

Problematizing 'Ira': Existential or rational?

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In existentialism, the term 'facticity' is used to describe how one is thrown into the world and is confronted by the world's various possibilities. One is always already in the world. Existentialists in this description seek to bring attention to lived experience before a common rationalist, Platonic tendency to think of human existence as something related to a metaphysics of presence. In this presentation, I consider the Maori term 'ira' in light of a possible existential reading – that is, I argue that 'ira' is primarily a term to describe one's particularly Maori facticity, or thrownness into the world. I also argue that the current rendition of 'ira' – gene – is a reductionist one that is a symptom of a 'metaphysics of presence' and one that actually precedes science.

The ground in advance

With the burgeoning of science, Maori academics and researchers are confronted with the drive to produce knowledge. Royal (2009), for instance, has noted that the term 'maturanga' started to flourish when the knowledge economy grew to prominence. 'Knowledge' here tends to be of the type of thinking that Heidegger (1971a) often calls 'calculative' in that it emerges from a ground that has already been preordained in advance. From this ground we have the dominant institutions such as education, law and health; but we also have logical ways of talking about things in the world, both in everyday life and in academic and scientific discourse. This ground (or apparent ground, as the Romantics such as Schelling (1858) would have it) is one that, according to Heidegger (2008), is ultimately already understood and:

determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which ... entities are already understood (pp. 25-6)).

This mathematical project, how Western man “takes cognizance of [things] as we know them in advance” (Heidegger, 1967, p. 73), is not in the first instance to do with numbers, just as the scientific translation of the term ‘ira’ as ‘gene’ is not in the first instance scientific. Modern science is a contemporary manifestation of this mathematical project, which “is the basis on which we encounter things as already given” (Glazebrook, 2000, p. 52). Thus the ground that we tend to operate from here in the West – and I include Maori too, as I believe that this encroaching idea of a firm, preordained ground is a very real threat to Maori metaphysics, as I go on to say – sets in advance how a thing is to be viewed.

So it is with the term ‘gene’, but before I delve into this let me give some very brief background to the colonisation of Maori by this Platonic ontology of presence. By presence, I mean the appearance of a thing as a solid, calculable entity in advance. In social, political and deeply philosophical senses, Maori have been affected by this other ground of belief. We continue to be. We are constantly urged to provide ‘details’ about our iwi affiliations in censuses. We are urged to turn up to schools, universities, doctors, and courthouses as bodily presences. Since the beginning of colonisation, we have been taught to view our gods as solid, identifiable entities (preferably *one* solid, identifiable entity). We have been taught to think of land as a solid, visible entity capable of definition by land block names. We have been encouraged to think of language, carvings, and arts as phenomena quite distinct from their mysterious origins. That primary mode of communication – language – we are now overwhelmingly pressured to think of as strictly adhering to linguistic conventions which are distinctly Western.

In and amongst these phenomena that have been changed for Maori through colonisation – notions of education, health, law, communication and so on – are the discrete terms that may be drawn on to ensure that those institutional ideas can continue to work. It is here that I come to the term ‘ira’ which, like many other terms in the Maori language such as ‘kaitiakitanga’, ‘whenua’, ‘whakapapa’, has been turned over to a Western worldview, insofar as, like those other terms, it now resonates with the metaphysics of presence.

The term 'ira' can be used in everyday life and scientific vernacular to mean 'gene'. This is hardly surprising, as I say, given that both science and everyday logical discourse operate from the same ground. In this representation of ira as gene, a Western worldview is given priority, because the representation assumes that one is talking about an aspect of the self that is projected as a thing. This thing can be measured, described and viewed along the lines that a gene is meant to be measured, described and viewed. Gene can only ever mean gene; and ira, despite the fact that it has a significant amount of spiritual discourse attributed to it in the literature, really just means gene. Ira is brought over to meet the expectations of the rationalist term 'gene'. From a Maori viewpoint, the term 'ira' is colonised, but so is the ontology from which it operates.

Ira's existentialism

This brings me to what I think ira 'is'. Rather than saying what I think ira 'is', instead I shall make some suggestions about what the term gives rise to. My reasons for this are, for me, straightforward: when we say what something *is*, we are saying that it comprises this or that and we therefore run the risk of prescribing it. Various Maori writers who are far more familiar with the Maori language than I have noted that te reo Maori has a certain something else to it. I think that, in a context in which we are considering colonisation, this 'certain something else' is partly to do with the fact that we do not have a verb in Maori to state what something 'is', as do the Indo-European languages. Thus I hesitate to say what criteria I expect ira to match up to. We should also be hesitant because, as the early Romantic poet and philosopher Novalis (1960) stated, "language is peculiar because it only concerns itself with itself" (p. 672); it is apt to open onto a clearing of darkness and uncertainty rather than illumination. The Maori language is perhaps no different from any other language in this regard; however, certain of its terms, as I have posited, have been forced to declare what we would like them to be.

When I make the statement that 'ira' *gives rise to* something, I am both purposely trying to avoid stating outright what ira *is*, and so I am mindful of colonisation, but I am also trying to remain true to what I believe is a Maori ontology. Ira, like any other Maori term, has a certain ability to incorporate itself into the world and act with other things in the world: I am reminded here of Heidegger's (1971b) famous maxim about

language that it “speaks itself” (p. 12). Language, alongside other aspects that we tend to think of as inanimate and human-centered, has some interdependent autonomy. Many Maori terms, when thought of in a broader sense than their given definition, reveal a self-development that accords to some extent with the Greek sense of *phusis*, or ‘to grow, bring forth’. Incidentally, many of our terms acknowledge this process of interaction and self-organisation, including *whakapapa*, *korekore*, and *ako* (Mika, 2011). The ontological nature of these terms is beyond my scope here, but rest assured they do indeed highlight a mysterious texture of the world, rather than a certainty about it.

So it is with the term *ira*. The closest *ira* gets to its autonomous self-revealing, in current dictionary definition, is in its notion of spiritual essence. This is a common definition given apart from ‘gene’. But this, unfortunately, doesn’t really tell us much, apart from drawing our attention to something that we are now encouraged to think of as not really part of everyday human affairs - *spiritual*. But what could it possibly mean in its everydayness, apart from or including its abstract, esoteric definition? What the spiritual definition *can* let us know about *ira* is that *ira* is greater than the translation ‘gene’ will allow. But it is an inadequate translation nevertheless. Another, less well known definition is this one:

(interjection) look! - calling for someone to look at something. (*Ira!*, 2014)

This definition is not in itself particularly telling, but it may signpost the way to theorising about the term’s existentialism. At this point it is deemed to be merely a linguistic particle – look! A house! for instance. Yet what it signifies as a response of the self to the external world is much more important. It suggests that there is an attention to things in the world. The compelling glance that things in the world have for us is, in a sense, a call to our attention, and is reflected also in the pivotal term ‘*whakapapa*’ which is about humanity’s emergence and intricate situatedness within the world. With *whakapapa*, which possesses all things in the world, the self and other things are linked but just as importantly, they have a current effect on each other. Edwards (2009) recalls that:

[a] kuia explained that uira, lightning, rekindles and connects our human whakapapa Lightning connects both the spiritual and human elements connecting the genes of the spirit world to that of the living so that the connection is maintained. (p. 253)

Ira derives from uira (hence the similarities). My problem with the equivalence of ira with 'genes' aside, I agree that there is a dynamic link between the self and other things, such that the self may be in awe as a necessary part of the self's facticity. Ira would indeed "rekindle ... human whakapapa" but in accordance with an existential reading of whakapapa that signals what we might call the 'ontological given' of things.

The definition I have focused on above, as it is cited, shares some striking similarities with the German 'Dasein', which literally means 'being-there'. We appreciate something, after all, because it is there. We are hence 'there' as well. This is where the similarities largely end, for 'ira' must acknowledge the ontological effect of things on the self (and vice versa), rather than just the effect of those things because the self is aware of them. There is a tendency in Western existentialism to put huge distance between a thing and any suggestion that that thing has its own influence. Of course, there are some exceptions – Schelling, Novalis, Wordsworth, and even the later Heidegger, for instance – but generally this is where the definition parts company for Maori. With Maori existentialism, however, things are not mere cognitive constructions of the self, as Descartes and Kant would have us believe, or as idealism wants us to imagine, but they come with their own self-determining *telos* even though the rational project would construct them as inanimate. Things have us in their thrall and they draw us to them: they affect us even without our awareness of their constant rekindling, and we respond.

Conclusion: Consequences for biocolonialism

The reduction of ira to 'gene' is, I propose, the 'first biocolonialism' because it colonises the lived experience and poses violence to a Maori metaphysics. Where Jackson (2004) has argued that the disregard for Maori cultural values that the Royal Commission on Genetic Modification displayed are political and not epistemological,

I posit that the problem is, first and foremost, ontological. Before the scientific techniques of genetic engineering, even prior to the view of us as possible resources for genes, well before discussions take place about informed consent, we have a Platonic worldview to deal with that disdains any suggestion that 'ira' could be related to a reciprocal mode of accrual between things and the self. Ira is approached in advance as an evident phenomenon. This approach conforms nicely with a metaphysics of presence because it preordains ira to mean 'gene'. It then provides epistemic certainty (or seeks to) about the self and fits nicely with a rationalist project as well.

It is important that Maori think of Maori terms in their dangerous potential for colonisation rather than their possibility for engagement *with* colonisation. Whilst we might not know exactly what ira *is*, part of the mystery of Maori existence must rest in theorising about the hiddenness of a term's significance beyond the rational dictionary definition. It is this theorising of the "mysterium tremendum" (Otto, 1958) or in Māori terms 'wana', I argue, that clears the way towards a thrownness that truly incorporates self and world.

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