Wiredu on Conceptual Decolonisation

Dylan B. Futter

Abstract: Kwasi Wiredu defines conceptual decolonisation as an activity in which Africans divest themselves of undue colonial influences, but his descriptions of this process are either unrelated to divesting or work quite generally, and not in favour of an African point of view. Wiredu’s approach to decolonisation appears to be largely indistinguishable from the business of philosophy.

Keywords: African philosophy, conceptual decolonisation, Kwasi Wiredu, meta-philosophy

1. Introduction

Kwasi Wiredu is a central figure in the contemporary debate on conceptual decolonisation. Whether one treats his views as authoritative,1 or doubts that they have anything to do with decolonisation at all,2 to participate in the discussion means to take one’s bearings from him. Given the influence of Wiredu’s work, it is then surprising that no detailed examination of his account of decolonisation has appeared in print. This article seeks to address that gap.

I proceed as follows. In Sections 2–3, I trace out the contours of Wiredu’s thinking on colonisation and decolonisation. Thereafter, in Sections 4 and 5, I focus on certain questions that arise for his account. Wiredu defines conceptual decolonisation as an activity in which Africans divest themselves of undue colonial influences (1984: 35; 1998: 17; 2004: 15), but his descriptions of this process...
are either unrelated to divesting or work quite generally, and not in favour of an African point of view. In its central aspects, Wiredu’s approach to decolonisation appears to be indistinguishable from the business of philosophy. In Section 6, I take up the question of whether he would accept this implication.

2. Colonisation

Wiredu’s investigation of the nature of conceptual decolonisation begins in 1980, the year of Zimbabwean independence. The animating focus of his search is neither political liberation (1984: 31) nor the dehumanising way in which foreign languages and ideas were introduced by colonial powers, but the lingering intellectual effects of such impositions on African people. What are these effects, according to Wiredu, and why are they undesirable?

Wiredu describes colonising action with metaphors of mixing, entangling and enclosing. He refers to a widespread involuntary mixing of Western and African intellectual categories in the thinking of contemporary Africans (2002: 54) and says that ‘Africans of the immediate post-independence era should try to unravel the conceptual entanglements’ (2002: 54); he also describes ‘Western intellectual categories’ as ‘colonial encrustation[s]’ that are superimposed on ‘African thought elements’ (2002: 54). Judging by these metaphors, colonised minds do not think their own thoughts but those of their oppressors. Colonisation seems to be a form of intellectual alienation.

Wiredu illuminates the state of being intellectually colonised – what he calls the ‘colonial mentality’ (1998: 20–21) – with examples. One has to do with the claim that ‘African traditional thought is pre-eminently religious’ (1998: 36). Wiredu takes exception to the application of the word ‘religious’ to African forms of life. In his estimation, scholars ‘lump’ traditional beliefs about gods, spirits and ancestors into the category of religion because they think of these beings as supernatural – yet for African people ‘all these forces are regular phenomena within the world’; ‘the distinction between the natural and the supernatural does not exist for them’ (1998: 36, emphasis added).
For Wiredu, African scholars who blithely claim that Africans are religious on account of a belief in ancestors are conceptually colonised. Colonised minds are those that ‘think about and expound their own culture in terms of categories of a colonial origin without any qualms as to any possible conceptual incongruities’ (1998: 20; see also 2004: 11). The use of alien categories to think about African ‘religion’, culture and traditions is distorting, an impediment to self-understanding. For this reason, ‘[the] applicability of Western concepts to the African world must be investigated very critically indeed’ (1984: 39).

Wiredu extends and reinforces his account of the colonised mentality with autobiography (2002: 60–61). He tells of his ‘long introspections into the history of [his] own thinking about the nature of mind’ and his sense, from the time of his undergraduate studies, that Cartesian dualism was ‘a kind of gibberish’ (2002: 61). Eventually Wiredu came to think that his intuitions were expressive of a latent Akan point of view. The insight that he was ‘thinking of mind in Akan linguistic terms’ was for him a revelation and a ‘sense of beginning to understand [himself]’ (2002: 61). This is an example of how a ‘colonised institutional education’ leads to an ‘encasing’ of the indigenous point of view and thus impedes the philosopher’s search for self-knowledge (2002: 61).

On Wiredu’s reckoning, the state of being colonised is also inhibiting of constructive work in African philosophy. Developing an African metaphysic of ‘nature’, say, requires distinguishing between an indigenous and a foreign point of view, but the colonial miscegenation of categories interferes with one’s inability to draw this distinction. In this way, it deprives African philosophy of its foundations, for if one does not know one’s own ideas, or these are intermingled with alien notions in ways of which one is not aware, one will not be able to use these as foundations (1996: 36). For this reason, Wiredu recommends that African philosophers use indigenous languages, concepts and ideas to ask philosophical questions and answer them (2002: 55).

### 3. Decolonisation

What, given its undesirable effects, should African people of the post-liberation period do about the colonised state of mind? The
short answer is, of course, that they should decolonise. Wiredu’s account of this process is complex, however, for which reason some care is needed to sketch it out.

As we have seen, Wiredu says that colonisation alienates African people from their own concepts and ideas by mixing these up with the thoughts of their oppressors. Decolonisation seeks to reverse this process and to recover an African ‘philosophic inheritance in its true lineaments’ (2002: 58; see also 1984: 34); it seeks to bring the enquirer to ‘to a vantage point for viewing African thought materials in their true light’ (2002: 58; see also 1996: 136; 2002: 55). This state of illumination is also a matter of individual self-knowledge, of knowing what one thinks and why (2002: 60–61).

As Wiredu describes it, the decolonising reversal is a matter of Africans ‘divesting’ themselves of undue ‘influences emanating from [the] colonial past’ (1984: 35) or, more generally, ‘freeing [themselves] from any undue foreign influence on [their] thought’ (1984: 35, n. 1; see also 1998: 17). In a later work, he says that it involves eliminating ‘modes of conceptualization that came … through colonization and remain in [African] thinking owing to inertia rather than to our own reflective choices’ (2002: 56). By this, he seems to mean that decolonisation is ‘the purging’ of the African mind ‘of all uncritical assimilation of Western ways of thinking’ (2002: 328, as quoted in Osha n.d.).

Which foreign ideas or ways of thinking fall within the scope of the decolonising reversal? One answer to this question is ‘all of them’: the whole influx of colonial ideas should be eliminated to the extent that this is possible (see Táiwò 2019: 137). Such is the view of many writers in the post-colonial tradition from Frantz Fanon (2008) to Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who is ‘hostile to anything of foreign provenance’ (Emmanuel 2019: 14), and so too that of Suren Pillay (2015), who argues for a complete repudiation of Western categories of thought.

Wiredu’s view is different, however; for him, decolonisation does not require the elimination of every Western idea. The injustices of the coloniser’s ‘civilising mission’ do not contaminate every colonial product – some of these might be ‘valid’ or ‘beneficial to humankind’ (1998: 17). For this reason, the ‘rejection of all doctrines originally conceived and formulated in a foreign language would be unspeakably absurd’ (1984: 35; see also 2004: 15).
Wiredu’s position is that Africans should not divest themselves of all colonial influences, only those that are undue. No specific idea falls within the scope of the decolonising reversal purely on account of its provenance or facts about how it was introduced.

Wiredu is in any case less interested in specific colonial judgements and beliefs than in underlying modes of conceptualisation. His focus is on ‘the linguistic, or more specifically, conceptual liberation’ that is ‘perhaps the most fundamental form of decolonisation’ (1984: 35). In his view, languages suggest certain avenues for philosophical thought – they ‘carry their own kinds of philosophical suggestiveness’ and ‘speculative intimations’ (2002: 56–57, 63). For example, the Greek word *psyche* is connected to both mind and life, a point that might lead a philosopher to argue that the soul is immortal (see Plato’s *Phaedo*). Yet this relationship does not exist in every language and, in fact, does not exist in Akan, in which the word *okra*, the presence of which means life, the absence of which means death, and which is usually rendered as ‘soul’, has nothing to with the mind (Wiredu 1984: 45). The African philosopher must be careful not to be misled by the suggestiveness of the words *psyche* and soul (1984: 35). If an argument for the immortality of the soul is valid, its validity ‘ought to be perceivable in any language’ (1984: 35).

For Wiredu, foreign languages and ideas convey patterns of connection and association different from those of the indigenous worldview. For this reason, it is important to ‘take care that one’s acceptance’ – or rejection, presumably – of any given doctrine not be ‘conditioned by the peculiarities of the given language or culture’ (1984: 35; see also 2004: 6). We might express his point by saying, with Wittgenstein, that we are bewitched by the grammar of our language. Africans should translate ‘conceptual projects and notions posed in Western terms into indigenous African languages’ to determine which forms of ‘suggestiveness’ constitute such bewitchments (Mosely 2006: 192).

On Wiredu’s analysis, decolonisation involves coming to know which thought elements are indigenous and which are exogenous; it also requires understanding how such elements line up with one another. Suppose, for example, that the enquirer recognises that she has unwittingly employed the Western concept of nature in thinking about some facet of her life. It remains a question as to whether this
concept fits the phenomenon. In many or most cases, this will not be so, but sometimes it might be. For example, it seems that the idea of *ubuntu* tracks the ancient Greek notion of *xenia* quite closely. In this scenario, the decoloniser would discern that a concept was both a colonial imposition and faithful to her experience.9

The action of recovering African ideas and relating them to Western concepts does not settle the question of which forms of thought are more truthful. Wiredu is clear on this point – ancestral ideas or claims need not be correct or valid; ‘there is no assumption that what comes from Africa is necessarily true, sound, profound et cetera’ (2002: 54; see also 2002: 58; 2004: 4). Of course, the same applies to the Western way of knowing. For this reason, it is not enough for the intellectual decolonist to retrieve her ancestral ideas from the post-colonial melting pot and to compare them to the exogenous ideas – she must also face up to questions of truth and conceptual adequacy.

On Wiredu’s view, then, decolonial self-examination culminates in reflective and deliberate choice. Should the enquirer dispense with the alien concept that is now an object of explicit attention? Or should she permit it to remain as her own? Wiredu’s answer is that it depends. To oversimplify slightly, if the Western concept does not withstand scrutiny, then it should be eliminated in favour of the indigenous point of view, whereas if it does, then it should be absorbed into the conceptual matrix and the ancestral point of view adjusted or extended where necessary (2002: 158).

Wiredu refers also to the goal of ‘exploiting as much as is judicious the resources of … indigenous [African] conceptual schemes in philosophical meditations on even the most technical problems of contemporary philosophy’ (1996: 136). This is, as he frames things, the positive side of the decolonisation process of which the negative process of conceptual elimination is ‘only the reverse’ (1996: 136). If I understand him, Wiredu is here recommending the use of suitably disentangled African words and concepts to raise philosophical questions and go about answering them.

In a similar vein, Wiredu speaks of ‘domestication’, by which he means the active assimilation of outside forms of enquiry. For example, if there were, as he claims, no traditions of formal logic in pre-colonial Ghana (1998: 22), then such traditions should be developed by using the resources of Western logic and relevant
natural languages, such as Akan and Ewe. Domestication is here a matter of absorbing foreign learning in order to fashion African traditions of enquiry along similar lines. This would not be a mechanical repetition but the use of a pattern or guideline to creatively extend and develop the philosophical resources contained within the indigenous point of view.

4. Aspects of Decolonisation

Wiredu’s definitional remarks suggest that Africans decolonise when they reverse, or divest themselves of, undue Western influences. To deepen our understanding of what he means, I want to try to locate this reversal at specific points in the decolonisation processes that he describes (see Section 3). To do so, I divide these processes into three phases: exegesis, evaluation and construction.

Exegesis refers to the community’s attempt to recover what it itself thinks – this is the business of drawing out and articulating the fundamental concepts that are carried within its rituals and practices, languages and myths; it may also, though it need not, include ‘sage philosophy’ of the sort practised by Henry Oruka (1990). For the present, the key point is that the goal of exegetical enquiry is the state of ‘viewing African thought materials in their true light’ (Wiredu 2002: 58; see also 1996: 136; 2004: 11).

By evaluation, I refer to the demand for critical examination. Although this demand applies to both the indigenous thought materials and Western ideas, it is compatible with differential levels of ‘suspicion’ – for example, since the colonial ideas are part of a scheme of domination, the enquirer should scrutinise them very carefully. Nevertheless, evaluation remains a matter of critically assessing both African ideas and the Western positions with which they potentially conflict ‘on independent grounds’ (2004: 15; 1984: 35; 2002: 54, 58). And it is clear that this activity takes place after exegesis, since part of what is evaluated are the ideas that are recovered in the exegetical phase.

The phase of construction incorporates Wiredu’s ideas about conceptual ‘exploitation’ and domestication. The former notion is a matter of using indigenous doxa to develop theories and to engage in positive research. This process depends on exegesis and
evaluation, since one would need to know one’s own doxa in order to develop them; and presumably, those that are false should not be used as foundations. In a related vein, domestication refers to the use of African languages and modes of thought to devise research programmes modelled on those of Western and other traditions of philosophy.

With these three phases distinguished, where should we locate Wiredu’s decolonising reversal or his notion of divestiture? Does this occur in all three phases or in only one or two of these? To begin answering these questions, it is immediately clear that ‘decolonisation’ is not correctly applied to the construction phase, for there is here no reversing to speak of. Construction is positive philosophy, which depends on exegesis and evaluation. To exploit one’s conceptual resources requires knowing what these are and whether they are justified, and something similar applies to the process of domestication. For these reasons, the decolonising reversal must be located in the phases of evaluation or exegetical enquiry.

As we have seen, Wiredu says that the decolonist must recover her knowledge of the ancestral ideas. This requires that she embark on particularistic studies by taking up, for example, the question of how the Bantu people understand morality or how the Akan think of the mind (1984: 43). The goal of exegetical enquiry is to recover the African thought systems by drawing them into the light of self-consciousness. Considered as an attempt to know what a community thinks, exegesis does not seek to reverse or divest or eliminate anything and does not in itself relate to colonial ideas. It is the community’s attempt to know its own worldview.

Does the term ‘decolonisation’ then apply to the evaluative part of the process in which Western and African ideas are put to the test? This initially seems to be a promising suggestion, for if a Western concept or claim is rejected as distorting or untrue, then the decoloniser would have divested herself of a foreign idea. Is this the proper locus of Wiredu’s decolonising reversal?

Upon reflection, it seems difficult to uphold this interpretation, for Wiredu does not think that foreign notions and modes of conceptualisation should always be eliminated. Instead, he claims that African ideas should sometimes give way to the Western point of view. And whenever this might be so and the enquirer prefers a Western idea to an African one on rational grounds, there will be
no reversal and no divesting to speak of. On the other hand, if it is judged that, for example, the Akan conception of mind is superior to the Western account, then this will be, says Wiredu, for reasons that could be accepted by philosophers everywhere (2002: 25). There is nothing here that relates specifically to the purging of Western propositions. The overcoming of false opinion is not an imperative of decolonial ‘divestment’ but of philosophical thought in general. And the same point would seem to apply to the acceptance and rejection of, not propositions, but ideas on account of their conceptual inadequacy. The question of the provenance of ideas falls away as they are considered in terms of their philosophical merits. Decolonisation in its evaluative aspect seems to be, for Wiredu, a ‘reversing’ characteristic of philosophical examination in general.

If my argument thus far is correct, then there is no space for a decolonising reversal or divestment within the constructive, exegetical and evaluative phases of the process that Wiredu describes. The relevant business either has nothing to do with divesting or, if it does, works quite generally and not in favour of the African point of view. Decolonisation seems to be another name for the business of philosophy.

5. Divesting as Disentangling

In the preceding section, I claimed that Wiredu’s method of conceptual exegesis does not in itself relate to colonial impositions, since it aims to know the ancestral worldview. In presenting this argument, I set aside the point that the African search for self-knowledge is formally but not materially independent of Western ideas, since these are mixed up with it in a way that makes recovery necessary. There is then a question of whether Wiredu’s account of decolonisation as reversal or divestiture can be identified with the process of un-mixing. My answer to this question turns on the distinction between ‘ridding’ oneself of a colonial idea and raising this idea to self-consciousness.

Wiredu says that the African enquirer could rationally uphold Western philosophical doctrines after the project of decolonisation has been carried through. Someone ‘who goes along with’ Christian belief after ‘due reflection is entitled to be exempted from
the colonized description’ (1998: 20; see also 2004: 15). Since the content of this individual’s belief after enquiry is the same as it was before, but she is no longer intellectually colonised, someone who thinks with colonial ideas need not be alienated or lacking in self-knowledge. The intellectually bad effects of colonisation are not manifest in thought content but in the way that it is entertained or approached. If the Christian enquirer can divest herself of colonial impositions while retaining her faith, then divesting in the relevant sense must be, for Wiredu, not a ridding but a raising to self-consciousness.

As noted above, Wiredu’s later account of decolonisation does not refer to divesting oneself of undue influences. He now describes this process as one of eliminating Western ‘modes of conceptualization’ that remain on account of ‘inertia rather than our’, that is, Africans’ ‘own reflective choices’ (2002: 56; cf. 2004: 15). In physics, inertia is an object’s tendency to stay at rest or in uniform motion when no external forces are applied. Wiredu’s use of the term thus implies that some colonial thought elements are fixed in African minds. Since fixity is not necessarily a weakness, for constancy is characteristic of knowledge, he must be concerned about those that remain in the places assigned to them by indoctrination and habit rather than active and reflective choice.

The business of decolonisation depends on the power to identify colonial thought elements that remain due to inertia. But to identify a given element as alien raises it to self-consciousness and counteracts its inertia. For example, the recognition that the concept of religion is a Western imposition that might well mischaracterise African practices interferes with one’s ability to use or apply it. One cannot go on in the way that one did before. This perception of otherness would not ensure that all unwanted effects are eliminated from one’s thinking, but some of these would be, and one would be set on the path towards a more encompassing purification. The mere identification of a concept as potentially incongruent with one’s ancestral point of view strips away some of its power.

Decolonisation is, says Wiredu, a matter of eliminating foreign influences that remain on account of inertia. Though this suggests that there is in the colonised mind a certain category of idea to be dispensed with, this interpretation is, to my way of thinking, incorrect. On the view that can be reconstructed from Wiredu’s
examples, decolonisation is less about conceptual elimination than about recognising colonial thought elements and taking charge of them. The act of elimination, if it occurred at all, would take place after this raising to self-consciousness, which, in as much as it depends on a more general assessment of philosophical merit, seems to have little to do with a decolonising reversal.

As we have seen, Wiredu describes the process of decolonisation with several vivid metaphors. These metaphors encode three pairs of opposites: mixing and un-mixing, tangling and disentangling, and encrusting and its opposite, which I will term ‘breaking off’. Yet the metaphors of mixing and tangling are significantly different from that of encrusting, and in ways that bear upon the question of whether decolonisation is a divestiture or a raising to self-consciousness.

In the first place, the phenomena of tangling and mixing imply that it is initially difficult to distinguish between colonial and African thought elements. But if Western categories cover over indigenous ideas like deadwood (Mosely 2006: 192), then this would not necessarily be so, for the alien categories would be those on the surface. Second, un-mixing and unravelling would seem to preserve the original elements, but breaking off an encrustation would likely destroy it. Thus, the first pair of metaphors imply that colonial ideas would remain after the un-mixing, separated into categories marked by origin, but the third suggests that they would be disintegrated, eliminated from mind and speech. We could also express this point by saying that decolonisation is, on the metaphors of un-mixing and disentangling, a process of separation, not divesting, whereas on the metaphor of uncovering, the separation and the divesting are one.

In order to ‘un-mix’ two substances or disentangle a ball of yarn, one must know or be able to know ‘what is what’. For example, to un-mix water and wine, one must be able to determine which substance is wine and which is water; to disentangle a ball of yarn, one must be able to determine that a given piece of thread is the same or different from some apparent other. Part of the difficulty of this action is that the mixture or entanglement makes it difficult to know which is which. The business of separation requires that one find a way of making such distinctions.

Wiredu thinks that colonised minds mischaracterise their own ideas and practices by applying foreign concepts. The recognition of such
incongruity is an instance of disentanglement. Thus, to return to an example discussed above, discerning the inapplicability of the concept of religion to African life depends on both prior knowledge of relevant practices and rituals and on the ability to say which ideas are African and which are colonial impositions. This is not merely a matter of knowing that a given word is, say, an English word, since the idea of religion might well have been absorbed into the indigenous language.

What makes it difficult to un-mix foreign modes of conceptualisation is that they are neither recognised nor understood. Consider again those studies that Wiredu terms ‘particularistic’ and which he regards as indispensable for the community’s understanding of its ideas, such as, for example, enquiry into the Bantu conception of ‘morality’. Part of the difficulty of this process is that the concept of morality will be active in the decolonist’s attempt to reverse the effects of colonisation. We can see this in the debate on the meaning of ubuntu, where Kantian and Christian understandings of virtue and human nature control the discussion (see Futter 2016). In short, particularistic studies seem to be threatened by the colonial impositions that they are intended to redress.

Wiredu maintains that such problems can be handled or mitigated by thinking in the indigenous languages. He says that one ‘cannot hope to disentangle the conceptual impositions that have historically been made upon African thought-formations without a close understanding of the languages concerned’ (1998: 23). Africans should ‘exploit’ their mother tongues, ‘not to proceed as if truth necessarily resides in their intimations’, but ‘to learn from their countervailing pulls how to separate independent considerations from, so to say, tongue-dependent ones’ (1998: 35).

The key question for now is whether decolonisation can be identified with the process of separation. If this is Wiredu’s view, then his accounts of decolonisation in terms of divestment and elimination are somewhat misleading, for the business of sorting out the categories is not about ridding or eliminating – the elements that come to be separated remain and might well be judged preferable to the indigenous ideas. Wiredu’s metaphors of un-mixing and unravelling give a better sense of what he means by decolonisation than his explicit definitions. By contrast, his metaphor of encrusting and breaking off fits with the definitions but seems to misdescribe the process, for it suggests that alien categories must be removed.
If this interpretation is on the right track, then we must ask whether
the action of conceptual separation is a recognisable method of phi-
losophy. The answer to the question is in the affirmative, for Plato
describes his dialectical method in terms of collection and division, that
is, of separating one idea from another and bringing these together into
an organised whole. In fact, what we are dealing with here is a descen-
dent of Socrates’ infamous principle of definitional priority. We must
ask what a thing is in order to know its instances – for example, what
religion is in order to know whether a given practice is an example of
it. Definitional enquiry seeks to make the being of something manifest
by separating it from other things with which it might be conflated.

The primary and obvious difference between philosophy in the
Socratic or Platonic sense and decolonial separation is this: the lat-
ter but not the former works with multiple languages and concep-
tual schemes in its attempt to determine the character of the African
way of thought and whether it is consonant with a Western view.
The question is not merely ‘what is ubuntu?’ but ‘how does this
concept relate to imported ideas of morality’? From the other direc-
tion, the question is not only ‘what is religion?’ but ‘does this con-
cept, or some understanding of it, apply to the life of Africa’? There
are, in this context, two forms to be investigated and understood,
not just one. Nevertheless, the business remains the same, for it is
fundamentally a matter of clarifying the content of one’s thoughts.
And this is what many, from Plato to Wittgenstein, have thought to
be essential to the activity of philosophy.

6. Decolonisation and Philosophy

As is clear from the preceding discussion, my critical argument
consists of two strands. The first is that Wiredu’s definitions of
conceptual decolonisation misstate his own position. He seems to
be less concerned with ‘ridding’ the mind of colonial impositions
than with taking responsibility for one’s thoughts and bringing alien
and indigenous concepts into dialogue with one another, where this
requires separating them out and understanding them as the ideas
that they are. The African enquirer must take charge of her think-
ing in moving towards a clearer apprehension of the fundamental
notions of philosophy.
The second strand is that Wiredu’s account of decolonisation looks to be philosophy by another name. Is this really a problem for Wiredu? I have up until now assumed that it is, and that he would not accept the identification of decolonisation with philosophy in one or more of its manifestations. There are at least three points of concern. First, the injunction to decolonise philosophy will make no sense on this equation, since philosophy (rather than some inventory of philosophical claims and theories) is itself the means of decolonisation. Second, since conceptual decolonisation would not, on this reading, privilege African ideas over Western ones, it seems to contradict the goal of reversing the influx of colonial ideas. And, third, if decolonisation is philosophy in one or many of its Western forms, then it would not be a response to European imperialism in particular; instead, it would be a way of dealing with the human condition.

What does Wiredu himself say about the relationship between decolonisation and philosophy? Would he perhaps agree that decolonisation can be identified with philosophy in some of its manifestations? There are some reasons for thinking that he would. For example, in his later work he describes conceptual decolonisation as a ‘remedy for what, hopefully, is a temporary disorder, namely, a hangover from colonialism’ (2002: 58). But he immediately qualifies this by adding that it ‘does have some permanent aspects with an African as well as a trans-African significance’ (2002: 58). Since the ideas under consideration in the process ‘constitute the foundations of a worldview, the self-examination involved is exactly the kind of intellectual activity that is the mainstay of philosophical thinking’ (2002: 58). For this reason, decolonisation ‘becomes an aid to the probing of perennial issues that must continue after the … obsolescence of the anti-colonial motivation’ (2002: 58). The final goal of this ‘probing’ is the transcendence of the cultural point of view and the attainment of a satisfactory understanding of the fundamental concepts of philosophy. As examples of such fundamental concepts, Wiredu mentions reality, being, existence and object (2002: 58–59). He also talks about the need for a ‘reflective integration of the traditional and the modern’, averring that it is only by this kind of synthesis that ‘contemporary African philosophers can contribute to the flourishing of our peoples and, ultimately, all other peoples’ (qtd. in Oladipo 2002: 328). In this, he seems to be committed to an intimate connection between happiness and knowledge or conceptual adequacy (see also Wiredu 2004: 15).
At the very least, we can say that Wiredu’s position on the relationship between conceptual decolonisation and philosophy of a recognisably Western form is complicated. Some of his remarks indicate that he distinguishes the two, since the former but not the latter is a temporary expedient. Decolonisation is on this reckoning in the service of philosophy. On the other hand, he also suggests that decolonisation has some ‘permanent aspects’, which might then be identified with elements of philosophy per se. By these, I think he means to refer to the activity of self-examination that is, as he puts it, ‘the mainstay of philosophical thinking’. His reason for regarding this as an activity characteristic of philosophy rather than the thing itself is perhaps that it occurs in the phase of exegesis, that is, before the African and Western concepts are put into a dialogue with one another. This means that if exegesis is regarded as philosophy qua pursuit of self-knowledge, then it would be, as it were, ‘the mainstay’ of conceptual decolonisation.

If decolonisation is just philosophy in one or more of its guises, then everyone – not only Africans or those who were victims of colonial oppression – ought to decolonise. The significance of the decolonisation business would flow from fundamental features of the human condition, that is, whatever it is that accounts for human ignorance. However, Wiredu seems to vacillate on the question of whether all should decolonise.

On the one hand, he writes that ‘English philosophers . . . brought up on the Western tradition of thought . . . are not supposed to take Western categories for granted. That would be to wallow in the unexamined life’ (Wiredu 1998: 18). Since taking these categories for granted seems to be a matter of conceptual alienation, of harbouring philosophical ‘deadwood’, English philosophers must decolonise themselves. Moreover, since wallowing ‘in the unexamined life’ is undesirable for all philosophers, not only the English, and, in fact, non-philosophers too, we should make the injunction to decolonise universal in scope. Ordinary people exhibit a mentality that is akin to the colonised state of mind that Wiredu describes and wishes to redress.

On the other hand, Wiredu’s work does not focus on the kind of decolonisation that each one of us should embark on. His account is tailored to address the effects of European colonisation, not as some universal feature of the human condition, but as a tragic and contingent historical event. If there is a special urgency to this project then, since
every culture contains elements that are passed down and held in place by ‘inertia’, which, since they are not understood or recognised, are not reflectively chosen, it must be, for Wiredu, more acceptable to live with unreflective ideas if they belong to one’s own linguistic and ethnic or cultural group. This position looks to be difficult to uphold and, in any case, returns us to what I described above as a presupposition of the decolonisation programme. This is the idea that there is a relevant difference between my ideas and yours, ours and theirs, and that it is more desirable for me to think with my group’s concepts rather than yours, even when both are unassimilated and unexamined.

In the end, I would prefer to maintain that for Wiredu decolonisation is only incidentally concerned with the effects of colonisation in the historical sense. For it is just philosophy in some of its guises. Wiredu has, in his way, decolonised the concept of decolonisation, removing it from the realm of the particularity and placing it into the sphere of universal reason. In the end we might say, paraphrasing one of the better-known figures in Western philosophy, that for him the colonised life is not worth living.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my thanks to a pair of anonymous referees for *Theoria*, who provided detailed and helpful feedback on an earlier version of this article. My research is supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa.

---

**Dylan B. Futter** is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, where he is also Coordinator of the Applied Ethics for Professionals Programme. He has published widely in ethics and ancient Greek philosophy; his book manuscript, *Socrates’ Search for Wisdom*, is currently under contract with Routledge. E-mail: dylan.futter@wits.ac.za

**Notes**

1. For Veli Mitova, Wiredu’s account gives ‘the two most basic and uncontroversial features of epistemic decolonisation’ (2020: 2). She does not specify the relationship between conceptual and epistemic colonisation.


4. Wiredu’s programme of decolonisation thus rests on an aetiological distinction: African vs. Western, indigenous vs. foreign, mine vs. thine, and so on. This division is questionable, since the ownership conditions for ideas are difficult to state and communities have always been connected by trade and exchange. Nevertheless, I follow Wiredu in setting these points to one side: the intelligibility of the intellectual mine vs. thine distinction is, we might say, a presupposition of the decolonisation project.

5. As Albert Mosely understands Wiredu’s account, conceptual decolonisation is a matter of ‘avoiding or reversing the unexamined assimilation of Western ideas by African people’ (2006: 192).

6. This claim should be contrasted with one in which decolonisation is ‘divesting’ itself of all foreign or colonial influences but which it is imprudent to carry out in full. On Wiredu’s account, as I understand it, a certain moderation is built into the very idea of decolonisation – it is not, as it were, limited from the outside.

7. Wiredu distinguishes forms of conceptual colonisation in which ‘language plays a direct role’ from those in which it does not, or, at least, plays a lesser role. Examples of the second sort of colonisation are political or ‘organisational practices’ and religious customs (1984: 64).


9. The ability to make conceptual comparisons of this sort requires familiarity with indigenous and colonial languages as well as the relevant phenomena. This is a difficult business, and one has some sympathy with Táiwò’s (2019) concern that it is too demanding. For discussion, see Emmanuel (2019).

10. I owe this suggestion to an anonymous referee for Theoria.

11. To be sure, the enquirer’s acceptance would now be reflective and knowing, and thus no longer indicative of a colonised mentality. She would have made an undue influence into a due influence, as it were, by taking ownership of it. I take up these points in Section 5.

12. See Phaedrus 266b.

13. See Meno 71a and, for discussion, Futter (2019).


15. Wiredu also says that ‘if we philosophise with an alert awareness of the possible snares of a foreign language, we can hardly remain unmindful of similar possibilities in our own language’ (1984: 42). In this, he seems to be concerned about a kind of conceptual mismatch that occurs or could occur independently of the colonisation process.


17. A referee for Theoria suggested that this view might be defended by an appeal to the values of community and cultural integrity. This is a promising suggestion and one that merits further exploration.


References


