Philosophy, Matauranga Maori, and the Meaning of Biculturalism

Abstract:

New Zealand has scarcely taken the first step towards genuinely bicultural dialogue, because no-one has indicated clearly what that first step must be.

Four general questions for NZ are introduced which broaden out into a search for definition of the needed first step.

(1) Does philosophy’s ‘Enlightenment ideal’ demarcate fairly, accurately and exhaustively what is genuine intellectual accomplishment by humans?

(2) Was NZ’s most famous philosopher, Karl Popper, correct to compare ‘tribal’ consciousness so invidiously with his vaunted ‘open society’?

(3) How might NZers best conceptualise the relationship between Matauranga Maori and science?

(4) How might philosophy best conceptualise its own cultural specificity, or thereby the cultural conditions that are necessary for the very existence of philosophy and theoretical science?

Because of its defining biculturalism, NZ possesses a particularly deep-lying institutional need to answer such questions both reflectively and well.

Suppose for the sake of argument that philosophy and science (a) were brought to NZ only within the heritage of those who arrived long after its indigenous people did, and yet, (b) themselves define, by the ideal to which they are beholden, what it is to reflect or dialogue truly well or ill. Then there is no coherence (in terms of any possible truly inclusive ideal dialogue within NZ) to NZ’s legally mandated biculturalism.

Such a dire realisation would be important if true, and it is equally important to diagnose and intellectually redress the error in it if it is false. New insights would result were NZers collectively to investigate this, which they largely have not done before now. NZ needs these insights as starting-point for true bicultural dialogue, if there is to be one.

Tena tatau katoa. These Maori-language words of inclusive greeting are meant to bring us together into a discussion. Granting that I who have begun with these words am not Maori, just as many others here are not Maori, should I not pause to consider carefully whose form of discussion I mean? Were I, for example, to mihi to my audience here by invoking my whakapapa, my ancestry, then I would lose myself immediately, revealing my ignorance. As is typical of Pakeha, I do not know even the qualities or deeds or ways of thinking of my great-grandparents. My ancestry is almost nothing to me. The exercise to mihi to you in this way, should I attempt it, would emblematise respect for Maori culture I would hope, but in fundamental ways it might otherwise be empty, and also embarrassingly short. But, in that case, if, in setting about to begin this discussion, I proceed simply with my own understanding of the ideals for discussion itself, if I bring expectations of my own about the qualities of fair and intellectually robust exchange and debate, then how far do I share in true dialogue, and how far do I instead merely help bifurcate the present assembled group?

Pakeha who come together with Maori for discussion often possess but an uncertain readiness for sharing and learning. Pakeha often are aware how little they have fathomed the cultural differences. They depend upon Maori to move the better and the
more knowingly within two cultures. Because someone needs to detect the possibilities for miscommunication or misunderstanding and to minimise those undoubted dangers, Pakeha will often leave to Maori this important task. Yet in another and I think very fundamental respect, Pakeha are unyielding. They exert (in a way they do not realise), sometimes efficaciously and sometimes not, but ever harmfully, an unyielding hegemony over any discussion that they attempt with Maori. For, Pakeha import, as the one true operative ideal for discussion itself, understandings that reduce to zero the special significance of any ancestral voice. They impose Enlightenment values: they seek through discussion to proportion credence simply to the unforced force of the better argument. The question concerning some idea that is discussed of whose that idea is, where it has gained its traditional authority, what would the ancestors (if they pondered it) think, is treated automatically as ill directed, officially unimportant, pathological. All that is allowed to count are present reasons — reasons in rational support of the idea, or reasons in rational criticism of the idea. In importing such expectations to discussion, Pakeha certainly do not wittingly imply disrespect, for you would find that the same Enlightenment values under-gird their operative understanding even of the form that respect should take. Unwitting though it may be, the automatic cleaving by Pakeha to their own ideal for discussion is nonetheless culturally hegemonic, and I think represents an original violence against the very meaning of ‘bicultural’ dialogue.

So that is the worry that I will discuss here today. I confess straightaway, unapologetically, that I come to my discussion of it as a philosopher. It would be disingenuous of me to pretend to surrender Enlightenment values, for I as yet have but an incomplete idea how, even towards bicultural meeting of minds, I ever could do so in good faith. These values are, because of what I am, deep-going to the bearing that I have in this or any discussion. At the same time it seems to me clear that when fellow philosophers passionately defend their Enlightenment values they sometimes go too far, say what is false about the need for these values, and even imply an insult against Maori. Indeed I will maintain that that was the case when a certain Karl Popper, in Christchurch in the late 1940s, penned his world-famous book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. The passionate defence of Enlightenment values can go too far when it fails to acknowledge both the potential functionality within other cultures of a different ideal for discussion, and indeed the impossibility of the functioning of Enlightenment kind of ideal except within a very unusual, recent and not unproblematic modern cultural form.

By the present day, across much of the world, Enlightenment values have been promoted to prominence, as defining the very ideal for discussion itself. Broad historical and cultural factors (some of them going back millennia, many issuing from the ignition of science) are responsible for this. All New Zealanders, Pakeha and Maori, could usefully consider these factors and the ideal for discussion that results from them. The ideal cannot fairly be taken for granted by Pakeha. Rather it must be reflectively examined by all. There are factors in traditional oral cultures that elevate the significance of the ancestral voice. These factors likewise need to be understood, and the authority of tradition itself not merely taken for granted by Maori, but rather reflectively examined by all. When the explanations are clear to all parties as to why peoples differ in their bearings in discussion in quite fundamental ways, then perhaps truly bicultural dialogue can begin to begin. I contend, however, that up till now, this key initial task has scarcely been attempted.

As a philosopher myself, I furthermore worry that philosophers are generally the reverse of helpful in initiating the needed first steps. Here I am thinking partly of Popper, who
says notoriously invidious things about ‘tribal’ societies in relation to his vaunted ideal of an ‘open society’. On the strength of a passionate endorsement of Enlightenment values (which he understands in a somewhat idiosyncratic way), Popper in effect condemns as anti-rational the very attempt at bicultural dialogue that I believe should be made.

Nothing excuses philosophers from listening to a certain question that there can be about the values of the Enlightenment. It is true that in modern nation states the greatest challenges to the values of the Enlightenment take us towards totalitarian, pathological outcomes. We are to remember however that this has nothing to do with indigenous voices. It is wrong to call such voices ‘fascist’, though one does these days actually hear here in New Zealand Maori insulted in that very way. Fascism was an accomplishment of Europeans. The same part of the world that produced Immanuel Kant, who with courageous clarity and incisiveness first fully articulated the values of the Enlightenment, also produced Adolf Hitler, and with him the reason-debilitating negative emotions of fear and loathing, from which followed the vilest forms imaginable of human subjugation of and violence against their fellows. We are to remember the conditions in Weimar Germany of extreme resource shortage and societal frustration, that helped Hitler to come as he did to power. Popper wrote his *Open Society* book as a passionate intellectual response to this deplorable debacle. The book champions intellectual courage in the form of critical reason. I think that the values-message is philosophically a freckle off, and some claims that Popper makes about historical philosophers miss their mark by a mile. But the near likeness in some broad respects between its passion and Kant’s is a credit to Popper’s book. Certainly the clarion prose recommend the book highly, which stands in my view as one of the finest literary accomplishments of the twentieth century. Popper has his own construal of the values of the Enlightenment which I think not quite right, but the book calls correctly for the courage to respect our fellows’ reasoning and to cultivate our own, and in that way was a magnificent work of popular philosophy in its day. To reassert in some such way the values of the Enlightenment certainly was, at that historical juncture, intellectually salutary. I will say more: to me it seems clear that across all modern nation states, the intellectual remedy most required wherever there is terrible subjugation and violence is the recovery and reassertion of Enlightenment values (though perhaps not entirely as Popper construed them). Yet let us be clear that this judgment (which would doubtless be contentious in some company) concerns modern nation states. When we consider instead traditional societies based on an oral cultural form, the following is clear. At some times some such societies have flourished impressively and well. At other times such societies have produced (often in conditions of resource-shortage frustration) significantly vile forms of subjugation and violence. In other words, just like societies that have at one or another time tasted the values of the Enlightenment, traditional societies can sometimes flourish well, and can sometimes be vile. To philosophers I feel I need to say the following. I do not believe that the difference between traditional societies that involve egregious subjugation and violence and those that flourish can be explained in terms of Enlightenment values. On the contrary, I have many reasons to think that in societies whose culture is oral, Enlightenment values are unaffordable, and so in that context cannot promote flourishing. If it were possible (as in a traditional oral culture it is not) for Enlightenment values to define the ideal for discussion itself, then in the case of a society which depends chiefly upon oral means for the propagation of culture, the values in question would not help society, but rather would seriously harm it.
So the question about Enlightenment values that I say must be faced by philosophers is this. Is their importance for making the difference socially between not-nice and nice quite so universal as philosophers make out?

I have a philosophy colleague who calls traditional Maori society fascistic. This colleague finds impertinent even my bare suggestion before-mentioned, about how bicultural dialogue in this country might begin to begin. It is in that philosopher’s view outright offensive to propose, as I do, to reconsider about Enlightenment values. Even the least willingness to reconsider these values is unseemly irrational by that philosopher’s lights. I find this position of my colleague’s ethnocentric and wrong. Maori society was never fascistic; that is quite the wrong description to use. It is true that only in early generations of association with Aotearoa / New Zealand were resources abundant and the ways of Maori free from subjugation and violence. Then resources grew thin, frustrations developed, and some forms of subjugation and violence set in. Were we to compare with Weimar Germany, say, leading into the era of Nazism, the conditions among Maori, especially after the arrival of Pakeha, who exacerbated Maori frustration among other ways by conveying devastating new diseases into their midst, and heightening competition for resources, then perhaps the pitch towards violence and subjugation could be somewhat understood, though the comparison seems forced in its way. The scale of the ugliness in Europe seems far greater. Moreover, there are generic reasons why resource-short horticultural groupings are the more liable than either hunter-gatherer or agricultural societies in some degree to take up violence and subjugation into ambient forms of life, and reasons why agricultural societies cycle by contrast between the extremes of fevered war and pious peace. So the comparison of not-niceness in late traditional Maori society with fascism in 1930s Europe is mostly lame in fact. Europe was building up to world war, and gas chambers. Suffice it to say — here at the outset, even before I turn instead to investigate the positives about Maori society which are many and are much to be kept in mind by New Zealanders — that there have been forms of ugliness in Maori society. The solution to European fascism lay partly in overcoming the negative emotion of fear, and in clearing the way politically (first by a military defeat) to reassert via values of the Enlightenment respect as the key moment of moral regard. But the route back from problems about warfare and slavery by which Maori were once much affected is vastly different. There was no defeat. Pakeha had, however, arrived. Biculturalism was supposed to be possible. The strengths of tradition and oral culture were meant to contribute to bicultural flourishing. How this might happen if it can was to be discussed, biculturally. Yet that is no matter merely of reassertion of values antecedently shared. On the contrary, it challenges both Pakeha and Maori to take stock of themselves and of one another far more searchingly than that.

To make my point that only in some types of society not others are Enlightenment values intellectually key to the accomplishment of release from subjugation and violence, and that these values are liable to harm not help other kinds of society, I next discuss, as indicated in my abstract, Matauranga Maori, and its functioning. I mean to ask not so much whether Matauranga Maori is science, as whether this very question, whenever it is raised, helps or hurts our power to understand one another, and to move forward into genuine dialogue with one another. I argue that it is a hurt not a help. What is wrong with the question whether Matauranga Maori is science tells a lot about how bicultural dialogue in this nation could best begin to begin.
I do not believe that the question whether Matauranga Maori is science adequately respects the form of either kind of intellectual attainment. ‘Matauranga Maori’ is a name for various very rich knowledge structures that were adapted to Aotearoa / New Zealand and to the needs for survival and flourishing of its indigenous people and that significantly developed over time partly as people learned more and partly as their conditions changed. Parts of Matauranga Maori were within the ambient public knowledge of all Maori, maintained by public uses of the oral memory arts that directly conditioned the lives of all in any iwi or hapu. Matauranga Maori made interesting all the minds that it helped thus to fill with knowledge, and brought about far greater like-mindedness among people than ever we experience today. Its character changed over time partly as conditions changed; and its usefulness for survival and flourishing was palpable. Any of us today would be dysfunctional or lost within the material conditions of life within which Matauranga Maori helped its possessors to flourish. Across its further reaches, Matauranga Maori was highly cultivated, roundly specialist knowledge, developed in the minds and by the experience of specialist inquirers, who had had a kind of exacting apprenticeship in this specialist form of life, and who were looked to by their fellows to perform a specialist, knowledge-keeping and knowledge-enhancing role. The ways in which the singular expertise of such knowledge specialists was not only cultivated but also made to condition societal decision-making is a further kind of social accomplishment, key to the survival and flourishing of traditional Maori people.

All aspects of Matauranga Maori represent high intellectual attainment by a people whose culture was oral. This gave Matauranga Maori a form of which most present-day people have but the poorest grasp. Present-day people typically also possess but a poor grasp of science, yet examples of the character of science are, by comparison, significantly more current and accessible. Inevitably present-day people are interested in whether Matauranga Maori is science, and furthermore, in whether the knowledge-specialist kaumatua in traditional Maori society were scientists. Yet comparison with science harms far more than it helps the task of understanding Matauranga Maori in my view. In particular, it is almost perfectly unhelpful to liken the purposes and attainments of the relevant knowledge specialists in traditional Maori society to those of present-day scientists.

If we are to create the kinds of joint appreciations of different cultural forms that we need in order to get truly bicultural dialogue going, the last thing we need is the question whether Matauranga Maori is science. I want to say of this question that it is misplaced, that by merely entertaining it we are deflected from where we might discover truth or create understanding. So in a sense I am putting myself in an isolated, uncomfortable position, different from those, and there are many, who have wanted to claim that Matauranga Maori isn’t science, because they are answering that question, and they are answering it in a way that represents a challenge to the enormity of the accomplishment intellectually that Matauranga Maori was. I am also however opposing those who say of Matauranga Maori that yes it is science, and although I am in agreement with them that we must recognise in Matauranga Maori a wealth of knowledge, and recognise the enormity of the intellectual accomplishment that it represents, still I want to say that calling Matauranga Maori ‘science’ doesn’t do justice to the kind of intellectual accomplishment that it is.

To talk about Matauranga Maori is to talk about an accomplishment within oral culture — or at least, an accomplishment within a culture that is profoundly oral, though it is at the same time making use of some exosomatic means (for example carving, string
games) of making facts memorable. Oral cultures make use of people’s minds to make room for all the enormous number and varied forms of facts that need to be recalled in order to make life possible, and good. Any people needs to have assembled vast knowledge in order to survive and flourish, and some peoples find means mostly in people’s heads for holding all of that information. They establish within the performance of talk and spoken ritual means to propagate that information down the generations, so that the information remains available generation after generation and the society can continue to survive and flourish.

A profound difference therefore between Maori in their traditional setting and people who may be acting in science laboratories or, say, in science departments in universities today, is that the means for propagation of all that is known in the one case is largely oral and in the other case is largely through what people tap through their computer keyboards, for storage ultimately in computer memory banks or printed journals or books, all utilising a writing-down of language. Maori had made very extensive use of exosomatic aids to memory. But these aids are to be understood as powerful extensions to the oral arts of memory. People already adept in oral arts of memory can find significances in carving or string games that further extend the already vast reach of their oral mnemonic structures. Maori exosomatic symbolic forms such as carving and string games are not an interruption of oral arts of memory but rather extend them.

By contrast, within the present-day cultural circumstance of which science is a part, there clearly has been an interruption of oral memory arts. These arts are thoroughly displaced by the information storage and retrieval systems that involve the written word. We don’t have our memories any more. Our minds are blank in ways that the minds of all peoples up to the last two or at most two-and-a-half millennia were not. Fortunately this blankness is not true of everyone; some among you may be lucky enough to be recipients of an oral culture, and you may know what I am talking about when I talk about oral arts of memory, but many who are present today know nothing much about what it would be to be a recipient of powerful mnemonic means to hold in one’s head a vast proportion of what a people can know about both their environment and themselves in order to make living together and surviving and flourishing within a landscape possible. Furthermore I hazard to say that even those of you who do know, know in not as full a way as that of people whose entire intellectual circumstance was of an oral culture. The echoes — important, and important to preserve — that there still are, of the powerful mnemonic arts of earlier Maori, are slight, so that people who are deep into what does remain of those arts today are nonetheless seeing less than what people only a few generations ago would have been equipped by those arts to see.

Let me illustrate in a mundane way what it is to use the mnemonic arts. When you are being introduced to many people at once, and you are challenged to remember all their names, the way forward is to associate a playful mnemonic with every name. It is crucial that you be spontaneous, imaginative, and, over against the demands of literal mindedness, irreverent. Roger Sandford is introduced to you, and you seize playfully on an image of him saying “roger, roger” into his cell-phone as he drives to the beach in a Ford. This image is not literally true. But it is enormously useful for memory. You now have an image to hold onto that combines all the elements of his name — roger, sand, Ford. With this image comes a powerful ability to retain this item of information and recall it at will. I suspect that you will all remember at the end of my talk the name of the man mentioned in this example. It would not surprise me if we meet on the street a year from now, and you are still able to recall the man’s name if asked.
If a people depends on their minds for the retention of all the information that confers upon them the powers of survival and flourishing, then they have to make use of just such devices thickly and constantly. They have to come together to enhance the powers of such play of the mind to make memorable a vast, vast store of information. When they do so, what they are doing is of a different character from simply organising information into some final, theoretical form. It is misunderstood if it is compared with the effort to organise information in theoretical science. When one is told of this “South Island” of ours that it represents what happened when some long-ago figures — deities, ancestors, it is a bit ambiguous — in their waka leaned forward and, somewhat forward of mid-centre, froze, you get an idea of the topography of this island. It makes memorable how the mountains are, how they are in the island, a bit about their structure (the strata line up that way). You have an image of what you will see. You make memorable many facts about the landscape that it will be useful for you to know. You would completely misunderstand the significance of that story by considering it a theory, an attempt to explain the island, an attempt to state its cause. It is no more to be understood just that way than is my image to you of Roger’s saying “roger, roger” into his cell phone while driving to the beach in a Ford an explanation of why the man’s name is Roger Sandford. It is instead a device for making things memorable, and the people who would put up the waka story in order to make memorable facts upon which their lives will depend won’t be mistaken about that. They know that they are creating memory arts. Their lives depend upon their having the memory arts constantly at their disposal.

Likewise if one considers an early ancestor or semi-deity to have used an enormous adze to make parallel strokes in the southwest corner of this island, one makes extremely memorable the topography of that place, one sees the sounds, one feels familiarity with their character. One also provides a story which could be the beginning point for other stories which would make memorable still further features of that landscape, pointing to significant further facts about that landscape, such as resources that it contains, dangers that lie there, the way it varies in its conditions season by season, how the resources can be collected and used, and so on. If you are making it possible to live in as challenging an environment as Aotearoa New Zealand, then you are desperate for ways to make a vast amount of information able to be propagated down the generations. And if minds alone are what you’re going to use to do that, then you will work to make minds rich and interesting, filled with stories that flesh out these mnemonic arts.

I really want to emphasise that in my view inheritors of an oral culture have minds that are interesting and full to an extent that we scarcely if ever see around us today. We have lost these arts. Consider you. You are inheritor to a tiny, miniscule fraction of the culture by which we are surrounded. Consider me. I am inheritor to a tiny, miniscule fraction of that culture. Moreover, the part that I have inherited is different from the part that you have inherited in enormous degree. We are alienated from one another. We don’t know that much about one another’s minds. Very little has passed into us that would make us similar. And this is a rather uncomfortable, alienated, situation to be in. Our bonds with our fellows are not that strong. This is true not only of contemporaries but also across generations. I mentioned at the beginning that I have almost nothing in common with my great-grandparents. I know them not at all. They are alien from me.

Consider by contrast members of a society whose whole culture is oral. Almost the whole culture will pass into their minds. That’s an exaggeration, because of course
there will be some skills that are specially concentrated in a few; but enough will pass into every person’s mind to give everyone an intimate knowledge of what anyone else in the society can do. A vast amount of total public knowledge will become the knowledge of every person. You can consider the situation of a people whose culture is oral to be such that unless each new person born into that society is treated as a vital resource, to aid with memory, to help propagate the total culture along, then there is a threat to the entire society. Everyone’s mind must over time become a vehicle for this public, societal knowledge, that makes survival and flourishing possible.

Karl Popper is sometimes claimed by New Zealand since he did teach at the then Canterbury College of the University of New Zealand during the 1940s. It was here in Christchurch that he wrote *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, a justly famous book which with clarion voice calls for the defence of Enlightenment values against totalitarianism. Partly for that reason, and for other contextual reasons, Popper was very down on what he called ‘tribalism’ of thought and culture. Popper lauded the ideal of an open society, where tradition doesn’t matter, where people are free to criticise anything, where an idea has only as much going for it as can be marshalled for it by reasons given in its defence, where the idea of its having worth by virtue simply of a role it plays in tradition, or by its being the voice of the ancestors, is utterly proscribed. Popper was a passionate defender of a way of dealing with intellectual culture which was shaped by the Enlightenment and by (Popper’s distinctive interpretation of) Enlightenment values. In the context of his *Open Society* book Popper says some desperately critical things about the kind of oral cultural form that I am trying to help those of you who need it to some understanding of. Popper says some critical things; he also says some false things. Popper suggests that, in tribal cultures, ideas can stabilise, whereas in an open society, he reckons that ideas are constantly at risk of being changed, of being found under the force of criticism to be rationally wanting, whence they are rejected, and replaced by new ideas. Popper emphasises continuity in tribal cultures, and insists that too much continuity can be a bad thing. We should be open to discontinuity, he believes. The idea of an open society that he lauds, is the idea of a society whose further development does not take a predictable form; it is open not only in the sense that everyone’s ideas are open to criticism, but it is also a society whose future cannot be predicted. Popper reckons that if a society allows its knowledge to develop properly, in an environment of criticism, then you don’t know how its knowledge will change, so you don’t know how the society will change. He insist that this is how we should be, this is the ideal; we should want to be open to that kind of uncertainty. If we hanker after certainty, if we hanker to know how our future will be, if we want things stayed and constant down the generations, then we are enemies of the open society, and that is a very bad thing in his view.

I think that Popper’s point of view is understandable in its context, and salutary even in some select respects, but I think it is seriously flawed in many ways, even for understanding the character and possibility of science, and I most definitely think that it is unhelpful for understanding bicultural issues in New Zealand. Popper’s position is quite clearly mistaken in many respects. Traditional societies have knowledge forms that do change, and Matauranga Maori as an intellectual accomplishment is a sure sign that that is so. Look how profoundly different the circumstances of life were for Polynesian people as they moved across the Pacific. Each new land had its own utterly distinct resources, and yet the people managed. Imagine the challenges that there would be, when all the wherewithal that people had, for finding resources, for utilising them in familiar ways, for going about life, and all the oral structures in the mind for
remembering these things, were always found to be fitted well to circumstances that had been left behind, rather than those found in new island contexts. And never was there a more profound change in material conditions of life than happened when people moved from far north in the Pacific to Aotearoa New Zealand. In its flora and fauna and other resources, in its climate, topography, coastal and inland challenges, this place was extraordinarily different. And yet within a very short time these people were flourishing. That is adaptability. That is intellectual change. It’s intellectual change unfolding within an oral culture, rapidly and well. It gives the lie to the idea that oral cultures are static. It gives the lie to Popper’s conviction that oral cultures must compare very invidiously to his preferred kind of society in terms of openness to intellectual change.

Something is going on in the pattern of intellectual accomplishment of Maori that Popper hasn’t laid hold of. It’s true that the way in which ideas are carried in this oral culture make the voice of tradition important. Your survival depends upon powers of knowing things which you would never possess unless you were made party to a tradition of mnemonic forms. Your people has to work on you to become receptacle to a vast amount of information, carried by oral memory arts, and if you resist that then you’re not a player in a way that your society needs you to be for the sake of its very survival. So there will be powerful calls to be receptive to the voice of the ancestors; there will be powerful calls for you to be respectful of tradition, because of what it represents, namely your wherewithal, everyone’s wherewithal, to continue to survive and flourish. And all this is different from Popper’s ideal in ways that need to be acknowledged and thought about. But the idea that these differences cause closed mindedness, or thus insusceptibility to intellectual change, cannot be right.

What is it for people to dialogue with one another well? I was once hugely impressed by the force of this question, and by a sense that it has not yet been considered properly here in Aotearoa New Zealand. The context for this was a conference at Akaroa, a conference on ethics of new biotechnologies. There, the views of indigenous peoples were to be represented and discussed. There were representatives of indigenous peoples of North America and of Aotearoa New Zealand. As was hugely appropriate, the conference began with many aspects of Maori protocol, by which I was deeply touched. It was in the context of an orchestration by a stick passing from person to person of participants invoking their whakapapa and thus presenting the bearings for the discussion that I discovered my inability to mihi to my fellows in this way. I could see how utterly appropriate it would be to invoke ancestry to call to mind the knowledge forms that would be shared and discussed. At the same time I found in my own cultural bearings nothing, but nothing, to connect me with that practice.

It did seem in the discussions at that conference that the more traditionally minded representatives of the indigenous voices valued within the discussion the question what would the ancestors think? Is that a legitimate question? What really impressed me was that, given the ideals for discussion that were being imported by the people without an indigenous perspective, the question could not be legitimate. The question would instead need to be, what is the better argument? The best argument in defence of the new biotechnology, or the best argument against it? If this is right, then you can respect what your ancestors would think because they gave a good argument, but then of course you’re really respecting the argument, not the ancestors. So, the ideals for discussion that were brought by the non-indigenous conference contributors reduced to zero the
special authority of the ancestral voice. But that wasn’t right, given the ideals for
discussion that were brought by the indigenous conference contributors. So there really
was a mismatch within the attempted discussion, which reflected different
understandings of what discussion should be. And so I began to think that much
attention must first be given to why cultural forms are as they are before truly bicultural
discussion can even start.

What is it about traditional culture that makes the ancestral voice extremely important?
That is something for the people who don’t have those ways of thinking first to
understand before they could enter dialogue respectfully. And what is it about this
other, Enlightenment cultural form which reduces to zero the special authority of the
voice of the ancestors? That’s something also to be understood, especially by the
indigenous people to whom it represents a challenge. It seemed to me that unless these
understandings could form, there was little prospect that truly bicultural dialogue even
would start. Attempts at it would surely instead simply fail. People would be mutually
uncomprehending.

So I took both a kind of negative lesson from this — man, have we got work to do, and
we haven’t even started, before we could have discussion that really works — but I also
took a kind of positive lesson from this, that hey, there is something crucial here for us
to start. We can start thinking together what it is to be a member of this kind of
intellectual culture, or this other kind, and why they both make sense in their respective
contexts of societal organisation and material existence, and what expectations does
each project into discussions about the form that dialogue ideally should take?

Why is it that aspects of Maori protocol are as they are? In what ways do the protocols
help confer excellence on discussion itself, and what is meant by excellence in this
connection? Pakeha have for the most part not even asked these questions, never mind
discovered how to answer them well and fairly. Their observances of Maori protocols
often are just down-time to them, a bit of time to let the mind wander, waiting for
discussion to begin. On the other hand, there is much about why Pakeha-imported
Enlightenment values for discussion are as they are that is to be considered by those
representing indigenous perspectives, and I suspect that that work likewise has scarcely
begun. It’s a worthy thing for certain purposes that the Enlightenment values are as they
are. For certain purposes it is worthy — such as for the development of arcane
knowledge say about something that only ridiculously literal-minded people would seek
to know. (An example I like is if a scientist spends a decade or more researching the
biochemistry of the muscular contractions of the mandibles of some beetle.) And who
knows, maybe the arcane knowledge in question will suddenly prove helpful (say, by
being discovered to be relevant for curing muscular dystrophy), in the weird sort of way
that happens in a scientific culture. You’re not going to get such weird and unexpected
benefits absent the Enlightenment values, and that’s a fact worth being acknowledged by
Maori.

If I can end with a challenge about this, it will be this. Enlightenment values point to a
distinction, between rhetoric and reason. That distinction informs a way of being on
guard, against bad or inappropriate moves in discussion. Appropriate moves in
discussion enable conviction to form in a way that is conditioned simply by the unforced
force of the better argument. Inappropriate moves in discussion deflect the mind from
this ideal. A corresponding question then is how is the distinction drawn in a traditional
culture, between blather, or unwarranted contribution, on the one hand, and worthy
contribution to discussion on the other? I would feel the reader to relax my own assertion in discussion of the Enlightenment values that guide me, if the form for such a distinction in traditional culture were clearer to me.

References


