Contesting the narrow approach to intellectual decolonisation, or how Martin Heidegger captured an African university

By George Hull

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Hull philosophically considers the report of the University of Cape Town's Curriculum Change Working Group (CCWG) and concludes that it would be a sorry finale to the drive for intellectual decolonisation were UCT to impose existential phenomenology and fundamental ontology on its lecturers and students by executive decree.

DESCARTES ON TRIAL

In the 1640s, Holland's five great Calvinist universities – Leiden, Utrecht, Franeker, Groningen and Harderwijk – banned Cartesianism from the curriculum. French philosopher René Descartes' (Cartesius) search for a certain foundation for human knowledge seemed to Protestant theologians to elevate philosophical reason above Biblical revelation.[1] Unlikely as it may sound, the senate of one of South Africa's leading universities appears, at the time of writing, poised to take the same step in 2019.

The University of Cape Town (UCT) last year published the report of its Curriculum Change Working Group (CCWG),[2] set up by former Vice-chancellor Max Price in August 2016 in response to campus protests.[3] The UCT Deputy Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning will submit it to the university's senate for a decision this year.[4]

A critical philosopher who used the method of doubt to interrogate the received opinions of his age might seem an unusual target for such a working group, but UCT's Curriculum Change Framework, which adopts a 'decolonial lens through which to effect meaningful curriculum change' (p. 18) says:

> René Descarte's [*sic*] '*Cogito ergo sum*' (I think, therefore, I am) [...] is in fact built on 'I conquered, therefore, I am' or 'I possess, therefore I am' [...]. The coloniality of knowledge is also rooted upon Descarte's [*sic*] motto, '*Cogito ergo sum*', which projects the only legitimate thinker as white, heterosexual, able-bodied and male.

How did the drive for decolonisation of higher education come to this? Not, it would seem, through a careful reading of Descartes. For Descartes' mind-body dualism commits him to holding that all thinkers are essentially *un*-bodied, let alone *able*-bodied (or sexed, raced, etc.). Furthermore, what is special about Descartes' premise 'I think' is that, unlike 'I conquer' or 'I possess', it cannot be doubted: after all, doubt itself is a form of thinking. This is why Descartes believes he can deduce his existence from it.[5]

SUPPORTING A BROADER SENSE OF DECOLONISATION

The last few years, in my view, have witnessed a distortive narrowing of the concept of intellectual decolonisation in ➤

South African higher education circles. Instead of a promise of intellectual liberation, we are now confronted with a threat of authoritarian dogmatism.

Before coming to the narrow sense of decolonisation, let me turn first to its broader sense, which I endorse. The 'de' in 'decolonisation' indicates a removal or undoing. In the case of intellectual decolonisation, this is the removal or undoing of the effects of colonial, neocolonial and other international power relations, where, and to the extent that, these have hindered the attainment of knowledge and other worthwhile intellectual goals. Decolonisation in this sense should be important to researchers and thinkers everywhere, and deserves the support of universities worldwide.

Academics who teach and research the concept of liberty are likely to turn to the writings of Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, rather than to those of Laurence Grimald Gozliski. Is this because Kant's and Rousseau's are more correct and better argued than Gozliski's, or because, while the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth fell into decline in the 17th century, France and Prussia remained world powers well into the 20th? Political theorists seeking historical models of political association turn more often to ancient Athens and the foundation of the United States of America than to precolonial African social formations. Is this because the latter have little relevance to contemporary conditions, or because the racist prejudices of erstwhile imperialist establishments have determined the cultural-historical horizon of contemporary academics?

Asking questions like these forms part of intellectual hygiene. It enables researchers to detect and address bias, acknowledging that bias is not just a matter of individual whimsy, but often reflects one's socialisation into a community with a distinctive past. Not all researchers can attend to such questions all the time, and it would

be overly optimistic to think all effects of bias or power relations could be removed from academic work. But the value of some researchers dedicating much of their energy to questions such as these should be manifest to all.

In my discipline, philosophy, Anthony Appiah and Kwasi Wiredu are examples of researchers who have done interesting work on decolonisation in this sense. Appiah argues that one task of "ideological decolonization" in Africa[6] must be an "archaeology of Pan-Africanism's idea of race".[7] Tracing the origins of race-based Pan-Africanist theory in the work of 19th century American writers can help guard against false assumptions of cultural homogeneity in contemporary African philosophy.[8]

Kwasi Wiredu, on the other hand, has raised the tantalising question of whether certain philosophical questions are "tongue-dependent".[9] In his manifesto for "conceptual decolonisation", Wiredu suggests that the dominance of colonial languages (e.g. English, French) has bequeathed a certain amount of "philosophical deadwood" to contemporary practitioners.[10] For example, he has argued that a statement of the correspondence theory of truth is "conceptually informative in a philosophical way" in English, but an "uninformative tautology, sans all philosophical pretences" in his mother-tongue, Akan.[11] Translation between a European language and an indigenous African language can be a useful tool for excising the dead wood, in Wiredu's view. When the status of a philosophical problem or proposition (e.g. as non-trivial or *a priori* true) appears to change depending on the language in which it is discussed, this is a sign that at least one of the languages portrays the problem or proposition deceptively. Which language is at fault must then be reasoned out "on independent grounds".[12]

Whether or not Appiah and Wiredu's specific claims are ultimately defensible, their work demonstrates there are

plenty of avenues worth pursuing within philosophy which fall under the heading of intellectual decolonisation in this broad sense.

DECOLONISING WITH MARTIN HEIDEGGER

The now prevailing, narrower approach to intellectual decolonisation is, in one way, very gratifying to philosophers. In many universities, ontology (the philosophical study of what is or exists) and epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge) are arcane specialisms, the preserve of unworldly professors who argue about whether properties (e.g. shape, colour) exist in their own right or are reducible to substance, and whether to know that a proposition is true I must also know that I know that it is.

In many South African universities today, on the other hand, it is rare to make it through a seminar, at least in humanities faculties, without hearing both of these terms several times, usually in the plural: 'ontologies', 'epistemologies'. UCT's Curriculum Change Framework concludes: "Decolonising the curriculum … must focus mainly on epistemology and underlying ontologies; the fundamentals of knowledge production. … Ontologies of students and staff in the academy cannot be glossed over or masked; it is important to recognise that one's view of reality is embedded in one's being in the world"[13].

Earlier on it endorses the view that "colonial ontological and epistemic logics undergird" UCT's current curricula[14]. Its abstruse vocabulary has been a frustration to many academics who have responded to UCT's draft curriculum guidelines.[15] Indeed, mastery of this vocabulary has lately functioned as a *de facto* qualification for entry into the supposedly non-hierarchical circles which claim to be furthering intellectual decolonisation on South African campuses.[16]

One can do better than note that

the narrower approach to intellectual decolonisation favours a 'postmodern' or 'postcolonial' conceptual repertoire (See Reddy and Smith in this issue). The distinctive approach to metaphysics which holds that 'being in the world' provides theoretical access to fundamental ontology can be dated much more precisely: to 1927, when Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* burst onto the philosophical scene.

Heidegger's highly innovative book married the *Lebensphilosophie* (life philosophy) of theorists such as Wilhelm Dilthey to the phenomenology of Heidegger's mentor, Edmund Husserl, before the altar of a revival of Aristotle's question about the fundamental nature of being.[17] The living human being is, in Heidegger's view, set apart from all other kinds of beings by the fact that its (human) being is a matter of questioning and concern for it.[18] This means, argues Heidegger, that a descriptive, phenomenological tracing of the characteristic forms of concern and engagement which make up human existence should provide the alert philosopher with privileged access to the general nature of the being of that which exists, or, in other words, the way in which all the things which are actually are.[19]

Husserl's mistake, thought Heidegger, was to conceive of humans' being-in-the-world[20] as primarily spectatorial. The point of departure of Husserl's phenomenology seemed to be a detached conscious subject, calmly contemplating the various objects which entered its sensory field. Heidegger agreed with the current of German philosophy known as 'life philosophy' that humans' most fundamental interactions with the world are marked by care[21] and practical engagement, not spectatorial detachment. Already in the mid-19th century, Dilthey had insisted on the centrality of the concept *Erleben* (experience) to the interpretative human sciences.[22] In *Being and Time*,

Heidegger approvingly cites Dilthey's investigations into the *Erlebnisse* of the human life form, though he claims Dilthey's work had remained at a superficial level, not appreciating the connection between human experience and the question of being.[23]

German has two principal words for experience, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, the latter of which incorporates the verb *leben* (to live). Dilthey, Heidegger and subsequent Heideggerians use the term *Erlebnis* when the type of experience they have in mind is practical, concern-driven, possibly non-rational rather than detached, contemplative, spectatorial. Translated into French as *expérience vécue* (lived experience), the term became a buzzword in 1960s *rive gauche* circles through the influence of the Heideggerian existentialists Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. By the 1970s, retail houses and PR firms in Paris were researching the 'lived experience' of their customers and marketing audiences as a matter of course. More recently, 'lived experience' has entered Anglophone vernacular via 'woke' intellectual circles, in part thanks to the intellectual current Lewis Gordon calls 'black existentialism'.[24] This current of existentialism was heavily influenced by French Heideggerians, for example, the title of Chapter Five of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* translated as 'The Fact of Blackness' in the English edition, is *'L'expérience vécue du Noir'* ('The lived experience of the black person').[25]

As he wrote *Being and Time* in the 1920s, Heidegger felt that the Western intellectual tradition had cut itself off from a true understanding of being *das Sein.* The blame for this, in Heidegger's eyes, lay in no small part on the shoulders of – you've guessed it – René Descartes. Descartes' philosophy, argued Heidegger, presupposed a distortive separation of humans' being-in-the-world into a worldly object of contemplation on one side and a detached human consciousness observing it on the other. This subject-

object dichotomy was something Heidegger also objected to in the work of his teacher, Husserl. While Heidegger did not deny that human *Dasein* can take up a cognitive stance towards the world, knowing was for him but one, rather peripheral, subspecies of humans' practical dealing with the world.[26]

Descartes has subsequently become a whipping boy for Heideggerians of all stripes, who have sought to outdo each other in attributing ever more gruesome crimes to the 17th century Frenchman.

An example is the Puerto Rican writer Ramón Grosfoguel, from the influential Decolonial Studies school. This Latin American intellectual current, which includes theorists such as Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, has created syntheses of Heideggerian existential phenomenology and world-systems analysis.[27] Grosfoguel agrees with Heidegger that Descartes' subject-object dichotomy and his search for a foundation of human knowledge within individual consciousness must be rejected. Then, drawing on work by Dussel,[28] he goes a step further with the bold claim that these aspects of Descartes' thinking are the philosophical expression of a geopolitical shift. He claims that a socially necessary condition of Descartes' adopting what Grosfoguel calls a 'God-Eye view' in his foundational deduction was the European colonial expansion beginning in 1492, accompanied by genocidal violence. Grosfoguel expresses this point by saying that "the socio-historical structural condition" of Descartes' *ego cogito* ('I think') is *ego conquiro* ('I conquer'), and ultimately *ego extermino* ('I exterminate').[29] Hence the CCWG's comment on Descartes' famous inference, which it claims to be at the root of 'the coloniality of knowledge'.

The distinctive philosophical framing of UCT's Curriculum Change Framework, which foregrounds access to 'ontologies' via 'being-in-the-world', ➤➤

the call by campus activists for a turn to 'lived experience' in research and teaching, and the CCWG's animus against Descartes are, we can now see, all of a piece. The CCWG avows that 'the Latin-American perspective on coloniality' was a major influence on its work.[30] What is more striking to a philosophically trained reader is how tightly UCT's curriculum document cleaves to the distinctive conceptual repertoire and approach to metaphysics advocated by Martin Heidegger in southern Germany in the 1920s.[31] Paradoxically, the narrow approach to intellectual decolonisation in South African universities is intolerant of research or teaching situated outside a highly controversial current in 20th century European philosophy.

AN HISTORICAL IRONY

Towards the end of *Being and Time*, Heidegger speaks of the need for a human *Dasein* to 'choose its hero'.[32] In May 1933, he announced that he had chosen his. With great fanfare, Heidegger joined the National Socialist German Workers' Party shortly after being installed as rector of the University of Freiburg im Breisgau. His inaugural address stated his acceptance of the '*Führerprinzip*', the fundamental principle behind the leadership structure of the Third Reich, both in national politics and in university affairs. In a hall bedecked with swastika flags, Heidegger declared himself *Führer* of the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität. He set to work implementing the so-called *Gleichschaltung* – literally 'changing into the same gear'– whereby all German institutions were meant to reform in line with the new nationalist ideology.

Already in the 1920s, Heidegger had complained about the 'Jewification' (an anti-Semitic neologism used by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*) of the German academy. As rector, in 1933 he denounced a number of Freiburg professors to the *Gestapo* – the chemist

Friedberg Hermann Staudinger for pacifist tendencies, the philosopher Eduard Baumgarten for consorting with foreigners and Jews. He declined to intervene when his mentor, Husserl, was stripped of his emeritus status due to Jewish ancestry. When a member of staff expressed concern to the rector about the student *Sturmabteilung* (S.A.) units which were harassing non-Nazi Freiburg politicians in their homes, Heidegger defended the units and replied to the member of staff that they should submit more 'constructive' suggestions to him in future.[33]

Though he resigned the rectorship early in 1934, Heidegger remained a committed Nazi. On a lecture tour of Italy he wore Nazi insignia. In 1935, he spoke of the 'inward truth and greatness of *the movement*, the German translation of which, '*die Bewegung*', was commonly used to refer to the Nazi Party and its tens of millions of fellow travellers. This was in a series of lectures which he was to publish unaltered in 1953.

Heidegger's best informed contemporaries such as Karl Jaspers were convinced that he had followed a path from within his philosophy to National Socialism, rather than embracing it insincerely or distorting his thinking to fit the mood of the time. Karl Löwith believed that Heidegger's Nazism was part of the essential core of his philosophy.[34] There may well be truth in this.[35] Yet, in my view, it would not be right simply to dismiss the work of Heidegger and the Heideggerians without further philosophical engagement.

That said, it is a sublime historical irony that academics on South African campuses are nowadays berated for teaching John Locke and Immanuel Kant – liberal philosophers who admittedly have racist skeletons in the cupboard – by student and academic activists who have adopted the distinctive conceptual repertoire of the notorious Nazi, Martin Heidegger.

QUESTIONING HEIDEGGER'S THEORY OF BEING

Quite apart from his political affiliation, Heidegger's metaphysics of being – his ontology – has come in for stout philosophical criticism. Heidegger's most famous living pupil, Ernst Tugendhat, publicly renounced the philosophy of his teacher in 1976.[36] Tugendhat had come to the view that Heidegger's talk of 'being' was 'unsurpassably naïve',[37] since it overlooked the fact that the word 'is' like all other forms of the verb 'to be' has several different meanings. The word 'is' can be used to ascribe a property to an object e.g. 'the sky *is* blue'; but it can equally be used to say that a statement is true 'it *is* the case that…'; finally, in some contexts, it means the same as 'exists'. Tugendhat concluded that ontology, the study of being, must take as its starting point the multiplicity of senses which *being* exhibits.

Earlier, Rudolf Carnap had taken issue with the empty mysticism towards which Heidegger tended. Statements such as 'Die Welt weltet' ('the world worlds') and 'Das Nichts nichtet' ('nothing nothings') were unverifiable 'nonsense', according to Carnap.[38]

But it is not only 'analytic' philosophers who have expressed dissatisfaction with Heidegger's metaphysics. Theodor Adorno, stalwart of the Frankfurt School of Marxism, argued that Heidegger's preoccupation with 'authenticity' was fundamentally reactionary, designed to distract attention from the injustices of a technocratically administered society with the opium of a little conservative irrationalism.[39] Adorno's pupil, Jürgen Habermas, accused Heidegger's philosophy of reducing all human action to goal-directed instrumental action.[40]

DECOLONISING INCLUSIVELY

The broader sense of intellectual decolonisation, which I outlined earlier, is inclusive enough to accommodate

Heideggerian theorists – those who wish to approach intellectual decolonisation by identifying the lived experience, or being-in-the-world, specific to various positions in a global matrix of domination, and thereby uncover their distinctive 'ontologies'. Universities should have a place for Heideggerians.

But the broad, more inclusive, understanding of decolonisation which I have endorsed can also encompass many different approaches, including those of the two Ghanaian theorists I mentioned above, Kwasi Wiredu and Anthony Appiah – theorists who, if they spoke of ontology at all, would not connect it to the being-in-the-world of a *Dasein*, but most likely view it as the study of everything which is the value of a bound variable.[41]

A university should be able to accommodate approaches to intellectual decolonisation informed by different philosophical schools, just as it should accommodate different approaches to the subject matter of every discipline. It should also have room for a significant number of teachers and researchers who are not primarily concerned with philosophical subjects like ontology at all, as it should for teachers and researchers whose primary concern is not intellectual decolonisation.

It would be a sorry finale to the drive for intellectual decolonisation were UCT to impose existential phenomenology and fundamental ontology on its lecturers and students by executive decree.

On the other hand, University Rector Heidegger would have found it singularly appropriate.

ENDNOTES

1 See Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 30)

2 Available at http://www.news.uct.ac.za/images/userfiles/downloads/reports/ccwg/UCT-Curriculum-Change-Framework.pdf.

3 Available at https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2016-08-17-curriculum-change-working-group.

4 Available at https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2018-09-19-curriculum-change-framework-feedback. The university executive has not stated what its recommendation will be when it presents the document to the senate for decision.

5 See Bernhard Weiss's comments on the Curriculum Change Framework, available at http://www.news.uct.ac.za/downloads/reports/ccwg/2019-01-11_CCF_Comment_BernhardWeiss.pdf.

6 Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*.(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. x

7 op. cit., p. 28.

8 op. cit., ch. 2, 'Illusions of Race', pp. 28-46.

9 Kwasi Wiredu, 'Truth and an African Language', in Lee M. Brown (ed.). *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, (New York: Oxford University Press 2003, p. 49)

10 Kwasi Wiredu, 'The Need for Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy', in Boatamo Mosupyoe & Mogobe B. Ramose (ed.), *The Development of Thought in Pan Africanism*. (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt 2011, p. 76)

11 Wiredu, 'Truth and an African Language', p. 48. For critical discussion of this thesis see Bernhard Weiss, 'Is Philosophy Bound by Language? Some Case Studies from African Philosophy', in George Hull (ed.), *Debating African Philosophy: Perspectives on Identity, Decolonial Ethics and Comparative Philosophy*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019, pp. 228–47)

12 Wiredu, 'The Need for Conceptual Decolonization', p. 77.

13 Curriculum Change Working Group (CCWG). *UCT Curriculum Change Framework*. (2018). Available at http://www.news.uct.ac.za/images/userfiles/downloads/reports/ccwg/UCT-Curriculum-Change-Framework.pdf Accessed on 29 April 2019. See p. 54-55.

14 Ibid. p.36

15 See for example George Ellis' comments and comments from members of the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment on the Curriculum Change Framework available at http://www.news.uct.ac.za/downloads/reports/ccwg/2018-10-10_CCF_Comment_EProfGeorgeEllis.pdf; http://www.news.uct.ac.za/images/userfiles/downloads/media/2018-09-13_CurriculumChangeFramework_Engineering.pdf.

16 Rekgotsofetse Chikane makes this point about UCT's student-led Rhodes Must Fall movement, see his *Breaking a Rainbow, Building a Nation: The Politics Behind #MustFall Movements*. (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2018, p. 222)

17 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, [1927] 2006, p. 2)

18 'Das Dasein ist […] dadurch ontisch ausgezeichnet, daß es diesem Seienden in seinem Sein *um* dieses Sein selbst geht'; op. cit., p. 12.

19 op. cit., p. 56.

20 op. cit., p. 41.

21 op. cit., p. 57.

22 See Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany 1831–1933*. trans. Eric Matthews. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 55)

23 Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 46–47.

24 See Lewis R. Gordon, 'Black Existentialism', in David Ingram (ed.), *Critical Theory to Structuralism: Philosophy, Politics, and the Human Sciences*, Durham: Acumen, 2010, pp. 199–219.

25 See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (trans. Charles Lam Markmann), London: Pluto Press, 1986.

26 See Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2000, p. 236.

27 On world-systems analysis, see e.g. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-system I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York: Academic Press, 1974.

28 See Enrique Dussel, 'Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origin of the Philosophical Anti-discourse of Modernity' (trans. George Ciccariello-Maher), *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 13(1), 2014, pp. 11–52.

29 Ramón Grosfoguel, 'The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century', *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-knowledge*, 11(1), 2013, p. 77.

30 op. cit., p.30

31 Besides the Decolonial Studies school, the CCWG also draws on work by Lwazi Lushaba, whose PhD dissertation includes a sympathetic discussion of Heidegger: http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10539/19853/Lwazi-Theoretical%20Reflections%20on%20the%20Epistemic%20Production%20of.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

32 Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 385.

33 In this and the following two paragraphs, I am indebted to Yvonne Sherratt, *Hitler's Philosophers*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, ch. 5), 'Hitler's Superman: Martin Heidegger', pp. 104–126; and Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*. ch. 6, 'Martin Heidegger's Transformation of Phenomenology', pp. 192–221.

34 See Rüdiger Safranski, *Ein Meister aus Deuschland: Heidegger und seine Zeit*. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001, p. 357)

35 See Jeff Love and Michael Meng, 'Heidegger's Radical Antisemitism', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 44(1), 2018, pp. 3–23.

36 See Ernst Tugendhat, *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die sprachanalytische Philosophie*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976)

37 'unüberbietbar naiv'; op. cit., p. 89 n. 2.

38 Rudolf Carnap, 'Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache', *Erkenntnis*, 2, 1931, p. 229.

39 See Theodor W. Adorno, Jargon der Eigentlichkeit: Zur deutschen Ideologie. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1964)

40 See Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985, p. 180)

41 This is the orthodox view in 'analytic' philosophy. See Willard Van Orman Quine, 'On What There Is', in his *From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-philosophical Essays*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961, pp. 1–19) NA