

DECOLONISING KNOWLEDGE : IN WHAT SENSE IS AN ‘AFRICAN’ ETHIC POSSIBLE?

Ex Africa semper aliquid novi (?)

By Prof Piet Naudé (Inaugural address)

Opsomming: In hierdie intreerede word die aandrag op ‘dekolonisasie van kennis’ bepreek aan die hand van pogings om ’n inheemse, Afrika-etiek op die grondslag van *ubuntu* te konstrueer. Die gevolgtrekking is dat dekolonisasie ondersteun behoort te word in soverre dit die kontekstuele toepassing en uitbreiding van bestaande kennisinhoud behels. Op verskeie gronde word geargumenteer dat die skep van alternatiewe epistemologieë wat steeds as ‘wetenskaplike kennis’ sou kwalifiseer op hierdie stadium nog nie ’n haalbare moontlikheid blyk te wees nie.

Isishwankathelo: Kule ntetha-ntshayelelo, ukhwelo “lokukhulula ulwazi kubukolonyali” lushukuxwa ngokujolise kumalinge okuqulunqa imimiselo yokuziphatha yomthonyama okanye yobuAfrika nesekelezwe kubuntu. Isigqibo sesokuba ukukhululwa kubukolonyali makukhuthazwe apho kubandakanya khona ukusetyenziswa nokwandiswa koko kuqulethwe lulwazi olukhoyo, phantsi kweemeko ezithile. Kuthiwa, phantsi kwentlaninge yezizathu, okwangoku ukuyilwa kwezinye iindlela zokuphanda ngentsusa, ubume nendima yolwazi (epistemologies) ezinokubonwa “njengolwazi olunzulu” akukhangeleki kunokwenzeka.

1. The quest for ‘decolonised’ knowledge

One of the legitimate demands of the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa has been for ‘decolonised’ education. This claim is not unique to (South) Africa and links up with a global concern about ‘colonial’ knowledge. For example, the Center of Study and Investigation for Decolonial Dialogue (n.d.) explains its decolonising effort as follows: “A basic assumption of the project takes knowledge-making, since the European Renaissance, as a fundamental aspect of coloniality – the process of domination and exploitation of the Capitalist/Patriarchal/Imperial Western Metropolis over the rest of the world”. This coloniality “denies the epistemic diversity of the world and pretends to be mono-epistemic”. The Western tradition of thought “is the hegemonic perspective within the world system with the epistemic privilege to define for the rest of the world, as part of an imperial universal design, concepts such as democracy, human rights, economy, feminism, politics, history, etc. Non-Western¹ traditions of thought are concomitantly inferiorized and subalternized. ... There is no modernity without coloniality”.

The same sentiments are expressed in the very interesting paper by Achille Mbembe, titled “Decolonising knowledge and the question of the archive”.² He asks the question what a Eurocentric canon is and then responds: “A Eurocentric canon is a canon that attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production. It is a canon that disregards other knowledge

¹ Those who resist domination by Western knowledge often refer to other knowledges as ‘non-Western’, revealing the deep bias they are trying to overcome.

² It seems that the lecture was delivered in late 2015.

traditions” (Mbembe, 2015:9). He proceeds: “The problem – because there is a problem indeed – with this tradition is that has become hegemonic” (Mbembe, 2015:10).

Mbembe concludes that the decolonising project has two sides: A critique of the dominant Western models of knowledge and the development of alternative models. “This is where a lot remains to be done” (Mbembe, 2015:18).

Indeed, a lot remains to be done. One could summarise the concerns of knowledge decolonisation as follows: Western knowledge traditions have become the norm for all knowledge; the methodologies underlying these traditions are seen as the only forms of true knowledge, which has led to a reduction in epistemic diversity; because of the institutional and epistemic power that Western traditions hold, they constitute the centre of knowledge so that other forms of knowledge are suppressed and are seen as inferior – a situation described as “coloniality”. Decolonisation has specific relevance to Africa, as this continent finds itself in a post-colonial era, but its knowledge and university curricula still reflect the hold of colonial power over us.

I take up this important challenge.

As an African intellectual, my academic work over the last 30 years cannot be understood other than reading it in the context of (South) Africa. After receiving a Western education here at Stellenbosch, I, early in my intellectual journey, understood the tension between the knowledge I gained through my formal studies and the interesting and varied knowledge forms found in rural Africa.³ One of my first academic projects was to challenge the dominant definitions of theology and develop what I called ‘incipient oral theologies’ prevalent among members of the Zion Christian Church. I criticised liberation theologians for their complicity in using Western theorists such as Karl Marx, Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann and I reckoned that ‘African’ theology was nothing more than expressing traditional Western truths in African cultural forms (see Naudé, 1992; 1993; 1996).

That first project taught me the complexity of bringing different knowledges together. Although not couched in decolonisation language, I sensed that the Western tradition with its universal assumptions could be seen as a ‘local’ tradition. But I also saw that it was, at least for me, impossible to develop ‘indigenous knowledge’ in the academic sense of the word⁴ without recourse to the long canon of Western thought and sense-making categories.

I later embarked on a study of the first indigenous Christian confession written on the African continent, being the first new confession in my branch of the Reformed faith tradition for 368 years. I knew that the reception of the Belhar Confession (1986) outside the African continent would rely on us demonstrating its consonance with the already accepted ecumenical and catholic (‘universal’) tradition (read Naudé, 2010). The distinctive African content of the

³ My first full-time academic position was at the University of Venda and I completed a fieldwork study on oral liturgies in the Zion Christian Church, from which a few publications followed.

⁴ This is an important qualifier: There are many forms of knowledge expressed in cultural practices, customs, myths, folk songs and so forth. But the moment these mostly implicit knowledges are to be made explicit in reflective, rational terms, the recourse to existing Western forms is the default position. It is this hegemony that is challenged in the decolonisation project.

confession had to be communicated in the language and thought forms of the tradition, dominated as it is by Western⁵ theology.

I have come to accept the reality that it is indeed possible to develop, in conjunction with the Western tradition, indigenous theological knowledge under the constraint that such contextual knowledge, to be received into ecumenical debates, has to be expressed via a careful explanation of local conditions and in the categories established in the Western tradition.

Have I therefore succumbed to being a ‘colonised’ academic? Do not judge too soon.

In this inaugural address, I will speak to some of the salient issues raised in the decolonisation debate via the case study of an African ethic. I will confirm the concern of centre-periphery power-asymmetry so eloquently expressed by decolonisation academics. As Mbembe intimates, this is the easy part. The constructive effort to build an alternative is the difficult task. I will therefore embark on a discussion of different ways in which one can talk about ‘African’ ethics, taking the *ubuntu* debates as main example of the potential and constraints of such an ‘African’ ethic. The paper ends with a short evaluation of the central claims of the decolonisation project.

As a precursor to the discussion, it is important to raise the concern that to talk about ‘African’ ethics rests on the questionable assumption that it is indeed possible to speak about ‘*an* African’ approach abstracted from the complex histories, cultures and geographies of Africa.⁶ This is a familiar paradox where one attempts to build a model based on generalisations while knowing that such generalisations are distortions of the particularities from which they are abstracted. Where these generalisations are mostly filtered through the lenses of colonial and postcolonial views, the task for abstracting an ‘indigenous’ or ‘traditional’ African view becomes even more complex.

It would therefore technically be more appropriate to speak of African knowledges or ethics or value traditions in the plural form. This is, however, rarely done, as we have grown accustomed to explain particular complexities with a singular and a universal approach. Models gain their explanatory value exactly from such generalisations and I shall therefore venture to speak about ‘African ethics’ in the singular, though I will later in the paper raise concerns about the empirical validity of the very general value claims made in the name of ‘sub-Saharan African people’.

Advocates for decolonisation are right that by adding the adjective ‘African’ (or Chinese,⁷ or Japanese⁸) to ethics, the marginal intellectual and geo-ethical position of Africa may be reinforced. In the ‘centre’ there is (an assumed) ‘universal’ ethics derived from the dominance of Western philosophy, which is taken as the norm and point of reference, but rarely described

⁵ The dominance in academic circles of the West must, for theology at least, not lose sight of the significant reach and influence of the Eastern-Orthodox tradition and the blossoming of indigenous Pentecostal movements.

⁶ In the same way it is an abstraction to speak about ‘*a* Western’ or ‘*a* European’ approach.

⁷ See the Chinese approach to business ethics as set out by Xiaohe Lu (2010).

⁸ See the classic text written already in 1899 by Inazo Nitobe (source here from 2004) on Samurai ethics in the context of Japanese culture.

as ‘Western’.⁹ And on the margins are the adjective ethics with curiosity value and an overt contextuality.¹⁰

The reality facing a scholar from Africa (or other marginal sites) is that there is no way to escape the already well-developed traditions in ethics with the accompanying technical terms and canonical/classical texts. This is in fact the very way in which African-based scholars are introduced to ‘ethics’. There is no *tabula rasa* or Archimedes starting point ‘in Africa’ from where one can subsequently approach the established canons of ethics built over a 2 400-year reflective, written tradition in the West.

The intellectual journey to Africa always starts in Europe: An African scholar travels an arduous intellectual journey to first understand the rich and complex traditions of ‘ethics’. We learn the names of the great thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Schopenhauer, Marx and Nietzsche. We hear about the established models of ethics explained in terms such as virtue, deontology and utility. Once this tradition is understood, our hermeneutical lenses have already been shaped. So when we ‘return’ our gaze to Africa to reflect upon ‘traditional values’ or ‘indigenous knowledge systems’, the only categories and intellectual apparatus at our disposal are the Western ones. Whatever we seek and might find locally will have to be explained in English and in terms of the established academic tradition, otherwise it simply does not ‘make sense’ to outsiders. The local voice, if heard at all, will only be taken seriously if judged and legitimised in terms of the accepted standards already established. The homogenising power of academic globalisation renders ‘local’ ethics as an interesting variation on the normative tradition with which it is always compared.

2. Models of ‘African’ business ethics

Once this centre–periphery configuration is, for the moment, accepted as the reality of doing ethics, but one accepts the challenge to develop ethics from an ‘African’ perspective, three broad options for business ethics emerge in ascending order of localisation: a direct transfer of Western ethics to Africa (transfer model); different attempts to translate Western ethics into the context of Africa (translation model); and the development of a uniquely African position via the so-called *ubuntu* principle (substantive model). I will merely enumerate the first two options with minimal description, and then spend a bit more time on the potential of a substantive, alternative *ubuntu* ethics.

2.1 The transfer model

In this model, Western ethics is taken as the norm and held up as the ideal approach to ethics. This dominant tradition is then read and simply transferred to the context of Africa. There is very little ‘translation’, no contextual adaptation, and rarely any critical reception. The consequence is that the adjective ‘Africa’ in this case describes nothing more than a geographical reading location. Whether one reads Aristotle and Kant in Lagos, Cairo, Nairobi

⁹ Books with the title of ‘business ethics’ very rarely, if ever, explain themselves as *Western* business ethics, nor does one find an *American* business ethics journal in the same vein as the *African Journal of Business Ethics*. (This does not preclude American journals for sociology, bioethics and so forth).

¹⁰ That we in Africa are inevitably drawn toward the centre is, for example, evident from the very successful and good book, *Business ethics*, edited by colleagues Deon Rossouw and Leon van Vuuren. This book started in 1994 as *Business ethics: A southern Africa perspective*. It became *Business ethics in Africa* in 2002, and as from the third edition (2004) onwards, the title has just been *Business ethics*. For an appreciative discussion of this development up to 2010, read Naudé (2011).

or Berlin, it makes no difference. This is the way in which most African students are taught ethics and philosophy. We neither realise that we are introduced to a ‘Western’ tradition, nor that there are ‘Africans’ (such as Augustine and the Alexandrian School) who made significant contributions to this tradition. The question of an ‘African’ approach to ethics always comes later, if at all – and then it is impossible to jump over our own European shadows.

2.2 The translation model

There are at least three possible forms of translation that one may discern from a reading of business ethics literature. In each case, the normative position of Western ethics is accepted, but there is an interaction with the African context that goes further than a mere transfer of knowledge.

First, there is an elucidation of Western ethics from an African perspective. In this case, there is an (uneven) reciprocal relation¹¹ between Western ethics and African contexts: The Western insights are taken as basis from which to interpret local contexts with the consequence that these contexts themselves are made sense of, or are critically appraised, in terms of the accepted Western perspective with an illuminating effect on the Western idea itself.

In my paper “In defence of partisan justice: What can African business ethics learn from John Rawls?” (Naudé, 2007), the insight of structuring society behind a veil of ignorance with the least advantaged representative person as reference point is translated into the African context with specific implications for business ethics.

Second, a popular way to make a contextual, African contribution to ethics is the translation of local case studies into the frameworks of Western theories or ideas. One of the tasks to indigenise business school curricula is exactly by providing local case studies instead of dominant examples from the North.¹² Typical questions could be the following: What does the Walmart takeover or SAB Miller merger teach us about *stakeholder theory*? How can a *utilitarian approach* be used to argue for/against implementation of a minimum wage in South Africa? In what way does Islamic finance in Africa illustrate the potential of a *deontological ethics*?

A third way of translation occurs when context-specific African ethical problems are addressed with recourse to insights from the Western tradition. In this case, African ethics focuses on moral dilemmas that are particular to our context and seeks resolution of these questions by making use of Western theories. For example: Can corrupt business practices in Africa be explained by recourse to *Kohlberg’s stages of moral formation*?¹³ How can extensive

¹¹ Further examples: In what way do rites of passage in Africa represent the concept of ‘tradition’ as set out by Alisdair MacIntyre? How do African proverbs illustrate ‘choosing the mean between extremes’, as proposed by Aristotle?

¹² See, for example, the more than 500 cases listed by the African Association of Business Schools (www.aabschools.com) and the sources provided by the South African Business School Association (www.sabsa.co.za). See the interesting case studies listed in Chapter 23 of Rossouw and Van Vuuren (2013).

¹³ Lawrence Kohlberg completed his *Essays on moral development* in two volumes (1981 and 1984) and both were published in San Francisco by Harper & Row. His work has become an established part of ethical theories of moral formation.

management–labour conflicts be resolved by using the *creating shared value notion* developed by Porter and Kramer?

It is clear that the translation model does achieve a significant gain over a mere transfer, but as an example of decolonising knowledge, its contribution is minimal, as it relies on the Western insights and theories for its construction. In other words: There are local languages with some interesting variations, but the language from which and into which the translation takes place is predominantly ‘English’ (as a metaphor for the Western traditions).

2.3 The substantive model: *Ubuntu* ethics

In this model, Western ethics is taken as a valuable tradition, but there is an endeavour to develop a distinct ethics that could be called ‘African’. The claim is that *ubuntu* ethics constitutes an additional, competing and alternative theoretical framework to those received via the Western tradition. Hence the calling of this model as ‘substantive’.

There has been a considerable growth in literature to design an ‘*ubuntu* ethics’ deriving from the African continent. I will engage with some of these in the paragraphs below. The most advanced analytical work in this field has over recent years been done by Thaddeus Metz, who, in a seminal essay “Toward an African moral theory” (Metz, 2007b), outlines at least six senses in which *ubuntu* is used. He comes to the conclusion that there is indeed an indigenous African ethics that expresses the communitarian approach of Africans in distinction to the individualism of Europe. This *ubuntu* ethic may be summarised in the following principle of right action: “An action is right just insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on good-will; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will” (Metz, 2007b:338; read also Metz 2012).

To assist in the advancement of this important debate, my contribution, framed in decolonisation language, is to argue that the *ubuntu* project is based on a number of questionable claims:

First, the claim is that *ubuntu* derives from a universal respect for being-through-the-other, but it will be shown that its origin and social setting are tribal kinship relations.

Second, the claim is that *ubuntu* is a uniquely African phenomenon, but I will argue that the values associated with *ubuntu* are based on generalisations that are not empirically proven and, even if accepted, are prevalent in most pre-modern and small-scale communities.

Third, the claim is that *ubuntu* expresses African communitarian views in contrast to Western individualism and rationalism. It will be argued that personhood and autonomy are inherent in all societies, including those in Africa, and sociality or being-through-the-other is indeed integral to Western philosophy as well.

The classical academic discussion of what became known as the *ubuntu* idea derives from John Mbiti in his book *African religions and philosophy* (1969).¹⁴ I will use this work as primary reference point to develop my critical assessment of *ubuntu*.

¹⁴ It must be noted that Mbiti himself did not use ‘*ubuntu*’ in this study to describe an African philosophy, but, as will be evident, he does express the idea quite distinctly.

According to Mbiti (1969:108–109), “[w]hatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: ‘I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man”.

2.3.1 *First argument*

One should carefully note that the quotation above is set in Mbiti’s discussion of ethnic groups, kinship, (extended) family life and the individual. Mbiti wishes to avoid the negative connotation of the word ‘tribe’ and prefers to speak of ‘people’ or ‘peoples’. He emphasises that African peoples are to be differentiated on a number of factors: language, geographical boundaries (however fluid), a common culture expressed via a history with particular national figures and common ancestors, as well as common customs. He further mentions that “each people has its own distinct social and political organisation” with tribal chiefs, extended families and persons with special status. Each people also has its own religious system: “Traditional religions are not universal: they are tribal or national” (Mbiti, 1969:4). It therefore warrants to speak of African religions in the plural (Mbiti, 1969:1), while “a person cannot be converted from one tribal religion to another”, just as it is impossible to change tribal membership that is based on birth (Mbiti, 1969:103–104).

When proceeding to discuss kinship, Mbiti points out that the “deep sense of kinship, with all it implies, has been one of the strongest forces in traditional African life”. He immediately explains: “*Kinship is reckoned through blood and betrothal* (engagement and marriage).¹⁵ It is kinship which controls social relations between people *in a given community*: it governs marital customs and regulations, it determines the behaviour of one individual toward another” (Mbiti, 1969:104, my emphasis). This kinship is extended to the living dead (ancestors) and even covers animals and non-living objects through the totemic system. For Mbiti “almost all the concepts connected with human relationship can be understood and interpreted through the kinship system. This is what largely governs the behaviour, thinking and whole life of the individual *in the society of which he [sic] is a member*” (Mbiti, 1969:104, my emphasis).

Although Mbiti rightly points out that cultural exchange occurs among African peoples and that ideas found in one people may be found in a different form in another people (Mbiti, 1969:103), his discussion of the ‘*ubuntu*’ idea is fundamentally situated within the social boundaries of a particular people.

One can obviously abstract the idea of *ubuntu* from its social embeddedness in a particular people, and then develop a kind of universal goodwill idea with some moral force. This is what African (and other) ethicists do. But to claim that Africans in general traditionally (or today?) upheld a universal notion of *ubuntu* that includes ‘all others’¹⁶ is simply not supported by Mbiti’s discussion or by empirical research.¹⁷ If it is said that “I am, because we are”, the ‘we’ that shapes the ‘I’ has a particular ethnic and kinship character, and not a universal (“I am

¹⁵ See Ramose’s emphasis on the family (in its extended form) as social basis for an African philosophy. “No doubt there will be variations within this broad philosophical ‘family atmosphere’. But the blood circulating through the ‘family’ members is the same in its basics” (2002c:230).

¹⁶ In terms of the well-known moral development theory by Lawrence Kohlberg, very few people reach this level of post-conventional ethical maturity where ‘all selves’ matter, beyond the ‘I’ and ‘kinship’ relations. (I am aware of the criticism of Kohlberg from both a gender and culture perspective.)

¹⁷ See discussion on empirical evidence below.

through all others”) connotation.¹⁸ Translated into current contexts, *ubuntu* could consequently mean that I use my power in society to benefit those who are ‘of my own’. I am a person through the ones close to me and they benefit from my patronage to the exclusion of others who are not from my nation, tribe, family or political party. This tribal notion of *ubuntu* lies at the heart of factionalism in Africa.

2.3.2 *Second argument*

It is claimed that *ubuntu* is a uniquely African phenomenon, but it will be argued that the values associated with it are not proven empirically and are prevalent in most pre-modern and small-scale communities.

Mbiti points out that he is discussing African philosophy in its ‘traditional’ sense: traditional religions, traditional beliefs, traditional attitudes and traditional philosophies. He is aware of ‘modern’ influences such as education, urbanisation and industrialisation “by which individuals become detached from their traditional environments”. He is also keenly aware of the global power of modernity: “The man [sic] of Africa must get up and dance, for better and for worse, on the arena or world drama. His image of himself and of the universe is disrupted and must make room for the changing ‘universal’ and not simply ‘tribal’ man” (Mbiti, 1969:216). Some Africans are less affected by the changes (rural and illiterate people), but even where outward change to a ‘modern’ life takes place, many still hold on to some traditional beliefs.

The first problem is that the list of values associated with ‘traditional’ African society and therefore seen as expressions of *ubuntu* is as varied as there are authors on the topic: empathy, care for others, dignity, harmony, inclusivity, respect, reciprocity, forgiveness, community orientation, and so forth. The consequence is “that Ubuntu comes to mean no more than what is good or virtuous” in a very vague sense (West, 2014:49), without enough particularity to be of ethical use.¹⁹

The second problem is that the claims made in academic literature about these purported ‘African’ values have thus far not been supported by credible and reliable empirical research. Almost all *ubuntu* writers make the general claim that Africans (at least traditional ones) are ‘communal’ (with the kind of value list as above) while Westerners are ‘individualistic’. Two prominent authors serve as example of this:

Ramose bases his argument of *ubuntu* as ‘the root of African philosophy’ on a fine etymological analysis of *ubu-ntu*. This linguistic base for *ubuntu* is prevalent among what Ramose calls “the Bantu-speaking people” of Africa,²⁰ and it is on this analysis that he builds

¹⁸ I wrote elsewhere (Naudé, 2013): “When the supposedly universal boundaries of *ubuntu* (humaneness) are drawn along ethnic or party-political lines, they become a vicious philosophy of exclusion and dehumanisation. When life-enhancing social exchange is turned into corrupt buying of favour, public resources are wasted. When the social ideal of community enhancement is replaced by enrichment for powerful individuals or elite groups, poverty and social marginalisation increase. When a communitarian sense of happiness turns into an ideology of communitarianism where dissenting voices and contrasting opinions are seen as treacherous in principle, consultation (open debate), so famous in traditional African *imbizos*, dies”.

¹⁹ This is a problem that Metz admirably attempts to address in his *ubuntu* theory of right action (Metz, 2007b).

²⁰ See Ramose (2002c:230) and elsewhere in his writing.

the philosophy and ethics of *ubuntu*. But nowhere does Ramose empirically verify the transition from a linguistic feature to a moral world.²¹ In other words, *ubuntu* and its associated values are simply a construct.

Thaddeus Metz is at pains to state that his effort to build a theory of right action on the basis of *ubuntu* “is a constructive project not an empirical one” (Metz 2007a:333). This is a fair admission. But he then proceeds on the same page to say that he attempts to build a theory that is different from Western ones. The “evidence” (his word) that he gathered for this ‘African’ claim is from reading books on moral beliefs of Africans, engaging in conferences on the theme, listening to his students from Africa, and speaking to colleagues (Metz, 2007a:333, footnotes 3 and 4). He then proceeds: “So far as I can tell,²² *it is a fact* that there are several judgments and practices²³ that are spatio-temporally extensive in Africa, but not in the West” (Metz, 2007a:333, my emphasis).

As Andrew West rightly points out, claims based on personal experience, anecdotes and impressions are not ‘evidence’ in the academic sense of the word. Where such empirical-quantitative research has been attempted,²⁴ West (2014:53) also demonstrates its inconclusive results:

The mixed results and methodological limitations of all these studies preclude any simple generalisations regarding the values of sub-Saharan Africans being justified. It is premature to conclude, on the basis of existing evidence, that sub-Saharan Africans ... do or do not maintain the values of Ubuntu. At present, we can only conclude, that such generalisations are unjustified.

What happened in the *ubuntu* literature is that claims of ‘*ubuntu* values’ (as proliferated as they are) as ‘typical of sub-Saharan Africans’ (as diverse as they are) became part of the canon, and were then transmitted via academic cross-references from author to author, creating the impression of an undeniable ‘fact’.

What is ‘African’ about a set of *ubuntu* values is that it is an abstraction developed mostly by Africa-based or African-associated scholars. In this sense it is an etic, elite reinterpretation of residues of what used to be ‘traditional African’, devoid of the social practices and everyday realities of Africans subject to political, social and economic brutalities in sub-Saharan Africa. In this guise, it may function in two ways: As a utopian vision of society, it may inspire and give (false?) hope, like a kind of empty clarion call. And as a ‘narrative of return’²⁵ it may

²¹ What would the response be if I, as a native Afrikaans speaker, refer to the fact that the grammatical structure of the verb “to be” in Afrikaans has been simplified from the complexities of both German and (to a lesser extent) Dutch? The fact that all subjects (nominative case), no matter the gender or the number, use the same version of the verb to be (“is”) demonstrates that Afrikaans-speaking people of South Africa hold egalitarian values. The transition from a linguistic feature to a moral construct is just that: a construct, the plausibility of which could obviously be questioned. Metz (2007b:321) even excludes “Islamic Arabs in North Africa and white Afrikaners in South Africa” (like myself) from the sphere of *ubuntu*!

²² Is this preface to the ‘fact’ perhaps an indication of doubt?

²³ See the Metzian list of these judgements and practices in Metz (2007b:324 ff).

²⁴ See West’s discussion of various cross-cultural studies on this topic (West, 2014:52–54).

²⁵ For a discussion and literature of this term coined by C.B.N Gade in 2011, read West (2014:55).

provide Africans, subject to rapid modernisation and identity renegotiation,²⁶ some sense of anchorage in an idealised pre-colonial past.²⁷

But it fails as a project of decolonisation, because it ‘essentialises’ Africans (exactly what a colonial mind does) and as an elite abstraction it mirrors colonial power structures that exactly inhibit the move to release Africans from their oppression under coloniality.

The third problem relates specifically to the ‘uniqueness’²⁸ claim of *ubuntu*. I concur with the few *ubuntu* authors that point out that *ubuntu* is not unique²⁹ and actually expresses a universal sense³⁰ of humanity.

If we, for the moment, accept the value description of Mbiti’s ‘traditional’ African societies, the question arises whether what is termed ‘*ubuntu*’ is not in fact a description of most pre-modern, ‘traditional’ or ‘small-scale’ societies, irrespective of their geographical location? This question can be answered in the affirmative when one reads studies on personhood in ancient Egypt,³¹ concepts of autonomy in early rabbinical societies,³² the effect of monetisation on interpersonal relations in sixth-century BCE Greece,³³ the shifting concept of trust from ‘traditional’ to contemporary Chinese communities,³⁴ as well as descriptions of early faith

²⁶ The threat to a purported *ubuntu* lifestyle has its roots in the combined effect of Africans being swept off their feet by an “accelerated modernity” (Smit, 2007:83) and the impact of cultural globalisation (Naudé, 2007) together with the interiorisation of the colonial master’s image of Africans. The former implies an attitude of cultural diffidence (“global is always better than local”); the latter a deep sense of inferiority: “If I do not look, act and talk like my former master [now the centre of the global village], then I have not ‘made’ it yet”.

²⁷ For discussion and references to Gade and Van Binsberger on these criticism of *ubuntu*, see West (2014:54–55).

²⁸ Metz (2007c:375) speaks of “distinctiveness”: “A moral theory counts as ‘distinctive’ insofar as it differs from what is dominant in contemporary Anglo-American and Continental philosophy”. My view is that his theory of right action indeed shows potential of being distinctive; although its claim to be ‘African’ on the basis of particular “beliefs that are common among peoples of sub-Saharan Africa” is not convincing. The only sense in which Metz’s work is ‘African’ is that is done from a geographical location in Africa and in dialogue with a body of literature developed predominantly by African and African-based scholars.

²⁹ See Broodryk (1996:35–36) who, after comparing *ubuntu* with a variety of thought constellations (communism, capitalism, Marxism, etc.), concludes: “If unique means unusual, incomparable, extra-ordinary, Ubuntuism then seems not to be unique. Ubuntu does not exist only in one culture; people of all cultures and races can have ‘this magic gift or sadly lack it. In each of us some of these qualities exist’”.

³⁰ See Nussbaum (2009) on a “common humanity” and Lutz (2009:319) who, inter alia, forges links between *ubuntu* and Confucianism.

³¹ Famous Egyptologist Jan Assmann describes personhood in ancient Egypt as being constituted via life-in-connectivity with others: “Ein Mensch entsteht nach Massgabe seiner konstellativen Entfaltung in der ‘Mitwelt’ seiner Familie, Freunde, Vorgesetzten, Abhängigen. Ein Mensch, nach altägyptischer Vorstellung, ist ein konstellatives Phänomen” (Assmann, 2002:15). Like Mbiti’s description of relations beyond life on earth, Assmann points to the extended death rituals in Ancient Egypt to facilitate the relationship with persons in the “Nachwelt”. In short, Assmann states that the human person in ancient Egypt has his/her origin in a constellation of relationships. You are a human person insofar as you are “being accompanied” by others.

³² Read the two types of ‘autonomy’ explained by Fishbane with regard to rabbinical thought, where there is both a personal autonomy and an autonomy that is only possible within the community of believers (Fishbane, 2002:125–126).

³³ See the succinct analysis by Tony Hölscher (2014) of the transition in the Greek polis from trust-based, personal, gift and exchange communities to non-personal, transactional relations in a monetised economy.

³⁴ See Lu’s discussion of one-on-one trust in traditional Chinese communities that are being transformed by ‘modern society’ to ‘universal trust’ as response to China’s opening up to the global economy (Lu, 2010:117–127).

communities in the New Testament with the values embedded in, for example, the body metaphor.³⁵

It is clear that in most ‘traditional’ societies a person is established as person when he/she is embedded in social relations, and that there is an ontological reciprocity between individual and society. This applies to Europe as well where, for example, Ferdinand Tönnis³⁶ makes a distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) based on affectual loyalty so typical of traditional relations (*ubuntu*-type communities) and *Gesellschaft* (society), which is marked by impersonal, functional relations, for example the rational agreements contained in commercial contracts prevalent in modern, industrial contexts.

The idea that “I am a person through other persons” in a close-knit community of reciprocity is therefore not a uniquely African phenomenon. The only ‘uniquely African’ part is the depiction thereof via the concept of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.³⁷

2.3.3 Third argument

Ubuntu expresses African communitarian views in contrast to Western individualism and rationalism. It will be argued that personhood and autonomy are inherent in all societies, including Africa, and sociality or being-through-the-other is indeed integral to Western philosophy as well.

2.3.3.1 The ‘individualist’ dimension of African personhood

Let us turn to the complex notion of ‘making a person’ and the relation between an individual and the community in which he/she lives.

On the one hand, Mbiti argues what one would call a ‘communitarian’ perspective: “In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people ... He is simply part of the whole. *The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual*; for the individual depends on the corporate group” (Mbiti, 1969:108, my emphasis).

On the other hand, Mbiti holds on to what one could call an ‘individualist’ perspective: “Just as God made the first man, as God’s man, so now *man himself makes the individual who*

³⁵ See the narratives of these small-scale communities in the book of Acts and the normative vision of reciprocity, care, benevolence, service and assistance (*ubuntu* values?) contained in the letters to the Corinthians chapters 12–14, Romans (Chapter 15), Ephesians (Chapter 4) and Philippians (Chapter 2).

³⁶ His book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundbegriffe der reinen Soziologie* was originally published in 1881. It is a sociological reflection on the transition from rural, peasant communal (*ubuntu*?) societies to associational societies based on impersonal relations. See the 4th edition published in 1922 by Karl Curtius in Berlin: <https://archive.org/details/gemeinschaftundgg00tn> (accessed 21 January 2017).

³⁷ Where this false claim to uniqueness and fuzzy upholding of certain values shows itself in glaring obviousness is when *ubuntu* is translated into leadership and management literature. In preparation for this address, I read some of the popular books by, for example, Mbigi (2005), Broodryk (2005) and Msila (2016). I respect, and in fact support, the translation of academic knowledge into business-friendly and ‘popular’ format. This is what business schools are supposed to do. However, my general conclusion is that *ubuntu* has become a convenient marketing catchphrase (with all the necessary emotion and African flavour attractive to corporate customers) to say nothing new. Catchphrases such as ‘managing people as people’, ‘interdependence’, ‘service leadership’ and ‘collective decision making’ are well known in existing management literature. Depending on one’s ideological position, the rash commodification of *ubuntu* may in fact be viewed as an act of treachery against the decolonisation project. For a critical discussion on the marketisation of *ubuntu*, read McDonald (2010).

becomes a corporate or social man” (Mbiti, 1969:108, my emphasis). An example of this is polygamy, which must, according to Mbiti, ultimately be viewed in the context of enhancing immortality: The greater the number of offspring, the greater the opportunity to be reborn in the multitude of descendants and to be remembered by and through them. A man who enters into a polygamous marriage is ‘making’ both himself and the community. “Such a man has the attitude that ‘the more *we are*, the bigger *I am*”” (Mbiti, 1969:142, emphasis original).

Mbiti also qualifies his references to corporate descriptions to ensure that the element of individuation is not lost: “Therefore, when we say in this book that such and such a society ‘believes’ or ‘narrates’ or ‘performs’ such and such, we do not by any means imply that everybody in that society subscribes to that belief or performs that ritual ... *Individuals hold differences of opinion on various subjects*” (Mbiti, 1969:3, my emphasis) – a further testimony to the active presence of individuals and individuality in a given social context (though constrained by patriarchy and other social allocations of power).

This important dimension of ‘self-making’ or *autopoiesis* is lost in the crude contrast that African ethicists set up between ‘Western individualism’ and relational ‘African communalism’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002). In no society, neither Western nor African, can an individual create him- or herself *ex nihilo* or outside of social relations (Keller, 2002:200–201) because the idea that a person can exist as an unmediated sociological reality is simply that – an abstraction, an idea (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002:67).

Based on their careful anthropological studies in Africa, the Comaroffs make a number of important observations:

There is no generic view of *the* African conception of personhood. “There is no such thing” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002:68). Personhood is indeed a social construction and ‘the person’ is a dynamic negotiated entity, a constant work-in-progress that plays itself out in a social context that is at once highly communal and individuated (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002:69, 72) and subject to the resistance of countervailing forces (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002:76). The “foundational notion of being-as-becoming, of the sentient self as active agent in the world, was so taken for granted that it went largely unsaid” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002:73).

The conclusion is clear:

Nowhere in Africa were ideas of individuality ever absent. *Individualism*, another creature entirely, might not have been at home here before the postcolonial age ... But, each in its own way, African societies *did*, in times past, have a place for individuality, personal agency, property, privacy, biography, signature, and authored action upon the world ... All of which ought to underscore, yet again, why crude contrasts between European and African selfhood make little sense ... (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002:78, original emphasis).

This notion of personhood is confirmed by African scholar Kwama Gyekye. According to him, the first postcolonial leaders in Africa (such as Senghor and Kenyatta) overemphasised the communitarian or communalist nature of traditional African societies to provide a basis for experiments in African socialism (Gyekye, 2002:298–299). This communitarian conception,

reinforced by African philosophers such as Ifeanyi Menkiti,³⁸ upholds the ontological primacy and independence of the community over against the individual with the implication that “the person is *wholly* constituted by social relationships” (Gyekye, 2002:298, original emphasis). On the basis of moral agency (individuals are held responsible for their actions) and autonomy “that enables one to determine at least some of one’s own goals and to pursue them” (Gyekye, 2002:306), Gyekye rejects as “misguided” the simple contrast between African and Western notions of the person (2002:303). Gyekye holds a restricted or moderate communitarian view (2002:306), because “it cannot be persuasively argued that personhood is *fully* defined by the communal structure or social relationships” (Gyekye, 2002:305, original emphasis).

The dynamic nature of African humanness (not humanism) implies for Mogobe Ramose, inter alia, that one’s humanity is confirmed by recognising the humanity of others. This in turn implies that human subjectivity is an essential part of *ubuntu*. “If this were no so, it would be senseless to base the affirmation of one’s humanness on the recognition of the same in other” (Ramose, 2002a:644). The group is neither primary to nor does it supersede the individual. “The crucial point here is that *motho* is a never finished entity in the sense that the relational context reveals and conceals the potentialities of the individual” (Ramose, 2002a:644).

Now that we have established the ‘individualist’ dimension of African personhood implied by *ubuntu*, but mostly ignored by African ethicists, let us turn our gaze in the other direction: Is it correct to assume that the Western tradition operates with a rational, autonomous and individualist notion of personhood and that it is therefore different from Africa, which purportedly upholds a ‘relational’ orientation?

2.3.3.2 *An expanded view on Western notions of personhood*

Let us start by pointing to the deep paradox in the very notion of an ‘autonomous individual’, because “a non-contextual autonomy – autonomy in and of the self, rather than in relation to another – does not exist”. The reason is that “autonomy always arises within a context, relative to those from which it claims its independence” (Keller, 2002:194). There is always only, paradoxically speaking, a *relational* autonomy.

Acknowledging the context dependence of any claim to ‘autonomy’, Keller suggests that we need a social ontology wherein we recognise “the self always and only emergent from its matrix of relations – and therefore never strictly speaking autonomous, however free the agency of that emergence” (Keller, 2002:199). This would hold true for the ‘thinking I’ suggested by Descartes as well as the Enlightened person who is an autonomous rational being according to Kant. Yes, we indeed find in Descartes and Kant (see below) powerful expressions of ‘the turn to the subject’, but to suggest that this subject is to be equated with a purely decontextualised self-referential individualism is to overlook the fundamental ambiguity of relational autonomy in principle.

Rene Descartes

It has become the custom by African ethicists to build the contrast between *cogito ergo sum* (Western thinking) and the African *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Mbigi, 2005:69–70). This

³⁸ See the 1984 essay by Menkiti with the title “Person and community in traditional African thought”, in which he (in my view, wrongly) interprets Mbiti as putting forward a view that personhood is completely determined by communal relations.

interpretation is a misreading of Descartes, as it assumes that his view of the human person is fully expressed in the *cogito ergo sum* dictum. The confusion arises because Descartes' epistemology is isolated from and simply conflated with this anthropology. African ethicists therefore make a category mistake by comparing Cartesian apples (how do I know?) with African pears (how do I relate to others?).

As is well known, Descartes' aim was to establish an irrefutable basis for knowledge.³⁹ Via a process of methodical doubt he came to the conclusion that the only certainty is in fact doubting all existing knowledge. But to doubt means that I, the doubting individual, must exist. He wrote in his *Meditations* II: "So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it" (Descartes, 1952:78).⁴⁰ Descartes' further conclusion, after positing that thought is a vital attribute belonging to him, is that he is a real thing and really exists. "But what thing? I have answered: a thing which thinks" (Descartes, 1952:79).⁴¹

This summary of himself as 'a thinking thing' early in the *Meditations* reflects his search for an irrefutable basis for true knowledge, but does not exhaust his view of himself as a human person. As Descartes addressed the difficult question of sense perceptions such as feeling pain and hunger and thirst, he asserted that nature teaches him ...

... that I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am very closely united to it, and so to speak so intermingled with it that I seem to compose with it one whole ... For all these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain, etc. are in truth none other than certain confused modes of thought which are produced by the union and apparent intermingling of mind and body (*Meditation VI*, Descartes, 1952:99).⁴²

In his last published work, *Passions de l'ame* (*Passions of the soul*) (1649) Descartes (as the title suggests) turned his attention to discuss the feelings and experiences that arise from the interaction between body and spirit. The six basic passions are wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness, which are seen as physiological phenomena to be studied from a natural scientific perspective to ensure that they are beneficial to humans because they are understood and controlled. The freedom of the human person lies in the ability to reflect on and steer the reciprocal interaction between mind and body, constituting the person as a "master of his experiences" (see Perler, 2002:161).

While Descartes maintained his dualism as well as the primacy of the thinking soul, it would be inappropriate to reduce his richly developed view of the human person to a mere 'thinking I' and then build upon this reductionist basis a perception of 'the Western tradition'.

³⁹ Read the recent impressive history of scientific thought and the prominence of Descartes in the scientific revolution in Wootton (2015:361–367; 433 ff). There is no space to engage in the interesting intellectual dependency of Descartes on physic-mathematician Isaac Beeckman.

⁴⁰ An extended form of the *cogito* is sometimes given as: "I doubt, therefore I think, and hence I am".

⁴¹ See also *Meditations* III: "I am a thing that thinks, that is to say, that doubts, affirms, denies, that knows a few things" (Descartes, 1952:82).

⁴² For a more detailed discussion of this richer view of personhood in Descartes, read Perler (2002), especially pp. 160–161.

Immanuel Kant

It is, further, a misreading of Kant to claim that he was only promoting a self-confident, rational being who has the courage to seek knowledge with his⁴³ own mind, without recourse to assistance from other people. Kant, famously in his essay “Was ist Aufklärung?”, indeed described the enlightened person in these terms,⁴⁴ and said that it is very difficult to escape from immaturity and to use our own mind, because the immature state (relying for knowledge and truth on the insights of tradition or others in authority) has become a natural part of who we are. But this essay and the epistemology contained in *Critique of pure reason* should always be read in conjunction with his ethics in the *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (Kant, 1964).

In this latter work Kant explains that the free will that practises the categorical imperative is not merely subject to the law, but is so subject that it must be considered as also making the law for itself. This co-construction of the law with its sensitivity to all human beings as ends in themselves comes to pass because it is “in no way based on feelings, impulses, and inclinations, but *only on the relation of rational beings to one another*” (Kant, 1964: 102, my emphasis; see Keller, 2002:197).

Via his ethics, Kant herewith demonstrated the importance of relationality: not only does the imperative of treating people as ends and not merely as means point towards a striving precisely beyond ‘individualism’, but its very formulation depends on the relation of rational beings to one another in the kingdom of ends.

Karl Marx

It is, further, a selective reading and distortion to portray ‘the Western tradition’⁴⁵ as not being open to the purported *ubuntu* idea of being a person through others. In his famous theses on Feuerbach (1845, published 1888) Marx states unambiguously in the sixth thesis that Feuerbach dissolves the religious essence into the human essence. The problem is that Feuerbach presupposes “...an abstract – isolated – human being” whereas “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality *it is the ensemble of the social relations*” (my emphasis).⁴⁶ This must be understood from Marx’s theory of social classes, steering him sociologically speaking towards an explanation of individuals from their embeddedness in material, historical social relations, exactly against strands of individualism that view the single, autonomous person as unit of social analysis.

In their efforts to create an African ethic, most *ubuntu* scholars work with false generalisations of both Africa and the West, as well as with assumed dichotomies between them. This is a well-known rhetorical strategy: One creates space for one’s own view by building an exaggerated

⁴³ I maintain the sexist spirit of Kant’s language.

⁴⁴ “Unmündigkeit ist das Unvermögen, sich seines Verstandes ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen” (Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding/mind without guidance from another). See Kant (1784:481).

⁴⁵ In her recent doctoral dissertation with the interesting title *Einander nötig sein*, Sarah Bianchi (2016) demonstrates that intersubjective, existential recognition (“intersubjektive existentielle Anerkennung”) is a recurring theme in Fichte, Hegel and, the focus of her dissertation, Friedrich Nietzsche. Literally translated, she explores the notion that “we need one another” from a philosophical perspective.

⁴⁶ This translation of Thesis VI was retrieved on 26 January 2017 from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>

contrast position of the other. In terms of a decolonising project, it would, however, be a deep irony and a sign of a colonised hermeneutic if African ethicists call on a decontextualised and selective interpretation of Western philosophy to argue for their own uniqueness and contextuality.

2.3.4 *Does ubuntu represent an alternative to coloniality?*

Despite a much more ‘substantive’ effort than the transfer and translation models, it must be pointed out that the efforts to build an *ubuntu* ethic as alternative theory demonstrates just how difficult it is to escape from coloniality: The dominant languages expressing *ubuntu* are colonial English and French, and the means of knowledge production and distribution is via mainline universities, conferences, journals and publishers. Even *ubuntu* requires the very infrastructure and means seen as oppressive colonial power structures. The reason is simple: *Ubuntu* scholars also wish to be taken seriously. And they know that ‘acceptance’ and ‘validation’ of *ubuntu* scholarship are still subject to the hegemony of the North. The rule is clear: So-called indigenous knowledge is only ‘knowledge’ once endorsed by the centre.

That it is impossible to escape from the reality of ‘the West’ is evident from two factors:

First, for *ubuntu* to be taken seriously as alternative rival ethical theory it must be contrasted with dominant and standard Western traditions.⁴⁷ Its own particularity is premised upon that which it tries to undermine or escape or complement.⁴⁸ The postcolonial thinker is forever bound to the colony. Second, the methods and interpretative categories are borrowed from the West. Ramose premises his linguistic analysis of *ubu-ntu* on Heraclitus’ view of motion (Ramose, 2002a:645) and Heidegger’s etymological discussion of *aletheia* (Ramose, 2007:354). And in his development of an African philosophy he uses standard Western categories such as epistemology, ontology, ethics⁴⁹ and metaphysics. He, and others, cannot jump over the shadow of the European tradition.

3. Conclusion: Can we escape coloniality?

The background to this address is the debate whether one could steer between the “immovable rock” of Afrocentric and “the bad place” of Eurocentric knowledges (Cooper & Morell, 2014:2). If there is agreement that the current situation requires acts of ‘decolonisation’, there are at least three options open to us:

The first is to enter into a process of decentring the West and replace it with Africa. In other words, Eurocentrism is replaced by Afrocentrism. Mbembe (with reference to Ngugi) explains decolonisation exactly as such a process of decentring. “It is about rejecting the assumption that the modern West is the central root of Africa’s consciousness and cultural heritage. It is about rejecting the notion that Africa is merely an extension of the West” (Mbembe, 2015:16). A new centre should be created: “*With Africa at the centre of things*, not existing as an appendix

⁴⁷ See Metz, who clearly aims at designing “a competitive African moral theory”, which may be “compared to dominant Western theories such as Hobbesian egoism or Kantian respect for persons” (Metz, 2007b:321, 341).

⁴⁸ See Augustine Shutte’s attempt (2001) to develop a complementary model synthesised from ‘African’ and ‘Western’ thinking.

⁴⁹ Ramose (2002b:330) uses, for example, *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* (1909) for his definition of ethics. There is nothing ‘wrong’ with this referencing. I am merely positing that, in the context of a decolonisation project, this reliance on ‘colonial’ sources is common, if not unavoidable.

or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective” (Mbembe, 2015:17, my emphasis).

Apart from the question how this should happen in practice, it seems unethical to in the end mimic the coloniality from which we try to escape in creating a new power asymmetry where Africans exercise power over others.⁵⁰

A variation of this idea and a ‘softer’ version of Afro-centrism is the proposal for ‘Africa-centred knowledges’. This implies that “knowledge can become Africa-centred regardless of where they originate. But they do so only when they get entangled in African realities, lexicons and matrices and are shaped by these contexts” (Cooper & Morrell, 2014:4–5). Africa is then not so much a new centre, but a legitimate context which is taken seriously in the pursuit of multiple knowledges in an intermediate space between the West and Africa.⁵¹

The second option is to accept the reality and value of the Western tradition and, as decolonisation indeed does, to criticise the misuse of this tradition. The history of Western science, like all human efforts, is at best ambiguous. Both colonial and intellectual conquest unfolded with the aid of science, warfare-technologies, and political power. This must be fiercely exposed and contested as the decolonization debate in fact does.

But we need to move from critique to construction. One could claim that the very nature of the Western tradition requires it to be challenged from within and from without. To actively create space for dissenting views, especially those from the so-called margins,⁵² will undermine current privileges and weaken current academic power nestled in conferences, universities and journals. But such critique it is the ‘rational’ thing to do, as it increases the likelihood of growth in scientific knowledge.⁵³ As Mbembe said (with reference to Enrique Dussel), for knowledge to be universal, it must also be pluriversal. We must therefore transform the university into a pluriversity (Mbembe, 2015:19).⁵⁴

The third option is to question the very epistemic status of scientific knowledge as it has developed since the Enlightenment, and argue for this kind of knowledge to be suspended or relativised for the sake of greater epistemic diversity.⁵⁵ This is the most radical and difficult claim of decolonisation, and hinges on the fundamental question: What is knowledge?, followed by the more important question: When is knowledge ‘scientific’ knowledge?

We must keep a distinction between tacit knowledges assumed by people in their everyday lives and that take many forms: stories, anecdotes, beliefs, customs, songs, feasts. All social

⁵⁰ The “centre” of knowledge is not geographically fixed: There were times that Africa – via the Egyptian empire for example – was at the epicentre of architecture, mathematics and art. It is the process of globalization that currently gives Western science its universal hold.

⁵¹ This is no easy task: “Given the imbalance of world power, as reflected in its knowledge assumptions, those who choose to occupy this creative, suggestive third space, struggle to enlarge its archives, its case histories, and its theoretical concepts” (Cooper & Morrell, 2014:7).

⁵² These margins need not be geographical. The issue of women and minorities in science, the presence of the South in the North and so forth must be taken into account for a richer version of ‘marginality’.

⁵³ See Popper’s notion of falsification in his *Logic of scientific discovery* (1959) and Kuhn’s idea of normal and revolutionary science in his *The structure of scientific revolutions* (1962).

⁵⁴ In this vein, it would, for example, be advisable to include a discussion of *ubuntu*, to make explicit the work of Africans in an ethics curriculum, and to use *ubuntu* as the prism through which dominant Western theories are viewed. This is an act of decentring that could have a significant decolonising effect.

⁵⁵ The most forceful and challenging text I have read in this vein is *Rethinking thinking: Modernity’s “other” and the transformation of the university* (Hoppers & Richards, 2011).

contexts, not only ‘indigenous’ or ‘African’ ones, are rich with a multiplicity of knowledges. These knowledges imply cosmologies and sustain worldviews taken for granted, and their validity is not usually called into question. Life simply goes on.

But the moment we ask: What is *scientific* knowledge?, we enter a different epistemic realm with much stricter rules of validity. Not everything counts as ‘evidence’ and not anyone is a valid ‘source’. The modern Western tradition has, for now, definitively shaped the nature of what we call scientific, academic knowledge and therefore dominates the content of our university curricula. As to the suspension of or moratorium on this kind of knowledge and the creation of greater epistemic diversity, the following should be noted:

What we describe as ‘modern scientific thinking’ is indeed a fairly recent phenomenon in human history. If we take David Wootton’s magisterial history of the scientific revolution as reference point (Wootton, 2015), this ‘new science’ only finds its foothold in the period between 1492 and 1750. It introduced a new understanding of knowledge with a new language in which terms such as ‘discovery’, ‘hypotheses’, ‘experiments’, ‘theories’ and ‘laws’ of nature assumed a new meaning. Decolonisers are therefore right that this kind of knowledge is relative to the longer preceding history of knowledges; it is further relative to current indigenous knowledges as well as to the specific geography in which it first emerged, namely Western Europe. This particular scientific way of thinking therefore in principle qualifies for the description of a ‘local’ knowledge.

However, this ‘locality’ has in the meantime been ‘universalised’ in at least two ways:

First, the successful translation of Western scientific knowledge into all sorts of technologies has and will continue to shape the global world. Science constitutes the inescapable basis of our everyday lives, no matter our location. If some decolonisers call for the suspension of well-established knowledges that underlie the many positive fruits of these valid knowledges (such as flying in an aeroplane, using antiretroviral medicine, halting the spread of cholera and malaria, and talking on our mobile phones) they will not be taken seriously. Each of these technologies is the product of stable modern knowledges that are, for now, accepted as valid. Translated into technology their trusted and stable validity, as measured in scientific terms, is indeed useful to all people. We, inescapably, live in and benefit from a ‘scientific’ world, shaped by modernity and the Enlightenment.

Second, the idea that ‘science’ is a ‘local’ form of ‘Western’ knowledge has been superseded by both academic and economic globalisation. If one takes into account the spread of scientific knowledge in its ‘Western’ form across the globe via the international university system, and if one, for example, looks at manufactured products with a global supply chain, it has become superfluous to speak of ‘Western’ knowledge. At this point in human history, the matrix of knowledge as scientific knowledge knows no geographic boundaries and is being advanced by scientists and being bought in consumer goods all over the globe, including Africa.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ The first successful heart transplant was done in Cape Town. No one considers medical transplant techniques as either ‘African’ or ‘Western’. They are simply transplant techniques. The new galaxies found by the Square Kilometre Array radio telescope (SKA) in the Northern Cape or a new human species found in the Cradle of Humanity in Gauteng are not ‘Western’ discoveries. They are simply discoveries by scientists who happen to work in Africa.

But the real issue, argues the decolonisation project, is that this scientific way of defining knowledge does not allow for epistemic diversity.

If the critique is against scientism or positivistic knowledge where empirical observation and repeatable experiments are seen as the only form of valid knowledge, decolonisers are in fact in good company. Philosophically this critique is well established in various forms of post-positivist thinking from Popper's falsification and Kuhn's paradigm theories to different strands of social constructivism. This is not a new idea.

The weakness of some proponents of decolonisation in seeking greater room for other forms of knowledge than 'scientific' knowledge is that they focus chiefly on the natural sciences. They consequently miss the point that 'knowledge' in any modern university includes a rich variety of perspectives that do not conform to a narrow definition of experimental validity or the requirement of quantitative exactitude that work so well in mathematics, physics or engineering.

Western science itself has developed a rich diversity of epistemologies in fields of enquiry such as economics, history, philosophy, literature, psychology, theology, art or what one could bundle together as the humanities and social sciences. All these fields yield knowledge that challenge the narrow empiricist scientific tradition, and they have already shown great potential to embrace 'indigenous' knowledges:⁵⁷ Historians recognise that oral histories are crucial for access to an oral past; local music and song are important sources of anthropological understanding; archaeological artefacts open doors on the lifestyle of past communities; traditional healers already assist in a richer definition of health, and so forth.

The challenge, as I have demonstrated in the ethics discussion above, is that the moment indigenous knowledges are made into objects of study beyond their lived reality,⁵⁸ the shadow of the Western canon with its particular thought forms loom large.⁵⁹ Leaving political-ideological slogans against "Western science" aside, the very arguments for the decolonisation of knowledge conform to the validity standards (citing sources, making non-contradictory statements, building rational arguments, and so forth) against which decolonisation in its epistemic form rebels.

The conclusion is a sobering one:

⁵⁷ If there are indeed indigenous knowledges that are constructed along alternative epistemic lines, they should develop their own criteria for validity, unless anything that anybody says or believes is 'true' and the very notion of 'validity', even internally, is rejected.

⁵⁸ The reference here is to the transition from implicit to explicit knowledge. For example, oral histories may be important sources for historical knowledge, but they will not simply be accepted on face value or on the basis of traditional authority figures. No, they will be subjected to triangulation, for example by being compared with competing oral accounts and other non-oral sources stemming from the same period. In this sense, history is a science, albeit different from physics, but also different from tacit indigenous perceptions of the past.

⁵⁹ Look at this quotation from Hoppers and Richards who argue strongly for the epistemic deconstruction of science: "Whenever we look deeply at African society, or indeed most indigenous societies, the empirical fact that stares back at us is a reality of life lived differently, lives constituted around different metaphysics of economic, of law, of science, of healing ... The problem before us is that the academy has not adopted to its natural context, or has resisted epistemologically, cosmologically and culturally – with immense ensuing cognitive injustice to boot!" The construction of an 'empirical fact' and the description of indigenous cultures in etic categories of 'cosmology', 'metaphysics', 'epistemology' and so forth are clearly inferred from the Western academic tradition and constitute acts of colonisation and epistemic injustice – the exact opposite of what the authors intended.

Decolonisation is a necessary and important intellectual endeavour to both challenge and relativize the content of dominant Western knowledge and to address the reality of academic power imbalances head-on. Challenging accepted truths, and the de- and re-contextualising of existing knowledge, are in fact a rational trait of the growth in scientific knowledge itself. The pursuit of indigenous knowledges makes a crucial contribution to our current body of knowledge, though under the constraint that to qualify as *scientific* knowledge, they are still subject to the rules of validation set by ‘Western science’.

The historically determined “local” nature of Western science has been superseded via academic and technological globalisation. Science has become the very foundation and mediation of our everyday existence and is the manner in which the global scholarly community advances academic knowledge. From this specific perspective, our decolonization struggle against “Western” knowledge is tilting at the time-frozen windmills of yesteryear.

Decolonisation’s claim to develop alternative epistemic models with alternative rules of validation than what have been established in science, has not yet yielded credible results, exactly because the fundamental question of ‘credibility criteria’ remains contested. In the spirit of falsification, the efforts of decolonization may yet find solutions with superior solving-problem abilities, leading to new knowledge paradigms.

The prospects for success at this point do not seem good. Unless we radically reconceptualise what is counted as ‘problems’, ‘paradigms’ and – ultimately - ‘science’.

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