

CULTIVATING THE FUTURE: INTEGRATING IDEALISM AND RATIONALITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a collaborative approach to finding the level of thinking that Einstein suggested was required to ‘solve the problems of today’. We use our experiences and insight as young idealistic Pākehā (of European descent) New Zealanders to unravel the challenges and opportunities that our own worldview has constructed to reaching this level of thinking. We use a simple model which helps us to progress from the reductionist default mode of our worldview, through the chaotic complexity of the world and into a deeper place of knowing and presence. Moving through this process helps us to shift from the problem oriented thinking to a way of being in which problems dissolve into challenges and opportunities. The resultant shift from integrating the idealism of our hearts with the rationality of our heads shifts our perception of the world from tunnel vision to 360 degree vision.

“The problems of today cannot be solved with the thinking that created them”

- *Albert Einstein*

Einstein’s quote: “The problems of today cannot be solved with the thinking that created them” gets frequent citation, without too much consideration for what it actually means. This paper interprets Einstein’s ‘problems’ as those things that are prohibitive to positive development. What sort of ‘thinking’ is required of us to be able to solve the multitude of ‘problems’? What significance does that bear on the way in which we seek to solve these problems? This paper explores that new level of thinking and how we access it.

This paper is a collaboration between like-minded friends responding to the call to forge new approaches to the many ‘problems’ that we collectively face. We have not attempted to solve any particular problems – to do so would be to continue with the thinking that created them. Instead, we have entered a space of deep listening to the future as it emerges and how that

might lift us out of our endless problem solving. In this context, the writing of this paper shifts openly in and out of different voices as a ripe variety of different conscious voices emerge. In this sense we are reflexive about how we might be projecting and giving voice to our intentions: we are of the view that we are attending to more than just single issue problems. As we take a step back and practice deep listening we become present to the chance that ‘problems’ dissolve into challenges and opportunities. We associate ourselves in this way through a shifting personal and simultaneously, interpersonal global dialogue attending to common concerns that affect us as individuals, as colleagues and as a collective whole. As the reader, we ask that you join us by suspending judgement and listening for the future as it emerges. So, take a deep breath and bring yourself to your senses. Let us enter into a deep exploration of what could be co-created.

Our short time on this planet has shown it to be a place of paradox. Acts of loving kindness are plentiful and hold many communities together. At the same time, acts of abuse and deceit corrupt our cooperative sentiments and distort how we perceive our common individual and collective interests. What will it take to shift out of this paradox, to a level in which acts of loving kindness are so prolific and persuasive that acts of abuse begin to lose influence and fade into history? It is a massive question, so massive that many might call me an idealist. I have grown fonder of the word idealism in the past year. I used to get frustrated at being called an idealist but have come to realise that idealism is an integral part of getting to where we want to be, or at least *getting to maybe* as Westley et al. [1] call it.

Idealism is irrational thought – to the conditioned rational mind. It is irrational because it steps beyond what we understand will work in our present world and engages us with our hearts: idealism invokes a raw connection to the future (and the present) as it could be. Yet such an aspiration is seen as ‘youthful exuberance’ and is institutionally discouraged. Institutions tend to limit space for idealism by curtailing our free expression, requiring us to fit into predetermined agendas and timelines, and to take a "risk adverse" approach to decision-making. Such institutionalisation limits what is possible and keeps us in the paradox. How can we get institutions to make better use of our collective creative potential?

It is important that we ‘dream’ of where we want to be and then work toward how we are going to get there, rather than rigidly following the simplest linear path. When social norms limit our expression, we start to lose connection with who we are and our place in the world. A friend once said to me:

“Many New Zealanders travel thousands of kilometres around the world to find out who they are, only to find out that they already knew. This is a very long journey considering all that is required of us is to travel about 30 centimetres from our head down to our heart!”

Was this what Einstein meant – that to solve these great problems we need to connect our head to our heart?

Knowing and being who we are comes from being able to express ourselves from a place deeper than thought. Our thinking traverses time, which for many things is useful, however, when we let our thinking overtake us to the point where we do not distinguish our ability to control our thoughts, it has the tendency to become destructive and disempowering. We become focused in events of the past or scenarios of the future and lose the ability to be present to what is going on in. Thinking is a critical tool to get us to where we want to be, but it is conscious thinking that Einstein calls for. Knowing when to think and how to think has great impact on the way in which we frame situations, the way in which we take action and the way that people react to our actions.

Conditioned rational thinking is seen as the most important tool by western institutions to solve problems in a scientific manner. However, as Scharmer [2] points out, there are, in fact, two cycles of learning – the purely rational process of *learning by reflecting on the experiences of the past*, and secondly, *learning by presencing emerging futures*. The shift from dwelling in the first cycle of purely rational thinking/learning to the second cycle which is trans-rational takes us out of what Ken Wilber [3] calls ‘flatland’ (where all values are equal) and into a multidimensional state of being in which clarity, creativity, compassion and insight arise. This reflects a shift from seeing things as single issue problems, with definable solutions to seeing and listening for the interdependent complexity inherent in the universe. This is a big shift from tunnel vision to almost 360 degree vision; the impacts of such a shift are profound.

The shift that this change in thinking takes us through is:

Simple → Complex → Simple

Simple: the first simple is at present the status quo – reductionist thought processes that actively seek polarities to both simplify and understand the world. Polarising the world leaves us in flatland – there are only two options – positive or negative, good or bad. Thus in many ways flatland is self-enforcing and avoids recognising complex processes [4]. The first simple, dominated by pre-rational and rational thought is the default setting of a reductionist worldview.

Complex: It requires a degree of unlearning and self-reflexivity to accept and observe the natural complexity of the world. In reductionist mode, we resist complexity – we want to simplify to understand. The shift to complexity is embodied in such theories as systems thinking [5] and the Gaia hypothesis [6]. However, to the complexity worldview, there is a

tendency for things to seem so complexly entangled that it is hard for us to make head way – there seems to be no meaning to life, no sense of purpose – we become just one tiny part of the functioning whole. We feel isolated and disconnected from any possible unity. God (in the traditional personal sense) does not exist [7] and we lose ourselves in the complexity of our situation.

The critical distinction is that we are only lost because we pursue the first cycle of learning from past actions, and as a result, we primarily operate from past ways of doing. Hence we continue with the thinking that created the ‘problem’. We can be fixed in the mindset that this is the best we can do: to make incremental headway. To transcend such thinking requires us to move to a post-rational way of being by starting the journey from our head to our heart and listening to what might arise as we do so.

Simple: the second simple represents a profound shift that as Wilber [8] says, ‘transcends and includes’ complexity. This shift is when we begin to function both from our head and our heart as a fully integrated being. We enter a state of deep knowing, where problems cease to be problems, they shift to being challenges and opportunities. Decision-making becomes simple again because we are guided by this deep knowing that is an emergent property of an integrated head and heart. We enter the level of thinking that is required of us as inhabitants of a complex world. Westley et al. [9] call this *getting to maybe* because it is a place in which there is limitless creative potential, things have the capacity to come into existence. Access to creativity is no longer bounded by rational thought processes – neither is it irrational thought, it is post-rational. Our mode of learning is predominately from presencing the emerging future. We practice conscious thinking and deep listening to get us to where we want to be.

Slowing down to be present as an individual or with a group allows the opportunity to enter a space of dialogue with the future through the present. There are some basic principles of dialogue and relationship building that are more comprehensively covered by Scharmer [10], Wheatley & Frieze [11] and the Mapping Dialogue Project [12]: including suspending judgement, operating from a place of openness and inclusiveness (open mind, open heart, open will), asking open questions and sharing insights, and developing communities of practice that foster growth in the individual and group.

Although we may present it as such, progressing through this model is not simply a linear process. The purpose of such a model is to simplify complexity (to the second simple) for the sake of clarity rather than ease. We hope that it might serve as a launch-pad, an entry point for you to perceive what might be possible, from which you can begin to consciously engage with the full spectrum (360 degree vision) of the possible (relationships, generative states and much more).

What moves us through Simple-Complex-Simple within our own worldview?

Identifying as middle class white males in New Zealand, we live in a place of paradox. We are incredibly lucky to have both the opportunities and resources to live the life we want. However, we are unsure about what we want and how we fit in with what is expected of us. We have encountered many similarly placed young people who operate not from a place of gratitude, but are locked into a struggle against the outside world. It is the paradox of our worldview that we have so many opportunities, yet we struggle to see past ourselves.

The process of socialisation has taught us from a young age to be self-interested, to have ambitions (which are very self inflating) rather than aspirations (creative dreaming) and that the world is a difficult, competitive place to survive in. In other words, the first simple seems to be the default setting of our worldview. Added to this is the tension Pākehā (those of European descent who call New Zealand home) feel in trying to make sense of our complex colonial history which is burdened with injustice towards the indigenous Māori peoples (since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi).

We hear a deep call to come together in a place of common understanding in all of our diversity. To reach this place of common unity (community) we turn our attention to the details that divide us now. In the search for unity, we transcend from complex into the second simple and we find that that which divides us is also that which could unite us. The Treaty of Waitangi was forged in 1840 to represent how two peoples could live together in peace and harmony, in respect of each other's difference and self-determination. In this light, the Treaty of Waitangi has given us a common reference to aspire to, an open commitment based in good faith and embedded in cultural, social and political complexity. The common unity that we are called to emerges through our deep listening. Hone Kaa provided a powerful acknowledgement of the role that different cultures with different perspectives can play to empower each other [13]:

“It's good that you Pākehā are who you are, and it's important that you know who you are; but you need to understand how you are, who you are - and how powerfully you are who you are...”

Reaching towards our aspirations we are focusing our conscious attention on the details of our commitment, so that in the process of coming together we may also “heal our history” [14]. The dialogue we are engaged in is multidimensional, encompassing open discussion, exchange of knowledge; it is an active state of *being*. Moving through the Simple-Complex-Simple process is opening the space in which cultural relationships can be (re)crafted, shared and experienced. It is in the times of crisis that the greatest change can occur for we have powerful spurs to action. The challenges of climate change, the loss of biodiversity,

community cohesion, meaning and purpose (to name a few) are the greatest opportunity for Pākehā to reclaim and reconnect to forms of culture that currently evade us:

“Pākehā change depends on new passions and new values - the discomfort of taking on new things, including the tenderness and vagueness of new things. It means being willing to take on things that we aren't clear about yet, leading to discomfort and excitement, because we don't know the whole thing.” [15, p.86]

The word ‘sustainability’ invokes the paradox of sustaining current practices whilst changing to better ways of living; which is arguably a conflict of interests. However, if we listen for the deeper message that lies behind notions of sustainability, we might just hear that it is the glimmer of hope that we can exist in a place free of our destructive paradox. Idealism is that glimmer of hope that things could be different and simply by giving ourselves the space to express idealism, we are cultivating the future that *could be*. Integrating idealism with rationality, connecting our head with our heart, and moving ourselves through the Simple-Complex-Simple is a precondition to our collective sustainability.

We sense that we are required to engage our thinking with greater awareness and for us to more fully inhabit our other ways of being. Only then will our paradox of experience begin to dissolve. This paper has sought to move beyond being just a piece of paper; we hope that in some way it connects to your experience of what might be possible. Perhaps you can sense elements of the first simple, the complexity and the second simple in different parts of our writing. It is a work in progress and is very much on the edge of emergence. We feel that there is much to explore not only in how we move through the process, but also how this paper as an experience could be transformed to better engage with the thinking that Einstein called for. What would academic papers be like if they did engage to that deeper level of knowing? And finally, we ask you, does this paper even engage with the thinking that Einstein called for?

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