a dual personal creativity and political liberation. The only data here may be one image, term or feeling, and even that 'fact byte' is thoroughly unknowable and crucially its own master. The provocative word, the man in the luridly coloured lavender wig, the self's reflection in a window: all have the potential in some form or other to coalesce around one's own speculative responses. This delight in the thing's mercuriality may, in turn, promise a counter-colonial answer, for it is in the lack of certainty in this kind of thinking that the colonizer might be, if not dealt with, at least put in some place of confusion themselves. This glee at the absurd—which is at the same time deadly serious—can best be summed up in the following quote of Hölderlin (2002), a German Romantic poet, who also saw the need to encounter a realm of shadows in his thinking: "We delight in flinging ourselves into the night of the unknown, into the cold strangeness of any other world, and, if we could, we would leave the realm of the sun and rush headlong beyond the comet's track" (p. 10).

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