

A chance for ontology

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Abstract: This paper speaks to Hook's thesis that a National Māori University needs to be established. However, it sets about this task by designating Hook's intended central concerns to the outer reaches of his article's limits, and moving towards the core those more ephemeral issues, which, despite their haziness, still demand attention. Hook builds an argument premised on assertions to do with the functional need for a National Māori University, and only hints at the nature of the knowledge to be experienced at such an institution – yet as the commentator I found that the various elements of that peripheral issue coalesced to demand my attention. In this peer commentary I consider how issues to do with the very nature of knowledge – if indeed we want to call it that – become absolutely vital (and hence central) to any discussion about a National Māori University.

Keywords: Māori education, philosophy

G. Raumati Hook's paper comes at a time of epistemological uncertainty for Māori. With that startling and grandiose revelation, we should also note that the doubt that attends this epoch is no less for major Western forms of knowledge, given the educational crisis that is occurring for many in the West at the time of writing. Hook's arguments for and against the establishment of a National Māori University occur simultaneously with flourishing discussions around knowledge – what is knowledge, how knowledge comes to be made, whether Western and Māori knowledges converge, and so on. It is no coincidence, I speculate, that the set of phenomena that we now call knowledge has become a central, if unfathomed, tenet of Hook's argument. As I shall explore, Hook's reference to knowledge is motivated by more than merely a discussion about Māori utilising knowledge, whether Māori or Western, in a more equitable way; it is also to do with the nature of knowledge itself, although this latter theme is not explicitly stated in Hook's article.

Hook may not have even intended that the first potential principles of knowledge be the focus of his article, yet they do compete with his other themes. The need for uniquely Māori venues for learning is already well traversed (Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005; Smith, 1999); Māori literature is saturated with descriptions of the dilemma that Māori face in being silent in the face of curricula, policy and legislation (see Barrington, 2008; Simon & Smith, 2001); the need for Māori to, as Hook states, begin "the long evolutionary journey towards intellectual independence and the advancement of human knowledge" (p. 2) is similarly widely proclaimed in the myriad of ways that language allows. Hook voices these issues further and gives his own urgent spin on them, yet the beauty of his article rests not in what is stated blatantly and tristically but in what is adumbrated: that knowledge as philosophical concept must be addressed.

Hook may take exception to this subjective licence that characterises my interpretation of his article. However, what strikes us most when reading any academic work is the peripheral issues that are raised, even when they are not part of the strict, central argument. In that sense, academic writing is not that different from poetry. As with verse, tangential concerns reveal themselves quite often when there is unspoken discomfort in respect of them – and here they manifest themselves as a sort of incessant distraction – or else when they are talked about quite often. It is the subconscious disclosure of these issues, by both the writer and the reader, which might even have the most profound consequences for discussions around Māori knowledge itself. Thus an approach to Māori knowledge in a National Māori University might acknowledge the importance of the method of considering as important what is not objectively apparent in an academic piece of writing. Western epistemological methods, with some notable exceptions, are not particularly keen on this method; yet if we consider the metaphorical nature of Māori language, explanations and allusion, then the path is cleared for us to explore completely other forms of knowledge.

What is knowledge that is not already bound up in Western modernity? Rather than simply stating how we can ‘upskill’ or ‘educate’, in the light of colonisation it is more appropriate to ask how we can describe affected Māori knowledge, especially if we are to take the subject of a National Māori University seriously. The opportunities for us to state emphatically that there is pure, unadulterated traditional knowledge are diminished. There is nothing wrong with this, as we are then able to think about how, for instance, a National Māori University could deal with knowledge that is ontologically Māori but yet empirical, or how we even think about knowledge in a phenomenological way. Just raising such questions can have an uncomfortable effect, simply because they are difficult. They expose the discussions that are commonly defaulted to – knowledge economy, equitable access to knowledge, policy around curricula and so on – as previous, because they demand that those discussions firstly consider the meanings of knowledge.

It is no coincidence that the philosophical questions are avoided in favour of functionalist ones. Under the guise of education, the tricky nature of identifying what knowledge actually *is* is pushed to the background. It is submerged within more apparently useful discourses (Oliver, 1998). Because of that almost instinctive drive, we try to find the origin of knowledge through discourses that favour education. We are used to trying to get at the primordial essence of knowledge by using empirical means (Heidegger, 2003). It is not, then, just *knowledge* that is at issue; it is something that comes before knowledge. Māori generally have no problem with the idea that there is an ontologically prior given; it is, however largely ignored in Western education systems. A National Māori University could distinguish itself as allowing debates around the nature of ontology, in which the role of mauri, for instance, impacts on what is obtained as knowledge and what is withheld from knowing. In other words, is it knowledge that would be the important focus in a National Māori University, as it is in its Western counterparts, or is it the orientation of the individual to his or her surroundings, and hence their possible gleaning of knowledge, as an incidental outcome? I tend to believe that the nature of such questions is especially important, particularly if ‘knowledge’ so-called is to be treated meaningfully in an innovative institution.

In many ways it is a pity to be focusing on the terms epistemology and ontology, but a colonised regard always acknowledges the need to grapple with introduced language. A National Māori University might well think through such a dilemma so thoroughly that the terms could be integrated once more, instead of being opposed. One of the enchantments of a National Māori University is its potential to rethink what the West takes for granted, including the ongoing relationship between knowledge and Being, and between the knowable and unknowable world. Examining these apparent oppositions might not take place in the Māori language, but could even occur in the language of the coloniser, especially initially, given their source. It might be an outcome of these dialectic exercises that a particularly subjective, non-rational form of academia is as important as its objective, rational counter. Of course, with an increasing governmental focus on policies which favour skills demonstrating a concrete outcome for the country, any institution that concentrates, even in part, on the ontology of knowledge (and the related Being of people who associate themselves with knowledge) will be regarded with some suspicion. However, to engage in these types of discussions is one of the remaining colonial challenges of Māori.

Hook’s ambitious project would see Māori “develop and explore new avenues of thought without being subject to the constraints of traditional European perspectives” (p. 3). Naturally it is difficult to see how traditional European perspectives would not influence new avenues of thought. The Wananga are aware of this; Te Whare Wananga o Awanuiarangi, for instance, critically accepts the limitations that Hook would avoid in its Masters of Indigenous Studies programme. Where a National Māori University could take up the gauntlet is in the prioritising of that project to an even more radical level. It would not simply discuss crucial issues; it would place traditional discourses within critical ones at all levels, continuing until Māori were satisfied that that process no longer had to occur. In a sense, it would meld both rational thought and subjective experience – neither taking priority over the other.

Admittedly I have neglected to discuss many of the concerns that Hook plainly raises in his article. Although it is worth reading Hook's article to experience his distinctive style, and to witness his obvious experience in the area – he was CEO of Te Whare Wananga o Awanuiarangi – it is the philosophical potential that a National Māori University could embody that makes it truly innovative. To be sure, Hook provides us with a great deal of detail, historical and political, which makes for necessary reading; however, the unvoiced yet strident philosophical issues that he senses on the periphery demand our attention even more.

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