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TE REO MAORI, PHILOSOPHY AND COLONIALISM: A CONVERSATION WITH MAORI PHILOSOPHER CARL MIKA

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Kia ora Carl
Some advice if you have the time... I have been asked to give a paper at Uppsala on philosophy of language and autonomy. I want to focus on colonialism and use some examples from the colonial history concerning te reo Maori. I did a little research at the time of the Royal Commission in 1988 but have lost touch with the literature. Are there a couple of strategic texts you would recommend?
Nga Mihi

Kia ora Michael
You tend to get two types of writing about the language: its revitalisation; and its link to the natural or spiritual worlds – which is to do with philosophy in a particular sense, but in my view doesn't have an eye towards the "autonomy" part you raise (i.e. isn't cognisant enough of colonialism). The latter writing theorises around the traditional place of language, or describes it as a traditional phenomenon. I've been considering writing something for some time on it, but just haven't gotten around to it.

You could discuss it in terms of how current uses of it in government policy etc. force the Maori language to become no more or no less than its English counterpart. So, for instance, language is an arbitrary (Saussure) thing that has very little in the way of "essence" in its own (autonomous) right. Terms like "whakapapa" equate precisely with "genealogy" but their interconnecting sense is lost in that translation. From a Maori belief, it could be argued that everything contains an essence, including words, and this essence precedes our interaction with language. In a way, language very much opens up a worldview, including the autonomy or essence of things in the world and their interconnectedness.

On that last point, here's an article I had published this year on the Maori term "ira" which is translated as "gene" but really does not cross over with it. "The Co-Existence of Self and Thing through *IRA:* A Maori Phenomenology," which was published in *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*. The abstract is as follows:

> In traditional Maori discourse, the division between metaphysical concepts and everyday life was non-existent. Because of that lack of delineation, the perception of objects was governed by certain beginning assumptions. Due to colonization, however, entities – and the conception of them – threaten to become unmoored from their primordiality. One example of this tendency lies in the current and common translation of the Moari term *ira* as 'gene.' This static casting of the erstwhile fluid nature of the phenomenon that *ira* indicated has consequences not only for how one perceives the world but, additionally, for both the self and the thing itself.… I propose a phenomenological approach to the term 'ira,' another definition of which is the interjectory "look!" I argue for an interpretation of *ira* in light of a Maori metaphysics – one that governs the inherent fluidity of things and the concomitant tentative representation of those things (p. 93).

And here's a link to someone's thesis (Marcia Browne), which talks about wairua and language: http://home.clear.net.nz/pages/mumlynch/thesis.pdf. Marcia actually gets behind the terms "wairua" and "language" and discusses their active nature within the learning process. She theorises on how they relate to a contemporary context, and thus moves beyond just discussing them in a traditional voice. She also sustains them as topics of discussion throughout her work, and makes them topics of discussion in their own right.

As I say, from a Maori perspective, philosophy and autonomy are political and counter-colonial topics as well as traditional or tikanga ones, and this dual philosophy has yet to be fleshed out.

Nga mihi

Kia Ora Carl

This is superb. A couple of questions:

1. When you talk of words do you mean "speech"? i.e., the oral form which is privileged over the written.

My guess is that the inverted priority is part of the colonizing process i.e. its alphabetisation, it's rendering first in the language of the Bible, the "compulsory" nature of the written form for legal and admin reasons, it's necessity for western style education and examination?

2. The emphasis on the written at the expense of speech and speaking kills te reo – at least historically because it acts to separate the spoken language from Maori form of life – poetry, dance, ceremony, invocation, and

therefore also provides another kind of history and history telling that interferes with identity as oral performance and lived experience

I wanted to raise another question that I am having difficulty in framing around the capture and administration of te reo – as part of the colonization of culture and therefore of mind
Nga mihi

Kia ora Michael
I'm not sure whether it's to do with oral vs written. I certainly agree that, if we distinguish between oral and written and privilege one before the other, those issues you raise are relevant. If we think of written and oral as both having the same potential, though, then we have to grapple with some other sorts of arguments. If I think out loud, this is what I come up with about it:

1. Whether speech is inherently more likely to preserve a Maori form of life – I used to think this, but then speech can be as logocentric as writing. Perhaps it has to do with the preservation of a sense (Frege?) that was important to words and that can be maintained in either writing or speech.

2. As you say, in academic language, legal, medical and so on – spoken or written, but more written because that's what we have to do – there is a particularly strong arrangement of the things they refer to (in a Maori sense) so that they align with a logocentric worldview.

3. It's entirely possible that aspects of Maori culture, such as kapa haka and so on, have been influenced by that same logocentrism. Perhaps it influences practice as well as concepts?

4. I do think that when any of us, Maori and non-Maori, are writing in contravention of the expectation that logocentrism sets up, then we are simultaneously adhering to it and contravening it. This is what I think of as "counter-colonial." Maori will probably do it for different reasons, but I do find it interesting that most of us who are thinking critically are in a sense destabilising the certainty of text etc. whilst being dependent on it. It's unlikely that we can ever fully destabilise it, then, I reckon.

5. On a more phenomenological note: when we are taking language to task (as we are now), from a Maori perspective we are also operating within the sphere of the things we are discussing. This paradoxical sphere could be called "language," I suppose. I do have an interest in a Maori term called "mea" which carries with it a sense of both show and say, which is admittedly very Heideggerean! So we can never get to the very crux of that sphere of influence of things that we could call language – it can't be moved around to be viewed in its totality (Kant). The essence of things is active, not permanent à la Aristotle, and so language represents a change of the expression of things. This is just my view about a Maori perspective, btw; I can't speak on behalf of anyone else here.

6. What intrigues me about language in both political and philosophical contexts is that the nature of language is not often questioned. For Maori, language threatens to become just an envelope of meaning – a symmetrical representation of ideas – much as it has become dominantly in the West. The focus has been mainly on how to preserve it – its linguistic purity and so on. We aren't encouraged to look at its ontology, and this poses a very grave threat to our identity first and foremost, and then to the "sense" that terms are allowed to carry as far as we're concerned.

Ok, I hope this makes sense! I'm still trying to figure language out. Despite what I say, it could be that oral forms of language are preferable to written ones. Again, I used to think this, but logocentrism influences all languages affected by colonisation.

Does this make sense?

Nga mihi

Kia ora Carl

Very interesting set of reflections and your introduction of Derrida's logo-centrism is one way of framing the issues that is central to the Western tradition but I am not sure the extent it applies to other non-Western cultures. Some theorists want to say that alphabetic writing systems are responsible for a logocentric perspective, perhaps a consequence of colonialism? Writing as a cultural invention tends towards a unilinear perspective whereas in an oral-based culture (I don't like the construction) speaking is much more tied to the stream of life. Maybe a moot point anyway when one bears in mind the fact that Maori is both now and an open ecology of language where translation and transliteration play such important roles even if meaning is always compromised.

I'm not sure either about whether one mode is more preferable; just that the dynamics of language changes favors written communication in the sense of institutional memory and the language of legal administration of the colony. The ongoing combination of modes tends to provides for both scientific reasoning, legal argumentation and the ceremonial and performative (perhaps protecting the sacred and spiritual).

I am finding this dialogue very helpful even if I am not getting it all. I wanted to ask you about identity and language in relation to Maori. I ask this huge question because I'm aware that Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other* writes: "What is identity, this concept of which the transparent identity to itself is always dogmatically presupposed by so many debates on monoculturalism or multiculturalism, nationality, citizenship, and, in general, belonging?" (p. 14).

The Other, the colonizer, demands an imperialistic monolingualism but the language I speak as a first language is not mine either.

I am interested in the effects on te reo Maori of coming into contact with metropolitan English as the language of colonization. We know for instance that there was a massive depletion and reduction of the speech community with hostile education policies and penalties for speaking Maori. Here I am deliberately trying to posed a question for philosophy of language – how can it ignore the fact of history...some 500 years of history with indigenous peoples in Latin America. While we know that te reo Maori was reduced to English alphabetical and syllabic forms and Maori culture was exposed early to writing and print technologies we do not know the wider effects of these changes – cognitively, psychologically or epistemologically. We know also that early Christian missionaries failed to created real literacy focusing on letter writing rather than reading (in order to christianise through the divine word) and thus failed to equip Maori to understand or negotiate their rights.

Is this simply to confuse history and sociology with philosophy or – what I would like to argue – that these issues should be central to an historically sensitive account of philosophy of language.

Anyway I am enjoying this conversation and your comments spur me on...

Perhaps this exchange could be the basis of a joint paper? And we should simply continue until we run out of steam?

Nga mihi

Kia ora Michael

I think his logocentrism is applicable to any sort of group that has been in touch with a stream of thinking that started with Plato. I'm not sure how enduring that contact has to have been in order for it to be effective, but in any case Maori, along with other indigenous people, have now been in touch with it for some time (as you say, 500 years for Latin America).

But there is possibly an amalgam of logocentrism and some other philosophy going on – one that always seeks to undermine logocentrism as well as uphold the type of language that does conjoin with the stream of life. I've been fascinated by that prospect for quite some time. I'm not sure whether there has to be a *deliberate* aim of undermining logocentrism or whether it takes place because of the irrationalism of sacred/spiritual type speech. Not sure.

I quite like the idea that, as counter-colonial scholars, we can upset that certainty of rational language by introducing another register. It could even be silence! In ancient Maori belief, silence was something that was cherished; much could be said in silence. Also, a critique delivered in a different tone – perhaps poetry or art? In any case, I think the destabilising is temporary.

I suppose the challenge for indigenous scholars is to make academic writing more like speech, if that is possible, by making the former a part of things in the world, the same way speech may be set up to be.

Is Derrida giving an example of how the self is made highly present through discussions about identity? This reminds me of Fichte! For Maori, Derrida seems to be arguing against very straightforward, rational descriptions of the self, am I correct? Also it reminds me of Heidegger's enframing, where the self is posited as something-or-other in advance. Poiesis is blocked in favor of that highly present depiction of the self.

For Maori, language can order the self so that identity does become transparent/one-dimensional/highly present. That term "ira" that I wrote about is something that could relate to this, because it is possibly about the identity of the self in relation to all other things (active, fluid and so on). But when it is frozen in time and space, then language carries out the ordering of the self as well. Is this what you meant?

When I was writing my PhD, I started to think about how the missionaries made language an issue, made it into lessons (think here about Kendall and so on). Because they made language a separate phenomenon from the rest of life, it could well have set up a jarring effect with Maori from a very early stage. How they wrote it was also phonetically "wrong," adding to that jarring effect. You wonder, then, if language became a denotative instrument that continues to jar with Maori because it is denotative, and not part of everyday phenomena in a material sense. It has been removed, cleansed and readjusted to sit above things, rather than within them so to speak!

Yes, Maori also weren't taught Latin. I can't remember the exact details but one school did teach Latin to some of the students, and they did very well. I think it was Pope or someone who went ballistic and warned the school or something. My memory is a bit fuzzy about that.

I do agree that sociology and history should inform philosophy. There's sort of no getting away from them anyway! But I think sociology and history tend to do quite well in debates about language but philosophy is left out. Not sure why – perhaps everyone thinks it's just intellectual indulgence? I think it's one of the most important issues of the day.

Nga mihi

Kia ora Carl

I think we can construct this as a dialogue pretty much unaltered. Thanks for the latest reflections which again I find very helpful.

My thinking on logocentrism (also phallologocentirsm) is that it is radically dependent on the logos as *reason* that promotes a kind of scientific rationality and world view and is in contrast to a poetic worldview where the mode is mythic and narrative often told through dramatisations based on evocation and metaphor.

Of course in the modern world we need both – if the distinction even holds water – and for Maori is has been significant to master legal-rational discourse as the language of rights, the courts and the Treaty process.

Derrida questions the Platonic tradition but without romanticizing its Other. You are better acquainted with Heidegger's work on language and poetry than I but I have always been impressed with Wittgenstein's ideal of writing – *composing* – philosophy as poetry (or music). It seems a cultural ideal close to the German tradition you grew up with as a scholar, a German Romanticism from Goethe on that is anti-Enlightenment?

On the question of self I'm inclined to follow Foucault on the order of discourse as an exercise in the government of self. That way I think I can make some progress in postcolonial studies.

I also tend to follow the anthropologists of small language death...a kind of ecological model of language colonialism that shows language attrition or even extinction especially in the South Pacific. Of the 7,000 languages in the world almost half are endangered some lost in bilingual environments overwhelmed by the dominant tongue. Maori seems to have successfully challenged this after the revitalisation in the 1970s when many of the kaumatua and kuia – the fluent speakers of te reo were still around. I should pose this as a question because I am no authority. Education, kohanga reo and Kaupapa Maori seem crucial in this leading to the Official Language status in 1981. After that date language use seemed to improve and now NZ English is more and more Maori – an interesting language effect or reversal. (I am thinking aloud for a European audience.)

This what I can't get my head around that in the literature language is often depicted as autonomous systems – autonomous from speakers, yet language reversal and the reproduction of language using opportunities seem directly related to a whole host of conscious and deliberate strategies from language recovery in terms of revival of ancient practices and texts to official language policies.

I wrote this back in 1988 for the Royal Commission on Social Policy:

> The history of policy can be seen in a number of clearly discernible successive phases: an 'assimilationist' approach to race relations which predominated up until the late 1950s; a focus on a policy of 'integration' implicitly based on a notion of 'cultural deprivation' during the 1960s and early 1970s; followed by a transitional period where emphasis was shifted from 'cultural deprivation' and 'the problem of the Maori child' to a concept of 'cultural difference' which emphasized *pakeha* tolerance of *non-pakeha* culture; and, finally, an attempt to formulate a 'multicultural' policy with the attendant notion that 'cultural diversity' should be valued. Most recently, there have been some signs that we are moving into a policy era of 'biculturalism,' mostly as a result of Maori initiatives, with the introduction of total immersion schools at all levels where education is *by* Maori, *for* Maori and *in* Maori, and with a number

> of bicultural schools. Whether these policies succeed is, however, another matter.

I am not sure whether it still holds or whether it is an accurate description.

Kia ora Michael
Totally agree that it doesn't do to romanticise the Other. It has the same effect, in the end, as denigrating the Other. I also agree with your comments around the revitalisation of the language. In some ways English has incorporated particular Maori terms – but from my perspective, this incorporation doesn't really address the question of what language actually *is* for Maori. That's probably up for some speculation, but it's incidentally one of my areas of interest.

Some studies have seemed to suggest that the Maori language has indeed successfully been saved from extinction, but that there are still few fluent speakers. I imagine it's a bit like Wales, Scotland and Ireland in that regard. I gather one of the issues is that it is not practised enough in everyday contexts.

I don't see how language can ever be on its own, either. Even from a purely phenomenological perspective, because it has to be thought of as a kind of expression of some sort of concept – and just what that concept is, its nature, is culturally bound. In some indigenous cultures, a concept is an entity (Maori actually have a genealogy showing that an idea is material). So language has to be considered in that context (among others).

I think your quote was true for that time, but a retrospective glance would show that biculturalism never worked in the sense that Maori expected it to. Whether it ever could is uncertain, though. I'm not sure what stage we're in now – some people simply call it "post-Treaty settlement."

Anyway, just some more thoughts from me. If I don't get back to you in the future, hassle me!!
Nga mihi

Kia ora Carl
All very useful/instructive to my thinking. I will use all the emails to construct a conversation that I will then send to you as a draft.

In the meanwhile I want to gauge your thoughts on the following propositions:

1. Around 1901 in the NZ House of Parliament it is reported that one MP said: "Maori is an imperfect vehicle for thought." This is an interesting bio-political and racist remark that suggests that British colonialism depended upon a kind of linguistic imperialism much deeper than we normally realise, underpinning its law and education as well as perfectly expressing it assumption of cognitive superiority

2. In the late 1980s with the revivalist movement of te reo Maori it was often said that "language (te reo) is the very heart of culture and belonging."

I am certainly interested in this claim especially in view of my work in the field with Ngapuhi in the 1980s where I saw many Maori kids in rural areas like Pungaru who were fluent speakers but failed secondary school exams conducted through the written component. The double messages in this official policy had a ruinous cultural effect as one might imagine

These two propositions make an interesting juxtaposition and are expressive of the history of linguistic imperialism.
Nga mihi

Kia ora Michael
Yes, both these sentiments (in 1 and 2) are familiar to me. To deal with them both:

1. Maori is a great language for thinking in a Maori sense, just as English has its own relationship with thinking. The belief that Maori was imperfect for thought led directly to the scaling down of School Cert Maori right up until the 80s, because the belief was that the language was less academic than, say, Latin or German. This sort of racism led to certain Maori filing the Te Reo Maori claim with the Waitangi Tribunal.

I'm not an overly fluent speaker of the language, but from the literature it is apparently built on the idea that all elements in the world are interconnected and animate. That's where you get terms such as "whenua" meaning both land and afterbirth, to the extent that these two phenomena are one and the same thing – not different. They might be listed as different things in the dictionary under "whenua," but they aren't. So I have theorised that the language is very good at "de-clarifying" an object, so that it retains its sophisticated relationship with all other things in the world.

When I was 15 or so, I used to have a lot to do with an aunt of mine – I might have told you this before, or even referred to it in an earlier email. This aunt was incredibly influential on my thinking. She used to go quiet whenever I asked a question – for example, about the depth of the Maori language. There are a couple of ways of reading this. First, she might not have thought it was appropriate to tell me (but I find this hard to believe, given we used to talk quite freely). The other possibility is that using language in direct response to a question – accounting for a question by symmetrically responding to it (logically) – is detrimental to the topic of discussion, because it cuts too clarifyingly, too directly, to the life of the topic. Thus, language for her never attached itself to a clarification; it seemed to encompass everything including the topic up for discussion. So she would respond with something apparently quite unrelated, and it would be months later that I would have a "eureka" moment.

Therefore language is not just a vehicle for thought for Maori, and I don't think was ever intended to be; it is a way of curving around a phenomenon and holding it in its totality, as it rests in its context among all other things.

Hope this makes sense! I'm still reflecting on those earlier discussions with my aunt. Language remains one of the biggest challenges for me here. Can we say much about language, when we are apparently operating in its sphere of influence? Or are we both operating within its sphere and at the same time is that not all there is to language? I think these questions came about when I was even younger than 15, but were brought to the fore by my aunt. I always refer to my time with her, because for me it gives a concrete example of what I'm trying to discuss.

2. But I wouldn't say language is alone here. Other modes of expression are equally as de-clarifying, but language for some reason has come to be the most dominant mode. I'm not convinced that the language is *the* heart of the culture; I think it is one of its central facets and that it is incredibly important, but it is dangerous to centre in on one. I used to agree with this sort of declaration about the Maori language, but came to see that the culture is much more complex than that assertion gives room for.

The other part of (2) – that fluent kids would fail the written component – to me is exactly about the performativity of the language. If the Maori language is utilised to clarify (and de-animate) things in the world so that they conform to a denotative meaning (logocentrism), then it could be a case of a square peg being forced into a round hole. Perhaps if there was another way of writing/philosophising (and I remember what you said about Wittgenstein here), then it would be a different story? I've often thought that a holistic philosophy curriculum in schools could be beneficial for Maori kids, but it would have to be so carefully thought out that it would be hugely difficult!
Nga mihi

Kia ora Carl
Many thanks for this conversation and for your willingness to respond so quickly. I would like to do a full interview with you some time in the future.
Nga mihi

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