

***The Palace Letters: The Queen, the Governor-General, and the Plot to Dismiss Gough Whitlam***

Jenny Hocking

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In the aftermath of her long quest to unlock the Palace letters, Jenny Hocking naturally had a remarkable story to tell. In fact, she had *two* remarkable stories to tell, both of which are given high expression in this wonderful publication. In part, *The Palace Letters* is an attempt to make sense of the lingering colonial strictures that continue to shape and govern the way in which Australian historians make sense of our political past. All of the twists and turns of the protracted legal battle over the palace letters (discussed below) ultimately boil down to that one core problem. In that sense, this book defies historiographical classification. It is at once a contribution to Australia's political, institutional, legal and colonial historiography.

Of course, *The Palace Letters* also constitutes an attempt to re-examine the history of the constitutional crisis of November 1975 in light of these documents. In this regard, the final three chapters are effectively a different book, offering both a broad overview of the letters and a detailed examination of those select few that indelibly prove the involvement of the Palace in shaping and informing Sir John Kerr's actions in November 1975.

Hocking's account of her fight against the National Archives of Australia (NAA) is a great and exciting courtroom drama writ large upon the nation. She describes in vivid terms the key points of contention at stake in the case: the distinction between personal and official records; the supremacy of Australia's own *Archives Act 1983* over any convention of royal secrecy prevalent in the United Kingdom; the actual legal status of the relationship between monarch and governor-general; and ultimately the responsibility of the NAA to act as the custodian of Australian records in the interests of Australian citizens. The financial risk that Hocking assumed in this process is all the more staggering, considering that she faced the combined resources of the NAA, Government House, and the profound interventions of Attorneys-General George Brandis (a longstanding Kerr confidant) and Christian Porter. The outcome was, as we know, the release of the palace letters, not only in a burst of triumph for Hocking, but in what she very aptly describes as "pure theatre" on the part of the NAA (p. 169).

In my view, Malcolm Turnbull's Foreword to this book is somewhat jarring. Admittedly, Hocking has much in common with Turnbull, whose career involved multiple attempts at curtailing the reach of the British establishment in Australia, most famously in his defence of the publication of Peter Wright's *Spycatcher* in Australia. Against that backdrop, it is all the more unsettling that Turnbull allowed Brandis to encourage the NAA's expensive legal battle against Hocking, or at the very least, did not intervene. In the text, Hocking recalls that her legal team sought some kind of indication from Turnbull in 2017 as to whether or not he had advised the Queen to simply release the letters, only to receive the following reply: "Discussions/communications between the Prime Minister and Her Majesty the Queen are confidential" (p. 100). In the Foreword, Turnbull simply says

that it was “better to await the resolution of the issue in the Federal Court” (p. xii). Notwithstanding Turnbull’s praise for Hocking’s “tenacity” (p. xi), one is left pondering the nature of his contribution to this book.

Having told the story of the fight to get access to the Palace Letters, Hocking then revisits the nefarious history of the dismissal in light of these new documents. In doing so, she makes a compelling case that “the Palace was aware from September 1975 of Kerr’s concern for his own position” (p. 189), as well as Kerr’s preparedness to consider dismissing the Whitlam Government. Hocking shows that the appropriate notes of caution and care were not sounded by the Palace in response to the clear provocations that Kerr offered in his letters, and that Sir Martin Charteris indiscreetly pointed Kerr to Canadian legal theorist Eugene Forsey’s activist defence of the reserve powers. This is the supreme act of royal intervention in the domestic crisis of 1975.

Profoundly, Hocking also outlines the extent to which the Palace initiated an expurgated version of the dismissal after the event, including careful and considered reassurances to Kerr through 1976, efforts to quietly remove him from office in 1977, and most strikingly, a serious “royal whitewash of history” by way of intervention in Kerr’s memoirs (p. 147). She notes that the Palace’s tone in the vice-regal correspondence shifted dramatically as public discord over the dismissal wore on through 1976 and 1977.

Given their voluminous nature, this book necessarily offers a fleeting examination of the Palace letters, in which the reader flits across several short extracts from multiple letters in a single sentence. This approach was entirely necessary for this book, but far more can and should be said in another forum. I could think of nothing better than a revised edition of *Gough Whitlam: His Time* (2012) with these new documents studied alongside the dramatic events of 1975 in its totality.

Finally, this book rightly skewers Kerr’s reputation as governor-general, and adds to the existing literature on his character deficiencies at a moment in time when fortitude of character was called for. However, Hocking repeatedly identifies, without greatly elaborating on, Kerr’s capacity as a performer. Long before the dismissal, it appears that Kerr had a keen eye fixed on posterity. If the Palace letters are partly a vice-regal performance for the monarch, they are also in great measure a deliberate performance to us, the historians and readers of the future. The involvement of official secretary David Smith in crafting these letters was partly predicated on that notion of performance; so too was Kerr’s decision to have Smith copy the letters for him. Hocking tells us that Kerr “wanted these letters to be released” in the hope that they would support his version of the dismissal (p. 25). Like his other letters, papers and brief journal, the Palace letters were carefully choreographed at the outset, and even more so in the act of replication and depositing. By way of these letters, Kerr is still performing his case in the court of historical opinion, though rightly to no avail.

*Joshua Black*

*Australian National University*

***Māori Philosophy: Indigenous Thinking from Aotearoa***

Georgina Tuari Stewart

Bloomsbury, 2020; Paperback; 157 pages; ISBN 9781350101654.

*Māori Philosophy* is a brief but detailed introduction to some central philosophical questions from the perspective of the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. It covers Māori ideas about the self, knowledge, the world, and the challenges of trying to establish these philosophical views within the dominant Western paradigm. While Stewart is a professor of education and not an academic philosopher, she effectively criticizes some of the philosophical assumptions underpinning Western knowledge. The book stakes a claim for the value and legitimacy of indigenous philosophy, arguing that it is both harmful and absurd for Aotearoa New Zealand to consist of philosophical communities that are mutually excommunicate. It is therefore one of the unique benefits of cross-cultural perspectives in general—and of this book in particular—that the reader is exposed to unfamiliar and different ways of thinking which, for that very reason, help us to recognise and question our own philosophical premises. The book is divided into seven chapters that each address a distinct but interrelated aspect of Māori philosophy.

The first and second chapters begin by introducing several main themes and theoretical concepts from various disciplines that inform Māori philosophy. Stewart thoughtfully identifies the dangers in romanticising Māori philosophy as a pure and symbolic system on the one hand, and the tendency for Western minds to study Māori thought from an exclusively Western philosophical and scientific perspective on the other. She briefly challenges the universalism of the scientific method and introduces Māori philosophy as a distinct form of knowledge with its own epistemological framework, one which relies on Māori language, culture, and experience to fully comprehend. The unapologetic tone and breadth of research makes for some thought-provoking and important claims, although her concise approach comes somewhat at the cost of a more detailed analysis.

Chapter Three explores the first of the three main topics of the book: Māori ideas about the self. According to Māori philosophy, persons are made up of two parts: *waitahi* or *tinana* (the physical body) and *wairua* (the psyche, soul, or spirit). Stewart introduces this by way of analogy with a flax plant—a symbolic representation of the way Māori think about the self as an inseparable expression of the land from which humans originate. This stands in stark contrast to the more individualistic and separate sense of identity so characteristic of Western thought. This cultural difference is not lost on Stewart, who makes a compelling case that it manifests in misinformation and misunderstanding between Māori and non-Māori in the social and political landscape of present-day Aotearoa New Zealand.

Building upon these ideas about the self, Chapter Four explores Māori ideas about the world. Stewart argues that Māori find themselves living in two worlds: *te ao Māori* (the Māori world) and *te ao Pākehā* (the Pakeha, or Eurocentric world). Much of the way that *te ao Māori* is expressed is through narrative stories which describe a genealogical model of the universe that underpins Māori thought and conduct. This acts both as an explanatory tool for the world and as a guide for ethical behavior in it, which is based on principles such as ecology, community, and unity with the natural

world. As in the previous chapter, Stewart masterfully contrasts and explains the challenge of navigating between te ao Māori and te ao Pākehā in social, political, and academic contexts.

Chapter Five addresses the final of the three main themes: Māori knowledge, with Stewart arguing this must be evaluated according to its own epistemological framework. Māori ways of knowing resist being neatly pigeonholed into the more abstract, logical categories of Western science and philosophy, and Stewart makes a convincing case that any such attempt is apt to be a projection of characteristically Western categories of thought. Without appreciating basic differences in the very methods of thinking, Stewart argues that indigenous knowledge tends to lose its meaning by being assimilated into the Western canon through “epistemic colonization” on the one hand or to be excluded as myth and superstition on the other. The conundrum that Stewart faces is squaring this incommensurability with whether her book is intended to be an exposition of Māori knowledge for Western audiences or not. The solution, she persuasively argues, is to neither exclude nor assimilate Māori knowledge—but to recognize culturally different forms of acquiring it.

The final two chapters conclude by utilizing narratives and stories to highlight the impact of the clash between Māori and Pākehā cultural worldviews, with a special focus on the thorny issues of racism and cultural appropriation that strain intercultural relations. However, the final chapter begins with the (in my view) overblown conclusion that Eurocentric knowledge is supported by unsound philosophical commitments. At best this overstates the more careful and pointed arguments made in the previous chapters, and at worst commits the very vices of oversimplification and generalization which Stewart argues characterize Western accounts of indigenous thought. Nevertheless, a plausible case is made that an absence of clarity about basic cultural differences is partly responsible for the exclusionary attitude of Western knowledge.

Because of its different approach to philosophy, readers who are looking for sustained reasons and arguments in support of the author’s conclusions about the nature of the self, knowledge, and the world are unlikely to be satisfied. For such a person will immediately ask what the evidence is for such things as *wairua*, or how ethical truths logically follow from the premise that human beings and the natural world are one unified process. Yet such demands are symptomatic of the very philosophical assumptions whose vice-like grip Stewart is attempting to loosen, and so to insist upon them is to miss the point entirely. These factors simultaneously make the book difficult to situate within the field, while also constituting its most significant contributions. For quite apart from being the first book with “Māori Philosophy” in its title, it offers an excellently accessible introduction to Māori thought and invites us to take a closer look at what ought to count as knowledge about ourselves, others, and the world around us.

*Darryl Mathieson*

*Victoria University of Wellington*

***Being and Reason: An Essay on Spinoza's Metaphysics***

Martin Lin

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The metaphysics of Spinoza have recently re-emerged as a topic of interest and are now frequently investigated as concepts of historical significance. In *Being and Reason: an essay on Spinoza's metaphysics*, Martin Lin engages with Spinoza and his *Ethics* as one would a contemporary philosopher, controversially defending a realist interpretation of his metaphysics.

Broadly, *Being and Reason* works systematically through the core tenets of Spinoza's metaphysics: the doctrine of mind–body parallelism, that all things strive to persevere in their being, and that all objects or 'particular things' are modes of one infinite substance. Each of the seven chapters is devoted to a specific area of Spinoza's metaphysics. And yet, what is interesting about Lin's book is not the mere investigation of Spinoza – as noted, in recent years he has been a popular philosophical figure with whom to engage – but rather his overarching goal. Previously, it was thought that Spinoza's rationalism was all-encompassing, with all truths requiring an explanation. However, Lin argues that the demand extends only to truths about what exists and what does not exist; since many truths involve topics where existence is irrelevant, they consequently do not also require an explanation, and as such, Spinoza's rationalism is far less demanding than assumed. For example, I might state that the woman I am pointing to is Jane, and it is true that Jane is not Kate; I do not need to explain why Jane is not Kate, as Kate's existence is irrelevant to it being true that Jane is Jane. Lin contends that Spinoza allows that for some truths, there simply may be no explanation, and that it is acceptable that aspects of reality are fundamentally incomprehensible or ineffable.

Proceeding in order through Spinoza's presentation of *Ethics*, Lin leaves no stone unturned, dealing chapter-by-chapter with substance, God, attributes, modes, conatus doctrine and teleology, and metaphysical rationalism – specifically, Spinoza's Principle of Sufficient Reason, which has traditionally been understood to assert that everything can be explained via reason.

In his defence of a realist interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics, Lin begins with the cause of confusion when it comes to analysis of Spinoza's metaphysics: his befuddling entanglement of metaphysical claims with those of logic, epistemology and cognition. However, according to Spinoza, metaphysical attributes must necessarily be perceived through the intellect, a cognitive process, and therefore being must mirror reason. Lin then branches off from the accepted interpretation of Spinoza to argue that while functionally identical, being and reason are two separate orders, and as such we are not dependent on concepts to perceive the world; the world contains a fundamental nature, and we, as the perceivers, are capable of grasping it without encountering a dense conceptual veil blocking an immediate view. Instead, we may accept that that which is unexplained may simply be unexplainable; and that which is encountered must be encountered directly. Lin argues that Spinoza affirms that reason is sufficient to account for the existence *and*, critically, the *non-existence* of things.

Lin's book is significant not only for his argument for realist metaphysics but for the way in which he does it: engaging with Spinoza not as an impenetrable historical figure, but as a contemporary colleague. The views of a living or modern peer are open for scrutiny in a different way in that it is appropriate to ask, not only 'What is it that they have done here?', but also, 'Are they *right*?' In response to the typical philosophical investigation of Spinoza's work, Lin incorporates contemporary science: quantum theory and modern physics. Such an approach may be considered contentious for two reasons. First, one may claim this approach does not do justice to an historical work which should be reviewed with respect to the knowledge of its time. However, Lin is aiming beyond an attempt at mere interpretation and instead also prioritises investigating the philosophical truth of Spinoza's metaphysical claims, a goal which demands they be evaluated against modern evidence. Secondly, establishing a collegial discourse with an historical philosopher opens their assertions to interpretation: it may be argued, as one would comfortably with a living philosopher, that they simply meant something else. In Lin's case, the position is that Spinoza's metaphysics are not as radical as once believed. The only potentially problematic element – dependent on one's openness to Lin's approach – is that Spinoza is not capable of response. A detractor might also argue that given Spinoza's reputation for being an odd and secluded person – in his philosophy and life, he was and was known for being a lone wolf – his views may be correctly interpreted as being as radical as they initially appear, and Lin's attempt to 'ground' them in a healthy rationalism is misguided.

Regardless, Lin's *Being and Reason* is an excellent book, well written and balanced. Lin has treated Spinoza's metaphysics with the care and detail any contemporary philosopher would be honoured to receive. Given the complexity of Spinoza's metaphysics, *Being and Reason* is best suited for those with an academic background in philosophy and offers both a stimulating interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics and a refreshing contemporary approach to engagement with historical philosophy. Opening the final chapter with a quote from Queen Victoria – 'To try to find out the reason for everything is very dangerous and leads to nothing but disappointment and dissatisfaction' – Lin makes his stance on correcting idealist misinterpretations of Spinoza's metaphysics clear: reason has room to coherently permit unknowable unknowns.

*Ari Moore*

*University of Tasmania*