



REIMAGINING THE HUMAN- ENVIRONMENT RELATIONSHIP

Indigenous Philosophy and Intergenerational Justice

Krushil Watene



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This paper forms part of the volume *Reimagining the Human-Environment Relationship* for Stockholm+50. This curated collection of ideas captures, interrogates, and elevates alternative paradigms of the human-nature relationship – existing and new, and from various disciplines and societies – creating a space to recast our relationship with the environment and inform future policymaking.

About the Author

Krushil Watene is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Massey University in Aotearoa New Zealand, where she specializes in moral and political philosophy. She has been a member of the UN Development Programme *Human Development Report* Advisory Board since 2020. She has published on the Sustainable Development Goals, intergenerational justice, and Indigenous contributions to local and global change. She is a member of the Māori tribal communities of Ngāti Manu, Te Hikutu, Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, and the Pacific island of Tonga (Hunga, Vava'u).



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"Whakapapa became a series of never-ending beginnings."

Moana Jackson, "Where to next?
Decolonisation and the stories of the land"

"We re-member hundreds of thousands of relationships - to wind, to flora, to fauna, to humans, to the dead, the star world, sky world, sea world. Everything from the humble snow flea on a glacier to the glacial age is re-membered for today and for tomorrow. There is no time differentiation in the conjuring of memory. Future is a remembered thing the very moment I give voice inside my mind to my imagined participation in tomorrow."

Lee Maracle, *Memory Serves*

This paper details several insights for the pursuit and realization of intergenerational justice that Indigenous philosophies contain. Following an explanation of some key Māori concepts in particular, the paper outlines an intergenerational orientation that situates these concepts in ways that chart pathways through complex intergenerational challenges. In this manner, the paper describes how Indigenous philosophies: enhance relationships through regenerative practices, invest in relational repair, and enable the ongoing transformation of concepts and ideas toward new imaginaries. This paper ends by articulating several practical implications that follow on from these philosophical insights. The paper highlights how Indigenous philosophies support: empowering local communities, rethinking responsibilities, and enabling innovation. In so doing, the paper notes some of the ways that policies and processes can be such that they function to realize intergenerational justice and ground an enduring sense of responsibility to its pursuit and realization.

Indigenous Philosophy

Māori philosophy situates all things within a complex system of relationships reaching as far back as the origins of the universe and as far forward as can be imagined.¹ On such a widely inclusive view, relationships are highly inclusive too. Relational constituents (relatives) include all human beings, non-human animals, flora and fauna, natural entities like land and waterways, as well as such things as knowledge and practices. Similarly, relational combinations (relations) stretch across diverse and multiple constituents in both linear and lateral directions – extending backwards and forwards in time, as well as outwards to include all things in the present.²

The Māori term used to capture this complex relational system is whakapapa (literally, to place in layers). Whakapapa layers and records numerous relationships, interacting across vast distances in time and space. These relationships are recorded as connections and separations – the meeting places and the spaces in between those meeting places. By recognizing both, whakapapa can help to explain the importance of similarities and differences and can help to unpack how distance is navigated and associations forged. In so doing, whakapapa can begin to elucidate the normative significance of relationships by providing a framework to further explore the extent to which relationships can be enhanced and/or diminished – and thus provide a range of insights for relating well. In Māori philosophy, well-being, development, and justice are, consequently, understood primarily in relational terms, bound up with a set of associated normative values and reciprocal responsibilities for relating well embedded in them.

For many (if not all) Indigenous peoples, navigating our complex (multiple and multidimensional) relationships is vital to intergenerational well-being and justice. In southern Africa, for example, the notion of ubuntu encompasses the idea that a person's humanity is inextricably bound up with a life lived in relation to and within human and non-human communities.³ Similarly, thriving relationships with other people and the natural environment play a central role in mabu liyan, or the notion of

well-being held by Yawuru in Broome, north-western Australia.⁴ In North America, relationships as well as the need for cooperation and justice between all beings ground the Anishinaabe good living concept of *minobimaatisiwin*.⁵ In Latin America, the Quechua good living notion of *allin kawsay* takes reciprocity in human interactions with nature as fundamental. Across the broader expanse of the Pacific, too, such as in the ethical framework of *teu le va*⁶ and the ontological theory of *ta-va*,⁷ navigating complex relationships play a primary role. For these and many other Indigenous communities, well-being and justice begins at the intersections of widely inclusive relationships – not least where our relationships with each other and the natural environment meet. By taking relationships as basic, these philosophies recognize that all things stand in relation, and that flourishing is a joint and collective endeavour.

Kaitiakitanga

For philosophies that place such a high emphasis on relationships, regenerating relationships is vital. Whakapapa is, thus, not merely a conceptual framework in which to situate the various combinations of relational constituents, but informs processes and practices to reinforce and remake relationships, too. The Māori word *whenua*, for example, means both land and placenta, recognizing and honouring intimate human-nature relationships in language. In addition, Māori botanical naming practices contain records of how plants function within a particular ecological system – such that the same plant species can have distinctive names across (often radically) different ecological contexts.⁸ More generally, as Robin Kimmerer details, the word used for plants in some Indigenous North American languages literally means “those who take care of us.”⁹ These relational sentiments are further exemplified in rituals of encounter in which Indigenous individuals will situate their identities in relation to stars, rivers, mountains, ancestral lands, and generations of people – detailing their places within a wider socioecological network. And this is all transmitted and remade in various artforms, too, that embed and extend these relationships through narratives in a range of customary and contemporary forms – storytelling, weaving, carving, music, and dance.

Kaitiakitanga (often translated as stewardship or guardianship) is another important way in which Māori philosophy captures, protects, and reinforces socioenvironmental relationships. As detailed elsewhere, one way to think about *kaitiakitanga* is in terms of *whakapapa*: situated at the intersection of human-nature relationships, constituted by a diverse set of socioenvironmental practices, and relying on deep local knowledge, relevant practical experience, and structures enabling the transfer of both.¹⁰ In such a way, *kaitiakitanga* can be understood as a collection of responsibilities, enacted by Māori communities to reinforce and enable flourishing socioenvironmental relationships.¹¹

The Māori concept of *rāhui*, for instance, places temporary constraints on human activities to ensure immediate responses to threats of serious harms. A key component of Māori customary fishing, for example, are harvesting limits based on securing flourishing in the long run. Temporary closures of marine areas or restrictions on harvesting would be used whenever species monitoring indicated that recovery was required.¹² Similarly, to prevent the spread of *kauri dieback* disease (*phytophthora agathicida*) and thereby prevent further *kauri* tree deaths, the Māori tribal community *Te Kawera ā Maki* restricted human access to the *Waitākere* forest to enable environmental regeneration.¹³

Legislative developments in environmental law such as the granting of legal rights to natural entities similarly provide insights for relational restoration in more permanent forms.¹⁴ The *Te Urewera Act* of 2014, for instance, gives legal rights to the forested area *Te Urewera* to “strengthen and maintain the connection between *Tūhoe* [the Māori tribal community of the area] and *Te Urewera* [the

forested area].”¹⁵ These and other Indigenous restorative processes draw attention to the ways that communities recognize, and take responsibility for protecting, socioenvironmental relationships – even when (as in the case of rāhui) doing so is (temporarily) costly to them in one way or another. These restorative practices reflect the importance of innovation and responsiveness. For many Indigenous communities, protecting relationships and relating well has often meant adapting to different environments to maintain both individual and communal flourishing. The Polynesians travelled across the Pacific and then through Aotearoa New Zealand, bringing knowledge with them, building on some of this existing knowledge, and developing new knowledge and practical innovations in radically different environments. Kaitiakitanga is, then, an overarching concept that describes a rich and evolving tradition, inclusive of the cumulative socioenvironmental knowledge and practice of ancestors and that continues to respond to the (ongoing) experiences of communities now and in the future.

Insights for Intergenerational Justice

Ideas like whakapapa and kaitiakitanga help to demonstrate the way that Māori and other Indigenous philosophies begin at the intersections of our intergenerational responsibilities. By contrast, in mainstream Western philosophy intergenerational justice is still an emerging field. For much of its history, mainstream Western philosophy ignored the future – in large part due to the privileging of technology and economic growth found in the philosophical perspectives that prevailed. As I (and others) have argued elsewhere, recognition of Indigenous and other marginalized philosophical traditions is an issue of justice.¹⁶ Here, however, I also focus on the way that Indigenous perspectives provide opportunities for vital insights and novel possibilities. As discussed further below, Indigenous philosophies can help to find enriching ways forward. Indigenous philosophies do this not merely by shining light on the limits of mainstream views, but by giving rise to different questions and methods for thinking through challenges that we (past, present, and future generations) collectively face.

A well-known Pacific adage is that we ‘walk forwards into the past and backwards into the future’. This metaphor is embedded in many of the languages in the region, where words denoting the past translate as ‘in front’ or ‘before’, and the future as ‘behind’ or ‘after’.¹⁷ The adage animates an important epistemic fact about intergenerational uncertainty: one walks forwards into the past because the past is (compared to the future) clear to us, and backwards into the future because the future is (compared to the past) unclear to us. This contextualizes why Pacific and other Indigenous communities look to the past and the collection of epistemic resources found therein, to help navigate present and future challenges.

The paper looks, however, to unpack a suite of values crystalized by the temporal orientation entrenched in this act of intergenerational ‘facing’. In particular, the paper draws out the following three insights. First, that this ‘face-to-face’ encounter with ancestors symbolizes an intimate connection and mutual recognition of inter- and multigenerational purpose and accountability. That such recognition, secondly, leads present generations to turn their attention to and thereby ‘face’ each other, to collectively learn from past generations – their struggles, feats, failures, and intentions. And that this act of facing ancestors and contemporaries, thirdly, forces a responsibility: to reimagine and recreate the world with and for future generations too. The adage, thus, situates each generation as both custodians of the collective memories and aspirations of previous generations, and agents of change and transformation responsible for, and to, the flourishing of those in the future.

Facing our Ancestors

To embed the idea that present generations ‘face’ the past, Indigenous philosophy needs to bridge vast distances by building intimacy between them. One of the ways that Indigenous philosophies do this is through social practices that animate these connections – thereby embedding ancestors in our everyday lives. According to Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, age plays a powerful organizing role in Yoruba culture, such that when one addresses an older person the appropriate pronoun is the same plural pronoun used to address a group of people. For Táíwò, one way to make sense of this linguistic practice is to say: ‘that to speak to someone older is to speak to history, and all its attendant accumulations.’¹⁸ In such a way, or so one might add, someone older animates, embodies, and bridges history, and thereby brings ancestors metaphorically closer. A similar occurrence can be found in the Māori language. When one asks another who they are – which is customarily the first thing uttered upon meeting – the question asked literally translates to ‘who are your waters?’ The practice of communicating who one is, therefore, often involves communicating the network of socioenvironmental and intergenerational relationships in which one is situated. In addition, this network includes both social and ecological communities to which one connects in Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as the distances travelled by Polynesian ancestors across the Pacific Ocean. For our purposes, both examples illustrate the way in which languages embed narratives of connection that continually place the past in front of us.

Broader traditions of storying and storytelling help present generations imagine and connect with people, places, and events across vast distances in time and space too. Polynesian ocean voyaging narratives tell of navigators who mapped journeys by stars in the night sky that metaphorically lifted land from sea, or imagined islands moving toward a stationary vessel.¹⁹ These narratives trace descent lines across the expanses of the Pacific Ocean, the largest body of water on earth, in some cases all the way to the Southern Ocean and Antarctica.²⁰ Land-based narratives story ancestral migrations that weave networks of tribal communities into the land and waterways – embedding connections and responsibilities across multiple generations through to today.²¹ In this way, narratives provide conceptual and cognitive tools that bring us ‘face-to-face’ with distant people and places. In so doing, ancestral narratives force us to situate ourselves as part of an intergenerational community – inspiring us to recognize and imagine relationships far beyond our own temporally and spatially-bound lives.

Facing Each Other

When present generations face the past, they face all the interwoven histories that shape their collective lives and the world they have inherited. In these moments, present generations come face-to-face with each other. At least two things come to bear on this face-to-face engagement. First, recognition of the structural injustices (past and present) that shape our harmful interactions. Second, our shared connections and potential to create new beginnings.

As we have pointed out to some extent already, Indigenous philosophies understand the importance of relational repair as part of living well. Recent events faced by Indigenous communities and pervasive global inequalities are a testament to the urgent need for relational repair across and within communities and generations today. For Indigenous (and many other) communities around the world, processes and practices of recognition that enable self-determination lay at the heart of this healing. As whakapapa helps to highlight, tracing the origins of these damaged relationships and mapping their continuing harm is vital for healing too. Of significance is the way unequal power

relations are distributed, clustered, and advanced. In addition, un-telling the narratives that enable and reinforce these degenerative relationships is significant, and the retelling of stories that bring us face-to-face with each other's truth.

Reversing our continued destruction of our natural environment is central to this healing as well. As Indigenous communities and scholars have long held, relational repair is not something to be applied exclusively to relationships among people, but rather to 'other dimensions of human experience – our relationship with the earth and all living beings.'²² Our continued unwillingness to restore relationships with nature exemplifies a failing of the present generation to uphold our side of a healthy relationship, which Deborah McGregor, drawing on Anishinaabe philosophy, refers to as *madjijjwe baziwin*. These sentiments are echoed by Robin Kimmerer:

“We need acts of restoration, not only for polluted waters and degraded lands, but also for our relationship to the world. We need to restore honor to the way we live, so that when we walk through the world, we don't have to avert our eyes with shame, so that we can hold our heads up high and receive the respectful acknowledgment of the rest of the earth's beings.”²³

Facing all our relatives is vital to bridging the growing distance between us. And as Kimmerer helps us to recognize, being able to face each other without shame is vital to well-being and justice. When we face our ancestors, we unpack the historical threads that locate our complex connections. These complex connections force us to turn our attention to each other – our histories, places in the world, and our collective responsibility for reimagining it anew.

Facing Descendants

Sometimes discussions of intergenerational justice build from the powerlessness of our descendants – beholden as they are to our decisions and actions. Indigenous philosophy, however, places them in a position of power as well. This is because 'facing' our ancestors forces us to acknowledge the way we each embody collective memories, hopes, and aspirations for the future. Just as our ancestors did, we too hope for a world that we know we will never live to see ourselves. And we know that these hopes and aspirations, and indeed the way we are remembered, depends on our descendants who will embody them. In this sense, we stand in a position of powerlessness with respect to our descendants. That our descendants will one day face us, and all that we have collectively storied (into them, lands and waterways, and the natural world) is a powerful reminder of our responsibility to work together to enact change. Not least, to write a different story.

Epeli Hau'ofa is insightful here. Detailing how narratives come to frame our way of thinking in (sometimes) harmful ways, he explains that when the South Pacific is framed as 'islands in a sea', opportunities and challenges are constrained by separate land masses that take (social, economic, historical, geographical) differences between them as the focus. A more constructive framing, he contends, is to understand the South Pacific as a 'sea of islands', thereby turning attention to the ocean as something that makes connections and shared purpose the focus instead.²⁴

“If we listened attentively to stories of ocean passage to new lands, and of the voyages of yore, our minds would open up to much that is profound in our histories, to much of what we are and what we have in common.”²⁵

Global narratives have much in common with this ‘islands in a sea’ framing. Driven by a view of the world as a collection of bounded entities separated by geography, culture, and Gross Domestic Product. Indigenous philosophies, in line with Epeli Hau’ofa’s insights, understand that our narratives are critical to our connections and identities – shaping not just who we are but what we believe we can do and be.

“Just as the sea is an open and ever-flowing reality, so should our ocean identity transcend all forms of insularity, to become one that is openly searching, inventive, and welcoming. In a metaphorical sense the ocean that has been our waterway to each other should also be our route to the rest of the world.”

The narratives we use to frame our generation will come to define our places in this world. Facing our descendants, therefore, prompts us to draw inspiration from our connections – integrating narratives woven across skies, oceans, and entire continents – and to explore and renew pathways to each other. Indigenous philosophies recognize that flourishing is not limited to our own lifetimes. By facing our descendants, we are prompted to cultivate the courage to undertake innovation and action in pursuit of collective well-being and justice.

Some Implications

Motivating and enabling responsibility-taking is the lifeblood of kaitiakitanga and wider Indigenous notions of socioenvironmental guardianship. As such, and to contribute to existing and further conversations, several implications can be garnered from the aforementioned philosophical insights. In particular, this paper focuses on the following three: 1) the importance of empowering and learning from local communities for charting change; 2) centering socioenvironmental responsibilities in policy and legal solutions; and 3) enabling flexibility and innovation in our processes and practices.

Empowering Local Communities

Indigenous philosophies and their revitalization are embedded in movements and on-the-ground initiatives enacted by Indigenous communities worldwide. These struggles have called attention to social and environmental injustices in their multiple forms, led to local, regional, and/or global statements for environmental protection, and enacted commitments to protect a range of natural entities. Legal reforms around the world, too, such as Te Urewera Act of 2014, have themselves been the outcome of decades-long struggles.²⁶ Indigenous and other local communities worldwide continue to organize and enact these social movements and struggles, many of which remain vital to broad transformative change.

There is much to learn from Indigenous and other local communities about how to enact change in even the harshest contexts and under conditions of intergenerational oppression. At least for our purposes, two lessons are particularly useful. The first concerns the role of Indigenous and other local communities in our conceptualizations of well-being, development, and justice. As argued more fully elsewhere, Indigenous and other local communities have tended to be treated as passive recipients of social and environmental policy and reform, rather than as active agents capable of responding locally and contributing to agenda- and policy-setting globally.²⁷ Transforming how policies and processes are designed and implemented so that they prioritize the contributions of activists and on-the-ground practitioners for reform is an important starting point for realizing just development pathways.

A related insight is that capabilities²⁸ must be a core focus of such things as well-being, development, and justice and thus an important aspect of enabling intergenerational relationships. A focus on what people (as individuals and communities) are able to do requires us all to adopt the intimate intergenerational 'facing' that underpins Māori and other Indigenous philosophies, and acquire the (social and global) practices²⁹ required to responsibly enact them. Such a capabilities-based approach, however, also requires that we work together – not least in genuinely equitable partnerships and for all our relatives – creating opportunities to work across cultures, age cohorts, and territorial boundaries. Here too, we can look to the way communities have been forging new ways of working together in multi-jurisdictional contexts,³⁰ as well as to the various ways that local communities are being empowered and remade around the world.³¹ Investment in and learning from these initiatives is vital.

Rethinking Responsibilities

Just as global narratives have much in common with the 'islands in a sea' view, our ideas about intergenerational responsibilities and decision-making often take this view also. For a long time, we treated past, present, and future generations as separate entities, sometimes requiring our attention, and often causing no conflicts at all.³² Whatever was good for present generations, or so it was thought, would be good for future generations. This assumption no longer holds, if indeed it ever did. We know that there is a good chance that future generations will inherit a world which threatens their survival.

For Māori and other Indigenous communities, the natural environment provides the metaphorical ocean that connects us across the world and through time. We see these connections in nature in multiple forms. Just as humans have voyaged across land and sea, birds too migrate across the globe, undertaking perilous journeys guided by the moon and stars as they travel across the night sky. The Arctic tern, for example, travels thousands of miles from the Arctic to breeding areas in the Antarctic. Whales and sea turtles too range across the world's oceans during their natural life spans, sometimes taking years to cross entire oceans to warmer feeding grounds.

For Indigenous philosophies, responsibilities principally concern our relationships with the natural world. We see this emphasis in various Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) documents from global statements³³ to national policy papers,³⁴ through to local tribal community strategic planning documents.³⁵ By centring our responsibilities as principally to restore human-nature relationships and to enable human-nature flourishing, Indigenous philosophies provide a profoundly different starting point. Such a starting point is likely to require temporary global restrictions (such as rāhui) on various practices to protect the natural environment. It would similarly require widespread legislative protections for several natural entities. In addition, it would require restrictions on consumption and production practices and the various (corporate and political) systems that underpin them.³⁶ Central, too, would be the pursuit of just transitions with and for local communities – in some cases requiring constitutional transformation. Combining provisional restrictions with enduring legislative protections in collaboration with local communities will help to meet the urgent need for action now, inclusive of the urgent need for long-term thinking and change.

Enabling Innovation


To meet the challenge of intergenerational justice in the ways suggested, we must be willing to transform our theories and practices in profound ways. We need policies and processes that nurture and cultivate good relationships. In addition, we need policies and processes that enable rather

than constrain these relationships. Our theories and practices of intergenerational justice must provide guidance at both deeply intimate and extremely remote levels for how we foster justice and solidarity within present generations and in ways that cultivate a concern for future generations.

A fundamental challenge, however, is finding the courage to look beyond our immediate shores. As we have argued elsewhere, often the uptake of Indigenous insights are constrained by existing (local and global) policy and agenda-setting systems. We need to find the courage to completely transform and remake development infrastructures and policymaking. To this end, flexibility in our systems is vital. Policies and processes, in line with ideas like *kaitiakitanga*, should not merely be stable and secure over the long term, but should allow responsiveness and adaptation also. This is likely to require a richer set of policymaking tools, diverse methods, and systems that encourage collaboration. Importantly, while long-term thinking is important, innovation is not to be found by adopting only a forward-looking orientation. Flexibility is likely to involve looking to the past for guidance – to find value in understanding how opportunities and challenges were navigated previously, to reframe and grow existing solutions in different ways, and to retrace our steps in search of opportunities for change. By doing this, the global community will be better positioned to support and enable not merely the adaptive social practices so vital to Indigenous and other local communities,³⁷ but also better positioned to realize the transformative philosophies that underpin them and on which our collective socioenvironmental flourishing depends.

Conclusion

Indigenous philosophies bring to life the idea that we are all part of an intergenerational journey. Each generation (to borrow from Moana Jackson) is part of a never-ending series of new beginnings – each born in the imaginations of generations past, with the responsibility to set the course for the journeys that follow. To embed this idea, Indigenous philosophies emphasize the importance of nourishing relationships – embedding the importance of cultivating intimate connections to a past that we were not part of and a future we will not live to realize ourselves. To this end, rich and diverse social practices facilitate our remembering (to borrow from Lee Maracle) of hundreds of thousands of relationships across vast distances in time and space. Such an intergenerational orientation reminds us that together we walk backwards into the future – facing our ancestors, each other, and ultimately our descendants' flourishing. Perhaps most urgently, it reminds us that we need to find the courage to profoundly change our story, to be bold enough to set a new course, and to inspire the will to hold the course toward a just future.



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