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Decolonisation and Rehumanising through Reclaiming the Humanities in ODEL

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Abstract

Due to an oft held presupposition by academic administrators that the humanities lack utility, it is common for humanities scholars to be fearful of the demise of our disciplines in institutions of higher learning. In a number of western institutions, humanities departments have been closed based upon this logic. Locating the discussion within the South African academy and based particularly upon the pedagogical experience of the University of South Africa, the authors note an emerging juxtaposition to the western utilitarian approach toward humanities. The decolonial turn is gaining traction in neo colonies and offers an approach away from western positivist-inspired reductivism. Therefore, from within the decolonial milieu, a recovery of the importance of researching and teaching themes of the human can arise when the conception of the person is integrally restored. We argue that when dominant knowledge systems are dislodged, space is created for epistemic plurality by which epistemic re-centring occurs. Doing philosophy in the decolonial environment affords the privilege of reclaiming humanity in the face of its neo colonial mutilation. This is even more so, when philosophy is taught through the dispersed mode of open, distance, and e-learning (ODeL), an andragogy that encourages recentring and decolonisation in both the theory and praxis of teaching and learning.

Keywords: *Humanities; philosophy; decoloniality; education*

Introduction

Within every sphere that the human has being—and sometimes beyond—the human subject is engaged in attempts to unearth meaning. Indeed, this mark lies at the root of scientific knowledge.

> Science is not only, like art and literature, an adventure of the human spirit, but it is among the creative arts perhaps the most human: full of human failings and short sightedness, it shows those flashes of insight which open our eyes to the wonders of the world and of the human spirit. But this is not all… It is part of our endeavour to see more clearly, to understand the world and ourselves… (Popper, 2000: 59).

Given the importance of the human to knowledge production, it is, surprising that the study of the dimensions of the human experience in her reality—the 'humanities'—are being threatened at universities around the globe, especially through budget cuts or through excision from curricula. The 'humanities' are epistemic disciplines concerned with categories constructed by humans and issues relating to humans that neither fit the methodologies of social nor natural science (Merriam Webster, 2020). These include history, philosophy, literature, religious studies, and theology (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020a).

Herein, we will explore the pressure on the humanities, as they manifest in international academies, and then specifically their iterations in the South African academy. We argue for the value of the

humanities. Subsequently, we postulate that dispersed, multi-synchronous, and non-classroom-bound teaching of the humanities contributes to its recentring as a means to decolonise and rehumanise the human experience. This is undertaken through the 'open system' of higher education, offering many thousands of students' exposure to alternatives to western-dominated epistemic reductivism each year.

We approach this study as philosophers, with our particular interest in philosophy as a sub-field of the humanities. Utilising the critical methodologies of philosophical discourse, we will make considerable reference to the discipline of philosophy, which speaks—in this context—to the broader humanities.

Utilitarian Threats to the Humanities Internationally

Throughout the world, institutions of higher education are dependent upon the funding received from national and international budgets, tuition fees, the bequests of donors, and research grants (Bérubé, 2011: 96). Funding allocations are limited by available funds but are also based on the value that funders perceive in particular academic disciplines. Oftentimes the utility of a qualification is bound up by its financial sustainability indicated by student enrolments as well as the potential ability for graduates to gain employment. For example, mutual understanding would have it that a graduate, specifically trained in internal auditing, can fulfil the job of being an auditor more readily than a 'Philosophy, Politics and Economics' graduate could immediately undertake a corporate position not directly related to their studies.

For decades, multiple critiques have been presented to the funding and place of the humanities, their relevance, and utility (Plumb, 1964: 7-8; Collini, 2012; Talavera, [2014]2015: 115-116; Keen, 2020: 5-14). Following the 2008 financial crisis, a *New York Times* article contended that the humanities should be the preserve of the few and the wealthy because humanities' qualifications lack the utility of employment potential (Cohen 2009). *The Wall Street Journal* took a similar stance (Levitz and Belkin, 2013). Continually, calls for the cutting of budgets to the humanities are being reported based on the reductive rationale of the employability of graduates, with the consequence being that funding is more generously allotted to the more 'useful' science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (Cohan, 2012; Ryall, 2015; Cohen, 2016).

In the United Kingdom, for example, the stress on the humanities has been tangible. Much uproar followed the 2010 cost-cutting closure of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Middlesex (Whitehead, 2010a), a component of which survived by being transferred to Kingston University (Whitehead, 2010b). Similarly, despite the best efforts of academics, Heythrop College, a former constituent college of the University of London, was closed in 2018 (Grove, 2015; Lamb, 2015). In the same year, the registrar of the University of Hull would not permit new students to access philosophy and modern language courses for the 2019 to 2020 academic year to "… ensure that their qualification holds value over time" (Baggini, 2018), to which the British Philosophical Association (BPA) responded robustly (British Philosophical Association, 2018). The obvious immediate ramification for the academics responsible for teaching these censured modules is financial instability.

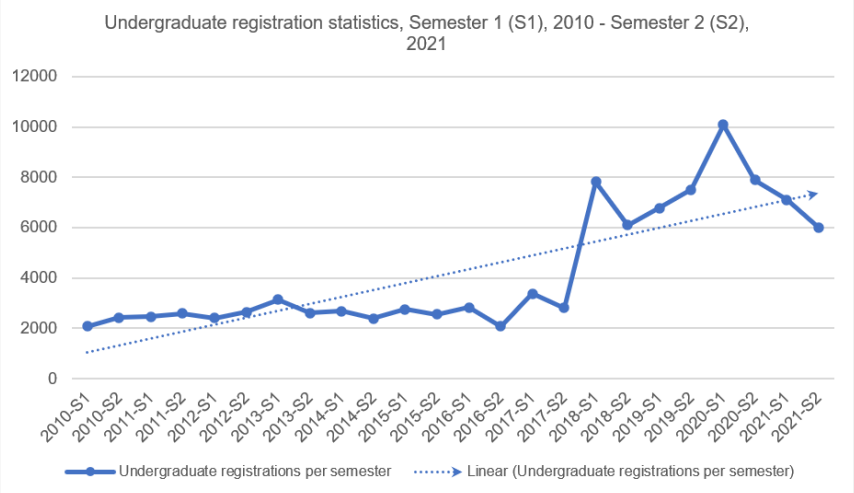
Humanities Marginalisation through University Funding Instruments in South Africa

Unlike European, North American, and Asian contexts, wherein humanities departments—notably philosophy departments—have been threatened, this has not happened in South Africa. In fact, we

observe a renewed interest in the study of humanities in this context. The University of South Africa (UNISA) can be utilised as a case study to demonstrate this point. UNISA, South Africa's largest University—which according to 2019 statistics, enrolled 31,89 per cent of the total university student headcount in South Africa (Higher Education Data Analyser [HEDA] 2021)—employs the andragogy of open, distance, and e-learning (ODeL) (University of South Africa, 2018: 3). Although the learners and educators in ODeL are engaged in learning with physical and/or geographical separation, the distance is attempted to be breached by ideological and methodological flexibility, the removal of structural barriers, and the use of ICTs, especially internet-based technologies to facilitate teaching and learning. An analysis of UNISA's curricula shows that humanities' modules are offered in a number of its non-humanities learning programmes. History is offered to education students. Philosophy modules are offered to undergraduate students registered in the Colleges of Human Sciences, Law, Science, Engineering, and Technology and Agriculture and Environmental Sciences. This prescription of undergraduate humanities modules in diverse learning programmes, is a positive reality for humanities scholars, enabling sustainability.

Though survival through sustainability is important, the diversity of students enrolled in philosophy modules makes it imperative not to get caught up in an isolated disciplinary paradigmatic bubble that makes engagement outside the humanities' paradigm impossible. Registrations of non-humanities' students also positively challenge humanities scholars to consider their relevance to the broader academic project by forcing them to relate their module content to the dominant majors of their students, and, most significantly, by permitting the exposure of many more students to the discourses of the humanities. In a particular way, these are coloured by the humanities' overall commitment to the decolonisation and Africanisation of the curricula at UNISA. In turn, the thousands of students from learning programmes in Law, Science, etc., who may never have conceived of these epistemic challenges, are given the occasion to do so.

A positive consequence of the prescription of humanities' modules into non-humanities' curricula is illustrated by the improved sustainability of the discipline of Philosophy at the University of South Africa, which has witnessed a steady rise in undergraduate student registrations over the past decade:



The decline noted in registrations in Semester 2, 2020 was the registration period at the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The decline in Semester 1, 2021 and Semester 2, 2021 followed the capping of student enrolments placed upon the University of South Africa by the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande in early 2021 (Shoba, 2021). On 11 March 2021, the Minister was ordered to reverse this decision by the Pretoria High Court in a case brought against him by the Economic Freedom Fighters' Student Command (EFFSC) (Fengu, 2021). 2021 also remains a year drastically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Extracting our consideration from the UNISA-context to the broader higher education milieu in South Africa, we gladly note that the Department of Science and Technology's (DST) *White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation* speaks of the importance of humanities beside natural, social, physical, and engineering sciences (2019: 45, 53-54). Further, by institution of a parliamentary act, the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) has invested in the humanities through its grant schemes (1998). However, a disparity exists between the humanities and STEM disciplines when considering funding and grants. The South African Government's National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) lays heavy emphasis upon the importance of the country to invest in "… technological and scientific revolutions [because these] underpin economic advances…" (National Planning Commission, 2012: 93-94). An inconsistency exists in South African state publications. Although the South African DST's *White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation* expands the definition of 'science', the NDP suggests a positivist-type worldview, as it considers technological advancements as the 'differentiator' between economically sound and struggling nations (2012: 93). As the NDP progresses, an emphasis upon a limited definition of 'science' is noted, because science is specifically intertwined with matters of technological innovation (2012: 316).

Indeed, the humanities are sparsely mentioned, but, where they are, humanities' graduates are identified as those who cannot find employment because their qualifications do not meet the needs of employers (2012: 317). Aside from that, the same document mentions the humanities in relation to the fact that humanities' scholars produce the second greatest number of research outputs (2012: 317). As research output units are directly linked to state-funded higher education institutions' incomes (Ministry of Education, 2003), the humanities are acknowledged as a positive source of income, at least at the level of research. Still, the NDP specifically proposes that the number of STEM graduates should increase (2012: 319). Though not specifically stipulated, by virtue of the omission that non-natural science and technology graduates are to be encouraged to grow in number, it may be inferred that a certain utilitarian prejudice against the humanities stands, this is informed by the same sentiment as the threat placed upon the humanities in other parts of the world.

Higher education, in the South African context, is heavily funded and subsidised by the State. In February 2004, the then-South African Ministry of Education issued new directives for the funding of grants to public higher education institutions (2004). The National Treasury allocates funding to the Department of Higher Education and Training annually (National Treasury 2021: 270). For 2021, 90,4 per cent of this budget was to be directed to public higher education institutions (2021: 270). These state-contributed block grants are the greatest provider to financial sustainability for universities in South Africa. Block grants are divided between teaching input and output, research output, and grants to institutions, which are funds that are additional to the funds raised from student fees and third-stream sources, for example, bequests made to universities. The estimated figure for the 2019-2020 financial year, in terms of teaching input grants from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DoHET), amounts to approximately R20 billion (±USD 1,3 billion) (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018: 4). This figure comprises roughly 31 per cent

of the total state grant to universities per year. Whilst generous, teaching input grants are differentiated per the Classification of Subject Matter (CESM) category within which students are registered, the bulk of teaching input grants being in favour of the natural/empirical sciences. A partial account for the funding difference rests upon the costs in providing laboratories, equipment, and other facilities and provisions for the teaching and research of the empirical sciences. A discipline such as mathematics, however, is purely theoretical, and thus the justification for its placement in a higher funding group is questionable.

Funding in the context of South African public higher education is allocated in these proportions:

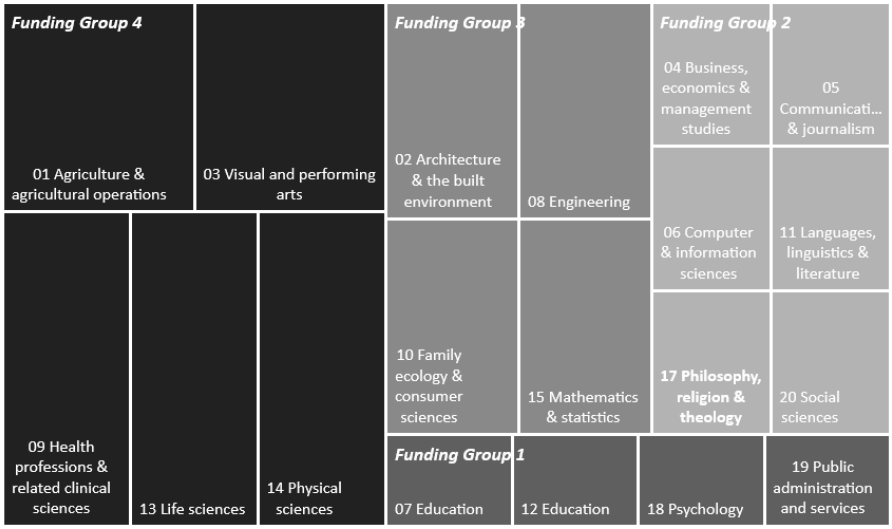


Chart 1: Teaching inputs for CESM categories per funding grouping (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018: 9-10)

The NRF funds postgraduate students, but—like DoHET—its funding is also skewed in favour of the STEM disciplines' allocations, which if added into one category reach 70 per cent.

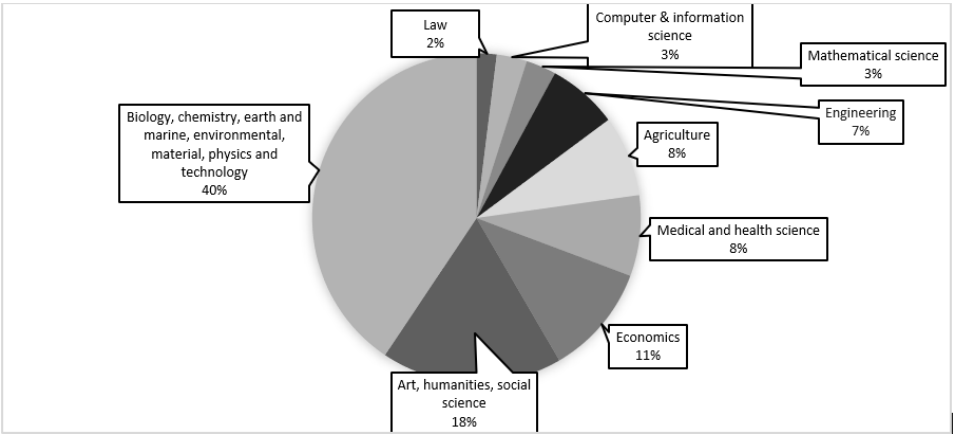


Chart 2: NRF funding of postgraduate students ("next generation researchers"): 2017/2018 (National Research Foundation 2018: 73).[1]

[1]The authors note that the total figure in the NRF report adds up to 101 per cent.

Thus, whilst student enrolment in humanities modules in South Africa are not declining, and funding support is offered by the DST and NRF, the natural and empirical sciences receive proportionally more than the humanities. Is the 'worth' of the humanities—translated into monetary value—proportionally so much less?

The Value of the Humanities

Though the humanities struggle by less funding and by their removal from curricula, it is intriguing to note that in the disruptive era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), the World Economic Forum (WEF) classifies specific humanities' skills as useful for economic success (2016: 20). The pressures faced by the 4IR are such that particular qualifications and 'hard skills' will not be sufficiently adaptive to the 4IR's disruption (2016: 20). The skills identified as relevant to the 4IR's employment are not complete and require further adaptation to pressures placed upon them, such as "… rapidly rising computing power, an ability to work with data and make data-based decisions…" (2016: 21). Nevertheless, an analysis of these projected skills by the World Economic Forum (2016: 21), indicate that these skills are overwhelmingly the competencies that are taught within philosophy (and other humanities) courses:

<table>
<tr><th><u>Abilities:</u></th><th><u>Basic Skills:</u></th><th colspan="2"><u>Cross-functional Skills:</u></th></tr>
<tr><td>Cognitive Abilities:
• Cognitive Flexibility
• Creativity
• Logical Reasoning
• Problem Sensitivity
• Mathematical Reasoning
• Visualisation</td><td>Content Skills:
• Active Learning
• Oral Expression
• Reading Comprehension
• Written Expression
• ICT Literary</td><td>Social Skills:
• Coordinating with Others
• Emotional Intelligence
• Negotiation
• Persuasion
• Service Orientation
• Training and Teaching Others</td><td>Resource Management Skills:
• Management of Financial Resources
• Management of Material Resources
• People Management
• Time Management</td></tr>
<tr><td>Physical Abilities:
• Physical Strength
• Manual Dexterity and Precision</td><td>Process Skills:
• Active Listening
• Critical Thinking
• Monitoring Self and Others</td><td>System Skills:
• Judgement and Decision-making
• Systems Analysis
Complex Problem-Solving Skills:
• Complex Problem Solving</td><td>Technical Skills:
• Equipment Maintenance and Repair
• Equipment Operation and Control
• Programming
• Quality Control
• Technology and User Experience Design
• Troubleshooting</td></tr>
</table>

The bold and italics are inserted by the authors to indicate transferable skills applicable to many varied dimensions of human life that are intentionally embedded in the courses/modules of philosophy and other humanities disciplines. This assertion is supported by the fact that in the American Graduate Record Examinations (GRE)—often used for postgraduate entrances—philosophy majors score above graduates of other disciplines in both the verbal and analytic writing components of the tests (ETS 2020), and first in the Law School Admission Test (Nieswiadomy 2010). Far from lacking utility and being outmoded, the transferable skills that students receive from

humanities-type programmes may be precisely what the next industrial revolution requires. Despite these projections, the Modern *zeitgeist* queries the utility of the humanities:

> … Talking about the utility of the humanities will always be a mug's game, an exercise in futility; the contest is rigged, and yet we keep playing… (Bérubé, 2011: 97).

Out of the industrial revolution—a product of the Enlightenment—modernity emerged. It was fuelled by the industrial machine, and rapidly bore witness to the rise of colonial, economic superpowers. At its base were labourers who became commodities at the service of economics. Modernity's utilitarian spirit, in neo-liberal capitalism, has overarchingly influenced every sphere of human life, including education, where the daily management of education is commodified and the content taught is directed to the production of personal wealth (Sitze, Sarat and Wolfson, 2015: 200). Considering what makes a human life most liveable—the discernment and articulation of the human experience of a life lived for truth, beauty, and goodness—is the oblation made for the individual's training in trading the commodity of human capital (Bowles and Gintis, 1975: 76; Sitze et al., 2015: 201). In this context, wherein the 'human' is reduced to 'human capital'—a means of production through their labour (Goldin, 2014)—humanities scholars must enact their moral imperative by reclaiming the human who is innately more complex than mere *automata* in the massive enterprise of the neo-liberal mechanism.

In 399 BCE, during his self-defence whilst on trial, the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, uttered his infamous dictum, "… the life which is unexamined is not worth living…" (Plato, n.d.). It was for the sake of the most human dimension of the human experience that Socrates died: the examined life through which truth, beauty, and goodness are discerned. Though romanticised, Socrates' example speaks to the extent that humanists would go to defend their disciplines and the difficulty that we have in undertaking our enterprise. For facing off against utilitarian and economic arguments, we may be engaging in a futile exercise contrary to the 'bottom-line' type arguments of academic bureaucrats (Bérubé, 2011: 97; Sitze et al., 2015: 191). On the contrary, to simply accept the *status quo* would be detrimental to human engagement-with-being-as-humans, therefore, promoting a 'dehumanised human life' that is void of humanity's unique ability to reflect upon value (Sitze et al., 2015: 192). It is true that a serious engagement with one's humanity need not come about specifically through academic studies. For example, a practitioner of art, a musician, or even someone who simply engages with others in significant ways through her interpersonal relationships, do thoroughly 'humanise' life. Nevertheless, the humanities have contributed to a sustained, systematic, and rigorous examination of the human condition and experience (Small, 2013: 4-6), utilising the formal techniques and methodologies of our disciplines.

However, if the humanities are to be true to their intrinsic character, their being must be engaged in a constant self-examination (Sitze et al., 2015: 192). This implies that the humanities cannot hearken back to any previous 'glory age', claiming that the perennial relevance of the humanities rests in its possession of a particular universal kind of thinking or source of wisdom that only humanities scholars are party to (Bérubé, 2015: 29). The argument for the humanities, based upon its exceptionalism, lacks robustness and contemporary relevance, as all science is in a constant state of becoming; although science's empirical method is timeless, the content of scientific theories is ever in flux (2015: 29-30). Further, the imperialism of the universal claim lays aside the experiences of the particularities of knowledges generated by the world's varied peoples (2015: 30).

> … Universalism is an attempt to represent a part for the whole, to claim that the intellectual folkways of one tribe are in fact models for the entire species, everywhere on the globe. It's that imperializing gesture—the very claim to universality—that makes the Enlightenment look bad in retrospect (Bérubé, 2015: 30).

Without being able to proffer any special, ageless universal claim-to-wisdom, the quality of the utility of the humanities requires further response. Perhaps the question of utility is inappropriate. 'Utility' suggests immediacy: per definition, the utility of anything refers to its ability to achieve a particular goal (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020b). There is no immediate utility in engaging in the creative production of an artwork or of leisurely enjoying a novel, yet, as humanity has evolved, these dimensions of human expression have become much valued (Boyd, 2013: 577). The humanities' contributions to humanity are more drawn out than immediate, for example, art's efficacy from the perspective of neuroscience lies in the long-term development of the cognitive ability to recognise and identify patterns that aid in understanding and problem solving (2013: 577-578). Furthermore, narrative literature assists in the development of the brain's 'core network' by exposing the developing human to both social cognition and creativity (2013: 579). It is worthwhile to note that in the 2020-2021 COVID-19 global lockdowns, it was in intrinsically human aspects of life—not necessarily utilitarian—that people found solace and that inspired resilience (Gupta, 2020; Giordano, Scarlata, Baroni, Gentile, Puntillo, Brienza and Gesulado, 2020; Macdonald and Hülür, 2021). This meant turning to art (Gupta, 2020), music (Giordano et al., 2020) and human relationships (Macdonald and Hülür, 2021). The question of the utility of the humanities, is consequently a non-question. Perhaps we can discern the humanities' relevance to the human experience in posing another question: what value do the humanities bear for the life of the human being?

The most cherished dimensions of the humanities are their pervasive pluriformity of theoretical approaches, methodologies, and reasoned opinions. The humanities' hallmark is being settled with incommensurable stances, contentions, and disputes (Bérubé, 2015: 53). Within the humanities rests an articulation of the unquenchable human attempt to consistently seek to grapple with "… the study of what it means and has meant and might yet mean to be human, [albeit] in a world where 'the human' itself is a variable term" (2015: 54). One of the values of the humanities is the encouragement to embody one of the precepts held dear by philosophers, inscribed on Apollo's Temple at Delphi in Greece, the maxim *'γνῶθι σεαυτόν'* ('know thyself')—the answer to which is as diverse as myriad humanity.

The human is contextually entrenched. Self-knowledge entails the embodied human knowing the environment within which one is implanted. To this end, a dimension of the humanities, namely literary and creative arts, are essential in the development of the human ability to appreciate patterns and similarities, and more broadly, to find meaning out of chaotic stimuli experienced by the human (Boyd, 2013: 580). It further serves an important role in assisting humans to express themselves visually, through the abstraction of meaning in language, music, scientific research, and text (2013: 583). The creative thought processes stimulated within the humanities, therefore, are a further value that these disciplines offer to human life, translatable to multifarious dimensions of conceptualisation, including the scientific.

By the removal of the humanities from curricula in some places of the Global North or the relegation of funding to the humanities in the South African situation, sentiments that humanities should not be invested in follows. The scandal is that these disciplines have as their subject matter the

fundamentality of human dimensions of the human experience. However, their value is to be found in their essential nature as disciplines that attempt to make sense of this experience. As similarly part of the project of Modernity, the suppression and excision of the humanities can be seen to be akin to the subjugation of minorities in colonial and postcolonial contexts. As with its political impact, the modern legacy of epistemic colonialism is so ubiquitous, that "[t]he struggle to end colonialism… has proven to be an elusive goal" (Wood, 2020: 16). Nevertheless, the focus upon the human—as opposed to the empirically explorable object in some postmodern discourses—emerged as a counter to Modernity (Van Maanen, [1988]2011: 125). In a similar manner, we proffer that the decolonial decentring of empirical, natural, and social sciences by the inclusion of the humanities can serve the task of recentring humans, which has been subsumed by an overemphasis on a singular interpretation of empirical science.

Decolonising and Recentring to Reclaim Humanity

Academies around the world have maintained western epistemologies at the centre of the curriculum, leading to an epistemologically hegemonic colonisation. The foundation of what was taught in disciplines like history, philosophy, and anthropology has overwhelmingly been the views, theories, and perspectives of white European men. Indeed, "[t]he domination of the Western conception of knowledge has historically and systematically marginalised, silenced, stereotyped, dislocated, and decentered alternative conceptions of knowledge in systems of education" (Gwaravanda, 2020). In fact, Ephraim Gwaravanda's interpretation is generous, for decentring implies some space being 'allotted' to non-western epistemologies (the doing of the allotting is a questionable responsibility) when in fact these were and are ignorantly erased from the academy. Mji, Kalenga, Ned, Alperstein, and Banda (2017) provide broad paradigmatic examples of colonially suppressed African indigenous knowledges, which significantly differ to the entrenched western mode: the conceptual intertwinement of time and space; an appreciation for humanity's interwovenness with nature and with other people; and the value of humans being essential rather than accidental (2017). The African indigenous paradigm is one of holistic epistemology and morality, which importantly bears relevance to the humanities wherein such ways of being and knowing are imagined as veritable.

Decolonially, the colonisation of knowledge pivots on the theme of justice because western colonisers deny the possibility of knowledges that are not theirs. This denial is founded in the denial of the source of this information, for the master cannot see the colonised as rational animals (Mungwini, 2017: 6). By centring knowledge upon western epistemology, those who 'know' differently, are not recognised as knowers, and in this way, their humanity is denied again, because their knowledge is not accorded the status of 'knowledge'. Since rationality was a trait reserved for the coloniser, i.e., white men, anyone who is not a white male, is not considered as human (Ramose 2003). Pascah Mungwini avers hypothetically that "had modernity affirmed rationality as a universal human trait distinct from, and uninfluenced by such things as sex, skin colour, or place of origin; the problems of modern society; including marginalisation and exclusion would not have arisen" (2017: 6).

The epistemic injustice that colonisers mete out, is apparent when a person is excluded as a knower or is not viewed as a credible knower due to their ethnicity or gender. This is known as testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007: 17). There is a further injustice, called hermeneutical injustice, which is when a person has a significant area of social experience marginalised or obscured because of structural inequalities, or when excluded from creating meaning (Mungwini, 2017: 6; Fricker, 2007: 17, 154). Among other ways that modern epistemic colonisation has been unjust is by determining

what 'valid' knowledge is in university curricula, wherein positivistic empiricism has won out. Since the colonial master could not conceive marginalised people as legitimate knowers, their epistemologies came to be rejected and omitted from the dominant knowledge economy and subsequently from the curriculum.

The project of decolonisation had been articulated by Franz Fanon (1963) seven decades ago and was made known in South Africa through calls for curriculum transformation (Mudaly 2018: 47). However, due to the abiding privileging of western knowledge systems in the entrenched epistemology of the Apartheid regime, decoloniality's entry into mainstream academic dialogue in South Africa is recent (2018: 47). Although decolonisation is a wide socio-political, historical, and humanistic project, it does have epistemic dimensions. By decolonising knowledge, it is possible that a process of recentring can take place, by which knowledge is attempted "to de-marginalise and to ensure that in any intellectual endeavour both our theory and praxis is rooted in African [or other silenced] experiences" (Mungwini, 2016: 524). A process of reclaiming subjugated humanity more generally is entered into in recentring the person's experience. Herein, the voiceless claim their own opportunity to be heard in the way they want to be heard. Though the concern is the experience of the African context, the processes of decolonisation and recentring epistemology can be applied to any context wherein colonial epistemic injustice has been felt.

In the specific terms of the academy, the disciplines of the humanities are the ideal intellectual locales within which this human reclamation can take place, as their 'subject matter' specifically revolves around the dimensions of the human experience that are most fundamentally human. A decolonised humanities curriculum—which rejects the veneration, hegemony, and domination of the modern, western epistemic project and its accompanying centralisation upon restrictive and oppressive western epistemology—is one that can engage with the humanistic project. In its breadth, the decolonised curriculum breaks free of modern empirical bounds and does not privilege certain epistemic agents above others, rather embracing a plurality of perspectives: western, African, feminist, eastern, etc.

Where does Philosophy Find Itself?

The philosophical endeavour, across all perspectives, engages with metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, and moral questions about what it means to be human. Philosophical discourse hugely influences the academic project. With its origins and evolution, as presented in academic philosophy, being largely based in western thinking, one can comprehend how one-dimensional much of the taught philosophy in the South African context is, by its prioritising the western episteme over all others. Indeed, philosophy in South Africa is marred by its own colonial history, and consequently "for growing numbers of South African students, their universities' Euro-centric presentation of philosophy is not a tangential product of colonialism, but core to the imperialist mission" (Goldhill, 2018).

It follows that if there is a need for decolonising the curriculum in order to reclaim humanity, that need must first be detected by philosophers as an urgent and immediate challenge to decolonise philosophy. Consolingly, philosophy is uniquely situated to address the issues of decolonisation, as the "decolonisation of universities is part and parcel of philosophy as a science of questioning — including itself through analysis, synthesis and improvement" (Mathebula, 2019: 18). As part of the

ongoing struggle "against colonial neo-liberal universities in post-apartheid South Africa," the African Philosophical approach has decolonisation deeply rooted within it (2019: 3).

Though the UNISA-experience indicates a positive growth trajectory in students interested in philosophy, there is much work in decolonising, rehumanizing, and 'Africanising' that needs to be done in decentring the curriculum such that students do not feel so isolated from what is taught to them in ODeL. Nevertheless, many students have exposure to philosophical and other humanities-type modules in their curricula which implies the potential for a mass reclamation by epistemically recentring the human.

Decolonising and Decentring the Teaching of the Humanities

The African university, laments Gwaravanda, relies on western epistemology, which is individualistic, universalistic, neutral, and analytic (2020). In this sense, western epistemology narrowly "… contradicts the spirit of genuine knowledge" by its actual closedness to the expansive depth of a plurality of particulars, the bulk of which Eurocentric epistemology has elected to reject out of hand (2020). 'Genuine knowledge', from the African epistemological paradigm, includes social epistemology (for example, the denigration of a subject-source of knowledge), which is often rejected by modern epistemology (Gwaravanda, 2020; Lauer, 2018: 238). A further dimension, among others, that the West ignores, includes the bounded nature of concepts, which African thinking sees as being informed and shaped by the multiple class, gender, linguistic, racial, and spiritual hierarchies of any specific milieu (Gwaravanda, 2020). Okere, Njoku and Devisch illustrate this through the employment of the Igbo proverb, "different people speak different languages, but the sound of their coughing is the same" (2011: 275).

Although the former Vice-Chancellor of UNISA, Mandla Makhanya, committed the University to Africanisation and decolonisation (2017)—which has become an entrenched approach in this university—the ideal remains far off from actualisation. The reductivism of modernity plays out in – among other locations – institutions of higher education, within which there is a live tension between the geographies of staff, students, and institutions, and them being part of "… a global economy of knowledge", in which western hegemonic production and circulation of knowledge dominates (Connell 2016: 1). This tension is apparent when it is forgotten that many knowledge systems emanate from the perceived periphery, like the Arabic number system, which has become foundational to, for example, algebra and physics (2016: 2). While the colonial and postcolonial world has participated in the making of "dominant forms of knowledge in the modern era", these knowledges are oftentimes usurped as 'Western' (2016: 2-3).

The views, perspectives, worldviews, and theories of women and people of colour were routinely rejected, denied, and ridiculed, while the colonial western worldviews were promoted as universal (Mudaly, 2018: 47). Women and people of colour were, until relatively recently, not given access to academic institutions, and even when they contributed significantly to knowledge production, they often did not get any or very limited recognition. There are many examples of female scientists who, despite their significant contributions, were not recognised in any significant way (Tucker, 2019; Lee, 2013). Most academic fields have a history of male-dominance, philosophy, being no different (Dykeman, 1999; Sandnes, 2011; Janiak and Mercer, 2015; Thomas, 2019). Likewise, there are historical African humanities scholars (Wolff, 2020; Trok, 2021), who have until recently all but been forgotten. To this day, if knowledge workers want to participate in higher education, they need to

become experts in western epistemologies and having published in 'international' (i.e., North American and European-based) journals in order to be given recognition (Connell, 2016: 1).

The argument must be made for an epistemic pluralism that opens and democratises knowledges that allows for multiplicity and diversity, for the break-down of hegemony and the embracement of a plural epistemology (Teffo, 2011: 25). This type of thinking "brings in the idea of pluri-cultural perspectives that engage in honest dialog for the enrichment of knowledge in particular and humanity in general" (Gwaravanda, 2020). Such pluralism is built on the following two tenets: there are multiple knowledge systems and none of these systems bear any more epistemic standing than any other (Boghossian, 2006: 73). Knowledge conceived from this vantage does not invalidate western-centred knowledge, but rather queries its use as the yardstick by which to judge all other epistemologies (Teffo, 2011: 26).

UNISA's Discipline of Philosophy bears thousands of students who annually register for its modules. Considerable responsibility is carried by this unit for the epistemic liberation of its students, most especially because an 'open' methodology is institutionally espoused. Scholars of open education provide varying definitions of what 'openness' refers to: open admission policies, removing barriers of education like race or gender, student-engaged curriculum development, and methodology of tuition praxis that is determined by students, and varying durations of learning (Peters, 1998: 98, 103). UNISA does attempt to espouse these dimensions (2018). However, we argue that at the core of UNISA's 'openness' is an orientation towards higher education that takes particular account of the challenging South African context and strongly ties with UNISA's essential objective: "… to meet Africa's changing needs…" (2013).

In the planning and execution of teaching and learning, UNISA's open education practitioners must remain cognisant of students' differing cultural and linguistic experiences and worldviews, their socio-economic and educative conditions, and backgrounds, etc., so enabling access to education that becomes truly developmental and liberative in the context of educational deprivation among many of South Africa's communities. For, whereas open learning in the Global North often provides second chances to students seeking part-time, life-long education, approximately 90 per cent of UNISA's students are part-time registrations, with an increasingly younger age (Peters, 1998:187; Tloubatla and Van Zyl, 2018: 19, 23). It is, therefore, inferred that UNISA is not a 'second chance' for its registered students, but the only choice for a multitude seeking to restore their wrecked humanity through education. In this sense, 'open' academic staff serve as epistemic liberators for students who register for the sake of their own liberation.

Epistemic liberation has long been a valued dimension of the struggle for the liberation of peoples, with the end goal of transforming society (Teffo, 2011: 27). But, as Gwaravanda emphasises, there is often non-alignment between what is learned at university and students' epistemological backgrounds and concerns for epistemic liberation (2020). The tension between university tuition and students' ontologies must be opened-up through the teaching and learning of multiple epistemologies (including students' own), allowing students to explore, criticise, and evaluate diverse positions (2020).

In proposing that the human can be recentred and rehumanised through exposure to plural epistemologies that bring about epistemic liberation in an 'open' educational system, we are not arguing for an exclusively ethnocentric focus, manifest in "advocating for the 'return' of an indigenous knowledge that is somehow imagined as more 'pure' than other knowledge forms," (Morreira, 2017: 288). Rather, we posit that in exposing students to manifold epistemologies, students will be brought

to the realisation of the "entangled nature of forms of knowledge in postcolonial Africa" (2017: 288). When students register and become the responsibility of philosophers, their open, decolonial duty is to form students through a curriculum wherein the beliefs, knowledges, and realities of African people are critically encountered, for the end of better understanding theories and their more thorough application to this context (Smith, 1999: 39).

Conclusion

In this article, we have considered the institutional decline in the Global North for the support of the humanities, particularly due to the evident financial cuts exerted upon the humanities by the closure of departments and the excision of modules from curricula. Despite this, our research indicates that in parts of the sub-Saharan African reality, the humanities have a renewed interest shown in them. This is particularly the case in the context of this research, the open, distance, and e-learning University of South Africa, wherein many thousands of students—based across the breadth of South Africa and beyond— register for humanities modules being overwhelmingly students who are registered for non-humanities qualifications.

The funding disparities between the humanities and the natural and empirical sciences have been pinpointed, and a consequent challenge laid to higher education bureaucrats to reconsider the value of the humanities. The humanities are of strategic value to knowledge and material economies due to the transferable skills that these disciplines offer to the needs of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. More importantly to us, in the South African context, we maintain that the shifting focus of the humanities toward recentring the human, in the decolonial academy, responds to the intrinsic need for the understanding of and expressing essential aspects of the human experience, especially that of epistemic liberation. In conceiving the humanities in an open manner that bears witness to the rich tapestry of the knowledges of subjugated people whose epistemologies were systematically silenced, the democratisation of human knowledge plays a role in recentring the human (Mathebula, 2019: 2-3).

For the end of epistemic liberation, the 'openness' of the andragogy, as we have interpreted it in humanities disciplines, contributes toward shifting higher education beyond the strictures of modern universities. In this sense, we have come to view openness as essentially decolonial.

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